

The Future Fire

Speculative Fiction, Cyberpunk, Dark Fantasy

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The Future Fire: Issue 2007.08

The planet has a fever. If your baby has a fever, you go to the doctor. If the doctor says you need to intervene here, you don't say, 'Well, I read a science fiction novel that told me it's not a problem.' If the crib's on fire, you don't speculate that the baby is flame retardant. You take action.

--Al Gore, March 21, 2007.

Table of Contents:

Fiction

Alan Frackleton 'Pianissimo' (3)

Terry Grimwood 'Coffin Road' (16)

William J Piovano 'The Blood of Castalsara' (21)

Reviews (33)

Welcome to issue #8 of *The Future Fire*, which brings us into our third year of publishing. We have been thinking a lot the last few weeks about the small press, what it means to be an independent magazine (online or otherwise) and what it means to be a writer published by the non-professional press.

As a small press magazine, you do not exist to make a profit—there are any number of more lucrative ways to make money—many don't even harbour the illusion of breaking even at the end of the day. The small press exists because there is a gap in the market. Because the big publishing houses that own 95% of the print magazines and other publications in the world don't take risks, are run by lawyers and economists not fans of good writing, and will never publish the newest, riskiest, most exciting and original stuff coming out of the SpecFic scene. On the other hand there are plenty of readers out there just dying for more of this stuff, and who are left cold by many of the *Year's Best* and similar anthologies that come out in hardcover. Granted, most of our readers are probably writers or publishers themselves, helping to support the scene that they're part of. Nothing wrong with that. And granted, maybe half of the stories submitted to the independent press are from people who clearly haven't bothered checking out a sample issue. But there's an audience out there, and even if you don't make money from publishing it will never be a thankless (much less pointless) mission.

And if you're an unsigned writer, why offer your title to a magazine that doesn't pay you for your work (or pays you a derisory \$5 a story)? The SFWA now only recognise magazines that pay 5c/word or over; the three stories in this issue of *The Future Fire* would have cost us \$1300 in royalties (we paid \$15). So why would any self-respecting author accept less? Well, in my view it is lazy organisations like the SFWA and some "market listings" who use payment as the principal and only indicator of quality. A writer who cares desperately about her reputation (and therefore career) should strive to be published in reputable and high-quality markets. One way to distinguish a quality market is to base your decision purely on how much they pay for a story. But that is a lazy distinction, and I'd like to know more about a market than that: you risk not only missing some very high-quality non-professional markets, but also ending up in the hands of poorly produced, ill-considered, or even unscrupulous paying markets. (No names.) Publish in the magazines you'd most like to read. If that includes *Interzone* or *F&SF*, fair enough, they are professional publications and pay well; but if that includes *The Harrow*, *Not One of Us*, or *Whispers of Wickedness*, then whaddayaknow... these are small press, non-professional rate-paying markets. And they're among the best genre publications out there. Regardless.

True, the small press is changing. The whole publishing world is changing. More people watch television and surf the internet than read nowadays. Where is there room for a non-professional speculative fiction magazine in the future? A lot of the markets are going online (look at the recent evolution of the well-financed Hub, for example). The professional and paying markets may change too—perhaps becoming more focussed in the hands of a smaller number of media presses, say—but there will always be venues for writers to get exposure for their work. There will always be readers looking for it. We just have to learn to live with the new media and the new modalities. As noted here in the past some writers have won a lot of success—including financial—by giving their work away online for free under Creative Commons licensing. Go figure. And anyway, is the internet not a possible venue for science fiction and genre creativity? Don't fear the future. Love the future. Help steer the future.

Thanks, as always, to everyone who helped to make *The Future Fire* possible.

'Pianissimo'

Alan Frackleton

Artwork by Cécile Matthey (c) 2007.



Two days after I learnt that Rachel was dead, Dave Rose offered me the job.

I was still trying to decide what to feel. Craig hadn't gone into details in his email—car accident, what did that mean? Was Rachel driving, was she a passenger, was there more than one car involved?—but the sleep I lost on Friday night wasn't wholly down to speculating about what might have happened. I'd stared at the six brief lines of text for so long the words actually began to lose their meaning, and I found myself trying to think in sentences as short and brutal as those on the screen. I haven't spoken to her in two years.

We only slept together once. She was beautiful.

Rachel is dead.

And for the rest of that long night, and all through Saturday, I just couldn't decide what to feel.

I thought you should know, Craig had written at the end of the email. Did that mean Scott had-

n't wanted me to, or was Craig just assuming that was how Scott would feel? Whenever Craig had contacted me with news of Scott and Rachel, I'd never once emailed back making it clear that I didn't want to know. In fact, I'd hardly even mentioned them at all. Not when Craig passed on the news of their 2:1s, not when he mentioned they were moving in together, not when he'd hinted at the possibility of marriage somewhere down the line. That had been, what, five or six months ago? It was unlikely that I'd saved a copy of the email, but on Saturday I spent a fruitless hour searching for it anyway.

It wasn't there.

But what did it matter? Rachel was dead.

And what I felt was like not feeling anything. Anything at all.

When I strolled down to the White Hart at lunchtime on Sunday, I wasn't really looking for

company. The pub was decked out in red and white and valiantly screaming for QPR on the big screen TV, but I only swapped a few polite greetings before taking my pint out into the relative quiet of the garden. Half an hour passed and I was still there nursing it when Dave Rose joined me at the table.

"Danny," he said. "You still looking to make a bit of extra cash?"

When I'd fled from university only a few months into my second year, I knew I couldn't just sit around on my arse doing nothing. My roots were in west London, and that had seemed like far enough away from the damage I'd done to make the prospect of dealing with my student loan and a £1,400 overdraft almost welcoming. Dad was happy to put me up, but there were clear conditions: get a job, save some money, find somewhere else to live. But he wouldn't have understood why I'd had to come home, even if I had told him the truth. I just wanted to keep busy, move on with my life, but I couldn't kid myself I was qualified to do much of anything. In the end I couldn't really summon the enthusiasm to look beyond the first opportunity that came my way.

The name Dave Rose wasn't new to me, of course. Businessman, entrepreneur, local-boy-made-good, he owned one cab firm, shares in at least half a dozen local pubs, numerous flats and bedsits, and Rose Secondhand Furniture, a cavernous warehouse of a building near Acton Town where old furniture went to die. On the other hand, there were the rumours. They ran the gamut from drugs, prostitution and loan sharking to bootlegged DVDs, stolen mobile phones, and even dodgy meat supplied to burger vans all over the city. Nothing had ever been proved, and the simple truth was I needed to start earning, so I didn't think twice when Kelvin let me know Dave might be able to put some work my way. I trusted Kelvin—we'd been mates since school—and Dave had taken him on as a driver at around the same time I was heading off to university. "It's decent money, decent hours, we'll have a laugh—what more do you need to know?" And if I didn't like the look of it, I'd just say thanks but no thanks, and look elsewhere.

That was two years ago; I'd been picking up and delivering cheap dining tables, sofas and wardrobes ever since. Sure, there had been one or two suspiciously small parcels Dave had asked us to drop off here or there because our pickups were taking us in that direction anyway, but I learnt not to ask any questions, and there was always an extra £50 in my wallet at the end of the week.

Within a year I'd moved out of my dad's spare room and into a flat of my own in Northwood Hills. A car was the next thing on my list. I'd been saving steadily towards a nice Audi TT Quattro for

nearly a year, when a decade's worth of ancient pipework ruptured in the flat directly above mine and a mutual neglect of insurance left me with no choice but to pay for the repairs myself. I gritted my teeth and started saving towards the car again, but getting as close as I had and then having to start again from scratch had made me impatient. A week before I came home to find Craig's email waiting in my in box, I'd mentioned to Dave that I could do with earning a bit of extra money, not as bothered as I used to be about what I might be letting myself in for. He told me he'd see what he could do, but I hadn't heard a word about it since.

When he joined me at my table in the pub garden that Sunday, the news about Rachel had shoved everything else out of my mind. It took me a few seconds to work out what he was talking about.

"Sorry Dave, I'm not really with it today," I finally said in answer to his question. "But yeah. If you think you've got something for me, then I might be interested."

Dave's expression was even more non-committal than my reply. But then, everything about the man was subtle. His broad, angular face rarely gave anything away, and any hint of what he might be thinking was buried deep in his eyes. He believed in eye contact; he'd once told me the eyes were the only place where you could never hide. So I held his gaze, and waited for him to reveal what he thought mine were telling him.

"Okay," he finally said. He took a slim notebook from the inside pocket of his jacket, and freed the chunky silver pen from the spiral. "Meet me here at half nine tomorrow," he said, tearing free the page bearing the address once he'd written it down.

He folded the paper and handed it to me.

"Sure," I said. "Thanks Dave."

"See you tomorrow," he said, then disappeared into the uproar that came with QPR's 5-0 defeat to Southend.

I glanced at the address—somewhere in North Wembley—but I didn't think about it much after that. Instead I finished my drink and headed home, and spent the ten minute walk trying to decide whether or not to answer Craig's email. Or I could give him a ring; it was a good three or four months since we'd last talked. But I scrapped that idea pretty quickly. At least in an email I could take the time to really think about what I wanted to say, removed from the immediacy of an actual conversation. The problem was, though I switched on my PC as soon as I got in, all the questions I'd thought I wanted answers to were crowded out by memories I'd rather not have to deal with. In the end I just sat there staring at Craig's message, reading the same words again

and again and again.

Why hadn't Craig mentioned Scott, how he was doing? I shook my head; the question really was as stupid as it sounded. What did I expect Scott to feel? Or maybe he was like me, he didn't know what to feel yet, what to allow himself to feel... No, if Scott was numb, it was for different reasons.

I'd loved Scott, too, but it was two years since I'd last seen or even spoken to him.

Even so, along with Rachel, he'd been with me every second just the same.

They visited me in dreams that night.

It was only Scott and I to begin with, kids again looking for something to do that didn't involve school, ties and blazers stuffed out of sight in our rucksacks, passing back and forth one of the Superkings I'd pinched from my dad's pack of twenty. It was a dream; it made no difference that in the waking world we wouldn't actually meet for another two or three years. The dream was supercharged with colour, sense, feeling, but nothing much really happened, and everything we said seemed to fly from us and vanish before meaning was clear.

There was no clear transition, no sense of having grown up and moved on, but suddenly we were in Spoofers, a pub just across the road from university, and Rachel was there, her back turned to us, leaning forward at the bar as she ordered the drinks. All I could see of her face was the merest of profiles, as if she'd almost turned but thought better of it; she was smiling, I was sure that she was smiling. The cropped sleeve of her t-shirt cast a sliver of shadow over the tiny green hummingbird tattooed high on her right arm. But she did not turn around. I sat there and waited and watched her, but she did not turn around...

I was standing outside the address Dave Rose had given me at twenty five past nine the next morning. It was a fairly modern end of row semi with blank curtainless windows and a narrow front garden no one had paid any attention to in years. The place looked empty, abandoned, but the connection to Dave Rose turned it into a question mark.

He arrived a few minutes later, in a green Transit van someone else was driving. Dave was dressed for work, heavy-duty Caterpillars and paint-stained jeans, and I wondered if all he needed was help clearing the house before he got to work turning it into flats. He offered me his usual curt nod in greeting and I followed him along the cracked stone path to the front door, turning to watch the van drive away while he sorted through a hefty bunch of keys.

Inside the picture of abandonment was completed. Walls stripped back to patches of brown

and grey plaster, a naked flight of stairs, doors removed to reveal partial views of equally empty rooms. The weak morning sunlight that followed us in through the pane in the front door seemed to fade too quickly, the gutted space depriving it of any real purpose.

"We're up here," Dave said.

Saying nothing, I followed him up to the first floor. There was barely any improvement, the same stripped walls and dust floorboards, but at least the rooms at either end of the landing had doors to hide them. There was even some furniture: a straight-backed wooden chair had been placed against the wall opposite the balustrade.

Dave walked over to the door at the far end of the landing. He took out his keys again, separated one, and used it to unlock the door.

"Just look," he said.

He opened the door—at some point the frame had been altered and the door itself re-hung so it opened out onto the landing instead of in and away from it—and I found myself staring into yet another empty room. It was small, a second rather than a master bedroom, but every surface—walls, ceiling, floor—had been painted white. There was even a pale, semi-transparent gauze curtain hanging limp across the single tiny window.

Then Dave took one step back, opening the door a little wider, and I saw that the room wasn't empty after all.

An old upright piano occupied the far corner of the room, the heavy, varnished wood as dark as the rest of the space was light. I don't know why I thought old, maybe just because the lid was up and a hint of muddy yellow on the keys suggested ivory. It *looked* like an heirloom, a little scratched and beaten but nevertheless cared for. There was no stool to sit on, which struck me as odd, but then again the fact that it was there, in that room, in that house, was already strange enough.

Dave closed the door once he was satisfied I'd seen all there was to see. He did not lock it.

"First off," he said, "you do not go into this room. People will show up to spend time in there. You let them in, show them up, unlock this door for them, and then you lock it again when they leave. Sometimes they need a hand getting back down the stairs. That's what you're here for, but otherwise you don't talk to them and you don't interfere. When the room's occupied you don't go near it—you sit over there in that chair. You get here at ten every morning, Monday to Friday, and you don't leave until I come back and tell you to. Five hundred a week.

"Interested?"

The question was my cue to turn the job down, and if I hadn't just seen for myself that the room was empty—empty apart from the piano,

that is—I might have read the obvious implication into what Dave had just told me. But whatever the house was, it wasn't a brothel. My first instinct was still to say no, but five hundred a week? That was nearly double what I'd been making as driver's mate to Kelvin.

And, instinct aside, I was intrigued, I couldn't deny that.

I knew Dave well enough to know he'd probably told me as much as he was going to, but there was one question I just had to ask.

"What do they do in there?"

He didn't even blink.

"Do you want the job or not?"

I had more reasons to say yes than no. I nodded.

"Good," Dave said. "The room at the other end of the hall's the bathroom. If you need to use it and someone's here, too bad. You wait until they leave and you remember to lock this door first. Here." Dave removed a key from his ring and gave it to me. "You return that to me at the end of every day. Try it."

I used the key to lock the door.

"So that's it?"

"That's it," Dave said. "You get paid Friday."

He pocketed the rest of his keys and I followed him back across the landing. "I'll be back around threeish," he called up from the bottom of the stairs, and then all I heard was the rattle of the letterbox as he closed the front door behind him.

The first visitor arrived just before eleven.

As soon as Dave left I stood for a time just looking at the door; dozens of questions were waiting for me behind it. Five hundred a week just to lock and unlock it, and otherwise sit in a chair doing nothing? But I was curious, not stupid. I knew full well Dave had threatened me, putting a particular stress on the word 'don't' as if each repetition corresponded to a finger stabbed against my chest or a tightening squeeze on my arm. Some of the rumours surrounding him may have had their quota of embellishments, but there was a strong enough thread of continuity running through them that I'd be foolish to discount them completely.

Even so there had to be more to it than what he'd told me.

Playing it safe, I decided to check out the rest of the house. It took all of five minutes. The bathroom was a small oblong box that offered no surprises, and the larger of the two bedrooms was as empty and featureless as the rooms downstairs. Even the kitchen had been gutted, but there were hints amidst the jungle at the back of the house of the neat and well-kept garden that once might have thrived there. The back door was locked and bolted, so with nothing left to see

I returned to the landing, pausing to test the chair with my hands to make sure it was stable before I sat down.

My eyes wandered across the bare walls and up to the small square window above the turn in the staircase, its grimy surface struggling to let in much light. *People will show up to spend time in there*, that's what Dave had told me. Doing what, playing the piano? It was plausible based on what I'd seen, but made no sense at all in context of Dave's instructions. There was one corner of the room I would have had to walk all the way inside to see, but judging by the size of the rest of the room, that corner couldn't have contained a bed, let alone much of anything else.

A small white room empty except for a piano.

I was still sitting there, trying to cancel out each question with an even halfway satisfying answer, when someone quietly knocked on the door.

I actually started to turn my head to look along the landing before I realised the sound had come from downstairs. I checked my pocket for Dave's key as I hurried down to answer it. All I could see through the glass pane was the murky silhouette of someone's head and shoulders; the silhouette froze as I turned the latch and pulled open the door.

He was a middle aged man dressed in a full-length coat as black as the suit he wore underneath it. His short greying hair was neatly combed, his face neatly shaved, but none of that could distract from the haunted look in his eyes. I almost asked him when he had slept last, it was so obvious he hadn't in longer than I could guess at. I waited for him to say something himself instead.

"I'm here for..." he finally managed, but that was all.

"Right," I said, and stood back to let him enter. He paused for just a moment, and lowered his head slightly before stepping forward to join me in the hall. Then he did something that told me he'd visited the house before: he moved to the foot of the stairs, but waited for me to join him and lead the way up.

I could smell his aftershave now, and though I couldn't name the scent it reminded me of my father. Something all the young men about town doused themselves in back in the sixties and seventies. Everything about the man spoke of preparation, as if he had been up before the sun readying himself for whatever it was he had come here to do. And then I realised something else, why he had seemed so bewildered when I opened the front door.

He'd been expecting someone else to let him in.

Which meant someone else had been doing this job before Dave offered it to me.

Who? And why weren't they still doing it now?

The stranger followed me across the landing, hovering a step or two behind while I fished the key from my pocket and unlocked the door.

Was I supposed to wait? I wondered. But the fact he hadn't come forward to enter the room told me not to.

In the time it took me to turn my back, cross the landing, and sit down, he'd silently opened the door and slipped inside.

Nothing happened. I expected music, a brief flurry of practice scales before Beethoven or Bach or Liszt filled the house—any instrument would surely echo in that empty room—but five minutes passed and there was only silence. I stayed where I was but glanced across at the door, and the four blank, untreated panels stared back at me. What the hell was he doing in there? I pictured him sitting down and carefully stretching his fingers in preparation to play before I remembered there was nothing for him to sit on.

Another few minutes ticked by. I spent them wondering what would anger Dave more; if I opened the door to look, or only stopped outside to listen?

I made it halfway across the landing before I heard the muffled sound of weeping.

It wasn't much louder when I reached the door and leaned in close to listen. The man inside the room wasn't sobbing, and there were no words, just the hitching exhalations and frequent ragged intakes of breath that suggested the heartfelt release of some painful emotion. I didn't linger, and the sound had faded almost to silence by the time I'd returned to my chair. When the man opened the door and left the room a short while later, one glance at his moist, red eyes was enough to tell anyone that he had been crying. He said nothing to me, but as soon as I started to rise he lifted a trembling hand to indicate that he could manage. So I sat there and listened to him make his slow way back down the stairs, and then carefully pull the front door shut behind him.

Once I'd remembered to lock the door across the landing, I had less than twenty minutes to try to process what had happened before the next visitor arrived. I got nowhere; my mind wanted to shut down every time I tried to pin the last quarter of an hour down and really examine it.

She was an older woman; late fifties, early sixties. She offered me a polite, "Good morning," as soon as I opened the front door, but that was all. Like the man preceding her she waited for me to lead the way upstairs, and like him she waited until my back was turned before opening the door and vanishing into the white room.

This time I didn't hesitate before going back to listen.

I pressed my ear to the cold bare wood and

waited to hear something other than the dull roaring of my blood. After only a few seconds I heard the woman take half a dozen steps across the room, and then something that might have been a sigh. I closed my eyes, but for the longest time there was only more silence. Then, just as I was about to step away, I heard the woman laugh.

It was a quick, almost a girlish giggle, something she'd been surprised into revealing about herself. It tapered off into silence, and this time the silence remained. Nothing else, she did not speak, and I did not hear so much as a single note of music from the piano.

I was sitting down again long before she opened the door just enough to slip out onto the landing. "Thank you," she said, with a smile that made her, briefly, the younger woman whose laugh I had heard through the door.

There were two more that day. A young black woman who couldn't have been much older than me; she quickly lowered her head when she saw me staring at the poorly healed scar that arched across the right side of her narrow face. She spent nearly half an hour in the room, and wept too, but only towards the end, a brief, anguished punctuation that followed the long unbroken silence I had forced myself to stay by the door and listen to. The last visitor was a tall, painfully thin young man who greeted me with cold indifference when I opened the front door, but who paused to thank me when he left the upstairs room fifteen minutes later.

I wasn't sure, but I thought I'd heard him dancing.

It was after two when he pulled the front door shut behind him. I wondered if there was time for any more visitors before Dave returned. I hoped not, but at the same time I strained my ears to catch the sound of someone approaching the front door. All I could hear was the occasional rumble from my stomach; I hadn't eaten a thing since breakfast, but the hunger only caught up with me as three o'clock approached.

Something happened to them in that room... *something*.

Long before I heard Dave's key in the lock, I knew what my answer would be if he asked me whether I'd be back tomorrow. But when he came up to join me, it was only to check that I'd remembered to lock the door (I had, burying the temptation to go inside as deeply as I could) and to hold his hand out for the key. Then all he did was tell me not to be late in the morning.

He didn't follow me back down to the ground floor, and I didn't wait for him.

The questions I'd known I couldn't ask Dave followed me all the way to Wembley High Street, where my hunger finally made itself too big to ignore. The first place I came to was a little West

Indian takeaway with barely enough room for the three minuscule tables crowded together inside the front window. I was the sole customer, and sat down to eat my two steaming-hot vegetable patties while a million questions clamoured in my mind.

Empty of answers, all I could do was push them aside.

But all that did was leave room for Rachel.

I realised with an almost painful jolt that I hadn't thought of her all day. Not once. Was that even *possible*? Every moment of the day was clear in my mind—how could it be otherwise—but Rachel wasn't there, and I couldn't believe that all those hours had passed without even one brief moment when I'd thought of her. As if to make up for it she came flooding back, a rush of thoughts and memories and emotions that struck me like a sudden hit of speed; for a moment I was dizzy with Rachel, high on Rachel, and then just as quickly gutted by the simple, terrible fact that she was gone.

Scott and I had actually joked about who saw her first. We'd been sitting together in the slowly filling lecture hall on the first day of our second year at London Met, as ready as we'd ever be for someone to come and teach us all about the Nineteenth Century English Novel. We chatted about the reading list, dreading Henry James and deciding *Lady Audley's Secret* might be worth looking forward to, every now and then glancing down towards the doors when someone pushed them open. It's perfectly possible that we both saw Rachel enter our lives at exactly the same moment; saw her push the door open with her hip, saw her pause to double check the number on it against something written on the sheet of paper in her hand, saw her quickly scuttled aside with a smile for the half dozen students who were waiting to enter behind her. She'd recognised a tall blonde girl, and together they sat down a little forward and across from me and Scott, but I think all either of us noticed about her friend was the colour of her hair.

"Fuck me," Scott said.

And I'd smiled. "I know."

That was as far as it went until the end of the lecture, when the lecturer paused to allocate spots in the subject tutorials. Scott and I were both pursuing a degree in IT & English Literature, and our 1p.m. Web Design 2 class meant we'd already been selected for the 11:30 to 12:30 seminar directly after the lecture. Amongst the mandatory gaggle of students trying to fit another hour of class around their own schedules was Rachel, and we heard her mention her own 1 p.m. class to the lecturer as we passed the lecturer on our way out. That's when Scott laid claim to having seen her first. Naturally I said I had, but he insisted, so I said no I was sure it had been

me... It went back and forth like that all the way to the seminar room, even though we hadn't lingered long enough to find out whether Rachel would get her way and join us.

Maybe it's only a detail I fabricated later, a little barb I could hook into myself whenever I decided I hadn't been punished enough, but every time I look back on it now I swear I sensed *something* change between us when Rachel entered the seminar room a few minutes later, and Scott and I got our first proper look at her.

It's true, but saying Rachel was beautiful doesn't really tell you anything. Her hair, a rich brown dark enough to be mistaken for black, was cut just on her shoulders, loose but pinned back behind her ears so nothing of her face was hidden. Deep hazel eyes, a small, full mouth that could never get enough of smiling... I once heard Craig describe her as "All right," and maybe to him and a hundred thousand other blokes that's all she was, but I've never thought of her as anything less than beautiful. And Scott clearly agreed—he quickly scribbled something at the foot of his lecture notes and turned the A4 pad so I could read *fuck me!!!* in giant-sized letters. I laughed, and maybe that's what made Rachel notice us; she pointed across the room, and then said something to her friend—Annie, I think her name was—before they came over and claimed the last two empty seats at our table.

The woman behind the takeaway's counter looked none too pleased when I left most of my second patty uneaten, and I smiled a quick apology before I left the shop. Without a car my journey home involved two buses and the Tube, but I felt like walking, and made it all the way to South Kenton before catching a 223 and then the Metropolitan Line to Northwick Park Station. Rachel still hovered there in the back of my thoughts, but now she'd been joined by the white room with its lonely piano. Would I dream about the room the way I'd dreamt about Scott and Rachel the night before? It was one question I'd be happy to see go unanswered.

My mobile rang just as I was letting myself into my flat, but it was only Kelvin wanting to know what Dave had had me doing all day. *Not much* was the first safe reply that came to mind, but remembering that Kelvin had worked for Dave longer than I had, I found myself asking whether he knew something about a house in North Wembley.

"Gutting the place for flats is he?" Kelvin asked back and, as was his habit, went on to answer the question himself. "Yeah, I've heard he's been expanding in that direction. So if you've been knocking in walls all day does that mean you're too tired for a jar or two tonight?"

I almost accepted, but quickly decided company wasn't really what I needed. It was just as

well; my replacement wasn't up to much, Kelvin told me, so it was a safe bet he would have spent most of the evening complaining. I told him maybe at the weekend, once I'd been paid, and then wondered what the hell I was going to do with the rest of the day instead.

Think about that room some more, at least to begin with. It would have surprised me if Kelvin had known something about it; I imagined very few people were aware of that particular house. There was no question of anything illegal, not as far as I could see, but whatever those people went there for, whatever it was that happened to them behind that cheap pine door, it was... private. Between them and the room. Maybe that explained why I'd been reluctant to take a closer look, despite giving in to my growing curiosity just enough to eavesdrop. After all, there was no way Dave would know I hadn't followed the rules unless I told him.

No, he'd know. One look into my eyes and he'd know.

Despite turning down Kelvin's offer of a night out, I toyed with the idea of phoning Callie, a girl I'd been seeing on and off for the past few months. It was a while since I'd last been in touch—I had to think a moment to remember the date—and she'd want a *very* good reason before even entertaining the idea of meeting me somewhere for a drink. I wasn't really sure what I wanted from her, that was the problem. Sex, but that was obvious, and I had to admit she could be fun in a light-hearted, meaningless way... No, there was too damn much I wasn't sure about these days, *that* was the problem, and a few hours with Callie wouldn't fix that.

So instead of picking up the phone, I switched on the computer. I think I'd known I would all along. Double-clicking to open Craig's email felt inevitable.

Were the police investigating the accident? And what about the funeral? The email didn't mention either. All I had to do was reply, and I knew Craig would tell me.

I got as far as watching the cursor blink inside the subject box before giving up. Nothing I was thinking seemed like the right thing to say.

Craig had stayed, and I hadn't.

I'd never quite figured out why he'd kept in touch. The only real thing we had in common was having shared the same flat with Scott, but maybe Craig placed more value on our relationship than I ever had. I'd always thought of him as Scott's other flatmate, a decent bloke but not someone I felt particularly close to. He'd been fine when Scott introduced us and said he wanted to rent me the spare room, and even though he and Scott had known each other for years, he'd seemed to accept the obvious depth of our friendship, as content to make plans of his

own as join us for a night out whenever we invited him.

God, that had been the best year of my life. What happened later didn't make that any less true. Maybe it was that as much as the habit of contact that prompted Craig to let me know about the accident.

Maybe he thought the memory of that one good year would be enough. Not just *Rachel is dead* but *Rachel's dead and Scott was your best friend*.

"I know he was," I heard myself admitting to the empty room. But I went ahead and switched off the computer anyway.

"What's in the bag?"

It was the first thing Dave said to me when I met him outside the Wembley house the next morning.

"Just a book," I told him, "and a bite to eat."

That seemed to satisfy him, but I had nothing to hide if he decided he wanted to check for himself. The small HMV bag contained a hastily prepared ham/salad sandwich wrapped in cling-film, a bottle of Highland Spring, and a fat paperback of vintage noir short stories. I'd added the book as an afterthought just before heading out the door. What better way to indicate that I wasn't the least bit interested in what went on in the white room? The ruse seemed a bit contrived once I reached the house, but anyway.

Dave didn't say anything else until we were upstairs, when he let me know he wouldn't be back to fetch the keys until sometime after four o'clock.

"No problem," I said.

"Good man. Enjoy your book," he added, and then left me to it.

I didn't even take it out of the bag. Instead, and despite knowing there was no possible reason to, I crossed the landing and pressed my ear against the door to listen. There was nothing for me to hear, of course, but I stayed like that for another minute or two. All I had to do was unlock the door and step inside...

I sat back down to wait instead. Another twenty minutes passed before I moved again, to answer the first quiet knock on the front door.

She was carrying a single white lily; a few years older than me, late twenties or early thirties, and as pale and elegant as the flower she clasped in her hand. Her eyes moved past me to the stairs, so I knew that this wasn't her first visit. No words passed between us, and I knew that once we were upstairs she would wait for me to turn my back and walk away before she opened the door.

I didn't sit down, though. I gave her a moment, then returned to the door to listen.

That established the pattern for the rest of the

day. There were four more visitors, three men and one more woman, and seemingly the only thing they had in common was whatever it was that brought them to the room. I heard each of them weeping, at one point or another; the woman carrying the lily sobbed with such awful, gut-wrenching force I wondered if people passing by outside could hear her.

She left the room empty-handed, but I locked the door without checking to see what had happened to the flower.

I ate my sandwich, drank some water, even scanned a page or two of my book. They were all just things to do in the lulls between visitors. I was waiting; I just couldn't say with any certainty exactly what I was waiting for.

The final visitor arrived just before two, a small, overweight man with thinning red hair who smiled warmly when I let him in. It was routine now; he followed me up to the first floor landing, stood behind me as I opened the door, entered the room only once my back was turned. And then my own routine; I paused, counted slowly to ten, then went to the door and pressed my ear against the wood.

The first thing I heard I wasn't sure of, but then it came again.

A name. He had whispered a name.

"*Judith...*"

Inexplicably I felt close to tears before I heard the man behind the door give in to his own. There was something in the sound of his weeping other than sorrow, and it was that something else that seemed to reach through the door and into me, but I'd moved away before I could give a name to the emotion. Still, I could feel it pull at me, even as I stumbled past the chair and into the bathroom. Then I blinked and seemed to lose a moment or two of time. The next thing I was aware of was bending over the sink and cupping my hands to catch the thin trickle of cold brown water from the tap. I must have turned it on, but I had no memory of doing so. I glanced up at the bare wall above the sink, and wondered what my face would have told me had there been a mirror there.

I gave up on the water and shook my hands dry, turning the tap off before returning to the landing. Could the visitor have left in the—what, minute, minute and a half—I seemed to have lost?

I would have to go back over to the door and listen if I wanted to be sure.

I couldn't do it. I sat down to wait, and when I heard him leave the room a few minutes later it was all I could do not to look at him. I didn't want to make eye contact, make a connection; I didn't want to believe he might answer me if I asked him whether he'd noticed the lily the day's first visitor had left inside the room.

Once he'd left I felt restless. I locked the door, then went downstairs, wandering from one empty ground floor box to the next, what had once been a front room, a dining room, a kitchen, but I already knew there was nothing those rooms could tell me. All I could hear was the echo of my own progress briefly filling the empty spaces, the murmur of traffic from the road outside, the occasional voice that I knew had drifted in from outside too. I'd returned to the front room when I heard someone walking along the path to the front door. As soon as I heard the key turn in the lock I knew it could only be Dave.

I looked at my watch—it was ten after four. Had I really been wandering around those empty rooms for over an hour?

Dave had let himself in and taken half a dozen steps towards the stairs before I forced myself to step into the hall to meet him.

He was dressed in a crisp grey suit today. He stood at the foot of the stairs with one hand in his pocket, the other making a loose fist around his keys. His face was unreadable, but that could mean anything.

I waited.

"You like to listen, don't you," he said at last.

It wasn't a question.

"I don't know what you mean," I said. It was an utterly pointless denial, but I had to say something.

"Tell me Danny. Why do you think I gave you this job?"

He hadn't moved, one hand still in his pocket, the other still gripping his keys. His voice gave as little away as his stance or his expression, but I didn't feel threatened. At least, I didn't feel threatened by him.

So I tried to answer his question.

"Because I needed it. I mean, because I told you I could use the extra cash."

"No," he said. "I meant *this* job."

He'd lost me. I shook my head.

"It's obvious, isn't it? Because there was a vacancy. And that look on your face... The guy who had this job before you, he got that look too. It took longer for him though, nearly three months in the end.

"The point is," he continued, once I hadn't replied, "I'm prepared to give you the same choice I gave him. The choice I give all of them once they get that look you've got now. The job's still yours if you want it, same deal as before, but if you don't you can just walk away. Simple yes or no. If it's no you don't have to worry, I'll find you something else. So, what's it to be?"

"I don't know," I said. Just then it was the one thing I was certain of.

"Fair enough," Dave said. He took his hand from his pocket and placed it on the flat square top of the newel post. "Follow me."

He headed upstairs without waiting to see if I'd join him. I told myself the same number of steps that would take me to the foot of the staircase would also take me to the front door.

Then I told myself I really didn't have a choice.

He was waiting for me outside the door to the white room, and as I crossed the landing he held out his hand for the key. Watching him unlock the door, I waited for the sense of *wrongness* I'd felt every time I stood outside to listen, like a voice saying *don't* so quietly I couldn't actually hear it, only feel the effect of the word like a firm hand pressed against my chest. But then Dave got the door open, and I felt nothing. I watched him walk all the way across the room and turn around.

"In you come," he said.

I walked across the white floor to join him. The floorboards were actually more grey than white, the dust scuffed here and there with footprints, a mess of swirls directly in front of the piano where I pictured visitor after visitor sitting down. It was just a room someone had doused with Dulux Brilliant White, occupied by nothing more than an old upright piano.

The only difference I could see was the single pale lily lying across the instrument's silent keys.

"Flats," Dave said, but I couldn't drag my eyes away from the piano. "That was the idea anyway. Used to be you could snap up a place like this at auction for under a hundred K if you were lucky. Cheaper, if you knew the right people. Two, three grand to gut it and turn it into flats, rent them out for one-twenty, one-fifty a week... Aren't you curious to know why my plans changed, Danny?"

"I'm listening," I said.

"Ah, but you can't hear it, can you?" Dave said. "The music. It doesn't matter, I've never heard it either. I could try to explain it to you, tell you all about the old guy who used to own this place and what happened to him when his wife died... but that doesn't really matter either. They can hear it, that's all that matters."

At the same time I was listening to Dave tell me these things, I was trying to concentrate on the silence that seemed like a solid force occupying the rest of the room. I didn't expect to hear anything beyond Dave's voice, but I couldn't help listening for something else anyway. But Dave was right, there was nothing. His voice. The sound of my breathing. Nothing else at all.

"How much?" I asked him, to fill some of that silence.

"How much do I charge them? Depends. What they can afford, some of them. But most pay whatever I ask them to, once they know what this place can do for them."

What did he do, I wondered, put an ad in the paper? Hang around cemeteries propositioning mourners? And what about the ones who could no longer pay? What if they hadn't found what

they were looking for? What happened then?

"That's the beauty of it," Dave said, as if he could hear the questions I was asking myself. "People always die, and people are always left behind."

"So," he added abruptly, the change in tone clearly indicating he was bringing the lesson to an end. "The job's still yours if you want it. If not I'll pay you for the week anyway and set you up with something else."

"The others, the ones who had this job before me. Why didn't they stay?"

"You'd have to ask them," Dave said. "So?"

"I'll be here tomorrow," I told him. I wasn't sure if I believed it, but as Dave took a moment to study me, absorbing my answer, I realised it was true.

"Good." He walked over to the piano, and for one terrible moment I thought he was going to play something.

But all he did was pick up the lily and toss it to me.

"Get rid of that on your way out," he said.

Hi Craig.

I'd been sitting in front of my computer for twenty minutes, but those two words were as far as I'd got.

The lily Dave had told me to throw away was on my kitchen table, where I'd left it as soon as I got home. I'd had to snap off part of the stem to fit it in my bag, but otherwise the journey home hadn't damaged it too badly. The scent seemed to cling to my fingers, and obscurely I wondered if that was the reason I'd only managed to type two words in nearly half an hour.

Don't fuck everything up, Craig had told me when he found me in my room packing a suitcase. But as far as I was concerned I'd already done that. I hadn't made up my mind to quit university altogether, kidding myself that all I needed was some time away. But I guess Craig wasn't fooled, and maybe that was part of the reason he'd stayed in touch, hoping to lure me back one day. He was stubborn, I had to give him that. It was two years later, and he was still trying.

What friends are for, I thought, as I stared at the words on the screen.

But it was true, I'd always been closer to Scott. It wasn't just the little things, like a similar taste in music or TV or books, it was the way our view of the world through the window was the same. Craig was a mate, but Scott was my *friend*; for that year and a half he was the best friend I'd ever had. Even when it became so obvious that he really did like Rachel, and once I accepted the fact that her attraction to him had done nothing at all to blunt my own feelings for her, I still thought of Scott as my closest friend, someone I'd do anything for. But in no time at all Danny and Scott

became Danny, and Scott and Rachel. She was there all the time, during lectures, in the pub afterwards, back at the flat, and as I watched them flirt, watch them draw irrevocably closer and closer to each other, I felt no jealousy towards my friend, only an undeniable desire for the girl he was falling for. I honestly don't think either of them were aware of it; I picked up no warning signals from Scott, and Rachel was as warm and open with me as she had been since the beginning. I even fantasised there had been a moment or two, early on, when she'd flirted with me too, as if there had been some small degree of attraction for her as well. But it was Scott she fell for. I knew that, never once doubted it, but the facts changed nothing. I could not get Rachel out of my head.

The night we threw a Halloween party at the flat, that really should have been the end of it. Scott and Rachel were barely a foot away from each other from the moment she arrived. If they weren't dancing they were sitting together in the garden, their intimacy like a barrier that closed them off from the rest of the world. I knew they hadn't slept together yet; Scott mightn't have told me in so many words, but he would have told me. When he said he was taking Rachel home, I knew instantly what that meant, and I managed to smile, even managed a jokey reminder about our nine a.m. lecture. When they were gone all I could think was that I didn't want to be alone, but the next morning all I knew about the girl I'd spent the night with was that she was from Coventry.

For weeks after that Scott couldn't keep the grin from his face. "She's amazing," he told me more than once, and I could see how happy she made him, how happy being together made them both. When I said I was glad for him, I meant it, but buried beneath that as deep as I could push it was the simple wish that Rachel had chosen me instead. Every time I saw her I felt it, a savage little ache that refused to heal.

I didn't want to hurt Scott. I didn't want to hurt either of them.

They'd been solid for nearly two months when it happened. My feelings hadn't changed, but I was starting to believe that, given time, they would, sure that if I only believed it hard enough it had to happen. It was a Saturday, and I had the flat to myself. Craig had driven down to Brighton for his older brother's stag do, but Scott and I had both turned down invitations to tag along. I just wasn't in the party mood, and I'd assumed, because he had not come back to the flat the previous evening, that Scott wanted to spend the weekend with Rachel.

She phoned me first, looking for him. Apparently Scott had mentioned the Brighton trip to her the day before, wondering if Rachel wanted to drive down with him, a suggestion that for some

reason ended up as an argument. I never did get a handle on what they had really been fighting about, but it seemed that Scott had headed off to Brighton anyway, a fact Rachel had phoned the flat to confirm. I called Scott as soon as I'd spoken to her, but Craig answered and told me Scott was still sleeping off the night before. It wasn't too late for me to jump on a train and join them, he pointed out, but I told him to have a good time and I'd see them on Monday.

Rachel showed up at the flat an hour later, carrying two bottles of wine.

I didn't try to tell myself inviting her in was a bad idea, or that getting drunk with her was an even worse one. There was no agenda; it just happened, and I let it. She was there and I was the focus of her attention, and that made me happy. I don't remember thinking about Scott at all after the first few glasses of wine. Rachel wanted to talk about anything but him anyway, and the conversation flowed from our studies to music, films, childhood reminiscences, and when the bottles were empty Rachel sent me out for more while she hunted through kitchen drawers for takeaway menus. When I got back she'd put on one of Craig's Bjork CDs, and she was dancing all alone to the music. In that moment it was real, she was there alone but waiting for me, and I could have stood there all night just watching her.

We drank more wine and ate the margarita pizzas when they finally arrived, and we talked some more, and we laughed, and then it was night and she was close to me and we were kissing. To this day I don't know who initiated it, but once we'd overcome a brief, electric pause when it might have gone either way, neither of us tried to stop it. I don't have to justify it in those terms, because Rachel was as much in the moment as I was. Her reasons weren't mine, that's the only difference. "Not here," she said, taking my hand and leading me into my bedroom, and those were the last words either of us spoke. The only light came in through the window, but that was enough, and every part of her I looked at I tasted with my mouth, touched with my hands.

She was asleep before I was. When I woke up she was gone.

For me that Sunday morning was almost the worst of what was to follow, but not because I was worried about Scott. I phoned Rachel five times in the space of half an hour before she finally picked up, but everything she said was compressed into the last five words she spoke before she ended the call: "I have to tell him." The rest came back to me later, *mistake, shouldn't have happened, I love him*, but all I did was try to erase them with the memory of the night. Alone in the flat I could still taste Rachel, still feel the heat of her on my fingers. But that was only as true as

the words she'd spoken on the phone. No more, no less.

I didn't doubt that she would tell him, only I couldn't decide what that would mean. It had to be the end for them, I told myself, just as it had to be the end of my friendship with Scott.

The question I asked myself was, was Rachel worth that?

Yes. Even if last night had never happened, the answer was absolutely yes.

She borrowed her sister's car and drove down to Brighton that afternoon. Craig came back first, alone, about six hours later: he told me Scott and Rachel were on their way. If he'd asked me I suppose I would have tried to explain it to him, but he only stayed long enough to drop off his bags. Maybe the empty wine bottles, the two glasses, the two plates, told him all he needed to know. I cleared everything away once he was gone, and waited.

The only thing I didn't want was for Scott to ask me if I was sorry, because I didn't want to tell him the truth.

I didn't want to tell him *no*.

Rachel hadn't lied, she really did love him. And, in the end, Scott couldn't deny that he loved her too. There was time apart, but they got back together, and I wondered if my decision not to return and pick up my studies had had anything to do with that.

Maybe if Scott had done something, anything other than look at me the way he had before he turned around and walked out of the room. . .

But that was it; I never saw either of them again. Everything I knew about the way they had slowly built a life together I learnt from Craig's emails and occasional phone calls. But now Rachel was dead, and I couldn't get beyond the first two words of my reply to the email Craig had sent to let me know.

In the end I just had to force everything out of my mind except for the one thing I really needed to know:

Hi Craig.

When's the funeral?

Friday.

Craig replied with the details less than an hour later, Friday at 10:45 a.m., and the address of a cemetery in North London. Nothing else, but maybe the fact I had asked at all told him I'd already decided to go.

And I had decided, but I needed to speak to Dave first.

Despite hardly sleeping at all that night I was at the house on time the next morning, but before he could hand me the key to the white room Dave and I had a conversation. He listened first, and thought about it for a long time before replying,

his eyes never once leaving my face. He made me a deal; he would cancel all the appointments he had lined up for Friday, and leave the key to the white room plus the front door key with me on Thursday afternoon. When I was done I would return both keys to him. In return, I owed him. Whatever he needed done, it was my job to do it. I didn't ask him for how long; I knew it wasn't that kind of deal. It was yes or no, and no going back either way.

"Yes," I said.

It was the first time I had ever really seen Dave Rose smile.

In the meantime I still had the rest of Wednesday and the whole of Thursday to get through. The visitors came to the house, and I did my job, but I no longer went to the door to listen. After work on Wednesday I took my one good suit to be dry-cleaned, paying extra to ensure I could pick it up on my way home on Thursday. Dave's house key and the key to the white room were safely in the coin-hold of the wallet. The only other thing I had to do was phone Kelvin and talk him into letting me borrow his car.

At home on Thursday, I spent hours listening to music. I sampled every CD I owned, and even dug out a box of cassettes I hadn't listened to in years, staying up till three in the morning surfing through radio stations once I'd tried them all. Rock, pop, classical, ragga, dance, jazz, drum & bass, folk, bangra, R&B... nothing I listened to was right. I don't think I really expected to find anything, but trying seemed necessary. It seemed right.

But I didn't cry.

My friend and the woman I still loved filled my heart, my head, but I did not once cry.

I arrived at the cemetery a good half hour early, and once I'd found somewhere to park Kelvin's Civic I looked around for a quiet spot where I could watch and wait. I knew I wouldn't approach Scott until after the service, but I wanted to be there, and there was no one around to direct me to the site of Rachel's grave.

What was soon to become Rachel's grave.

When the first black car rolled through the gates at twenty to eleven, the first familiar face I spotted through the windows was Craig's. I waited until all five vehicles had driven through and disappeared around the curve before following. I hadn't spotted Scott, but then I'd barely been able to tear my eyes away from the sight of RACHEL spelled out in pale yellow blossoms inside the window of the hearse.

It wasn't cold, but I could not stop shivering.

I found a vantage point above and slightly to the left of the mourners, watching as they slowly left the cars and gathered beside the grave. Scott

had let his hair grow out, I saw; he walked at the side of an older woman I assumed was Rachel's mother. The older man supporting her on the other side had to be a friend, or a relative, because I knew Rachel's father had died when she was a child. I thought one or two other faces were familiar, probably from university, but I couldn't put names to them.

Murmurs, that's all I heard. The priest's voice, Rachel's mother quietly sobbing, hushed 'Amen's'. I watched Rachel's mother sag into the support Scott tried to provide for her, and the strained mask of his face, and the way his hands seemed to tremor under the weight of the earth he scattered onto the coffin. I did not stop shivering until it was over and people began slowly drifting back towards the cars.

Only Scott lingered at the grave, Craig by his side.

It was Craig who looked up and watched me walk towards them. One or two people by the cars turned to look as well, but I paid no attention to them; I was studying Scott's face to confirm what I already suspected.

He hadn't cried during the service, not once.

"Scott," Craig finally said, because I had almost reached them and Scott still hadn't noticed me.

I stopped a few paces away. I could have reached out, offered my hand. Craig seemed uncertain about whether to linger, but I glanced at him briefly, and that was enough.

"I'll wait by the car," he said, and moved away.

"You..." Scott said, but that was all.

I felt it. *Something*. It was enough.

"I need you to come with me," I said. I didn't want to have to explain; I didn't think I could. I just needed him to listen to me and somehow understand, if that was even possible.

"Did you hear me Scott?" I tried again. "I need you to come with me, now."

He blinked. "Where?"

"Somewhere... It's in Wembley. A house... it isn't something I can describe, Scott, you just have to come with me and see for yourself. My car's parked outside. Will you come with me?"

"I don't know what you're talking about..."

"I know that, I know. But this is important. I came but now I really need you to come with me."

"What's going on?" Craig said, coming back to join us. "Look, Danny, we have to go. It's all been arranged, back at Gloria's. Are you coming with us?"

"No. I need Scott to come somewhere with me first."

"What are you talking about? Go where -"

"It's all right," Scott told him. He hadn't once taken his eyes from me. "You go on ahead. Tell Gloria... just tell her there's something I have to do. It's for Rachel, tell her that. I'll see you back

there later."

"Scott..."

"Go on," he said again, already walking along the grave towards me. "I'll be all right."

I had already turned and started along the gravel path towards the exit, and after a moment I heard Scott fall into pace a little way behind me. "It's the blue Civic," I told him, as soon as we were through the gates, and only looked at him again once I was behind the wheel and he'd climbed in beside me. His face reminded me of Dave's, solid, firm, but essentially expressionless. He stared straight ahead, only moving to pull the seatbelt across his chest and firmly lock it in place the moment as I started the engine.

We didn't speak. There was no threat in the silence, no anger, but two years is a long time. Had Craig passed on news about me the way he'd passed on news about Scott? I couldn't imagine it; there was hardly anything to tell. Maybe the occasional *I heard from Danny, he's doing okay*, but that was all. That was all.

We'd been driving in silence for a quarter of an hour when Scott started talking.

"Drunk driver," he said, his voice as expressionless as his face. "Did Craig tell you? Fifteen years old. He died too. Three and a half hours in surgery but he died too. And she loved that little Ka. K-a, you know the ones I mean? She was still trying to decide on a name for it. I remember... I remember..."

"I'm so sorry Scott," I said, when he couldn't finish.

"You weren't the only one to blame," he said. "But you shouldn't have walked away, Danny. You shouldn't have walked away. We could have worked it out."

"No, we couldn't have."

I expected him to argue, but he already sounded so defeated.

"No," he said, "you're probably right. She didn't really think so either." I sensed him turn his head, briefly, to look at me. "I knew."

"Knew what?"

"Don't be so fucking dense Danny," he said, with sudden vehemence. "What do you think I'm talking about? The way you felt about her."

The truth was there, and I let it come. "It never went away. I wish to God it had, but it just never went away."

"When she drove down to Brighton to tell me, do you know what she said? 'He wasn't you.' I knew who she meant right away, and if you'd been there... oh man, if you'd been there I fucking swear I would have killed you. It was that strong already, what we had. Do you know what I mean? She felt it too and it terrified her. I'm not saying she used you, she'd never do that, but what happened with you... Afterwards she was still scared, only it wasn't the same. She was

scared that she might have lost me. I hope one day you know what it feels like to have someone say that to you, I really do. It's incredible. It's just the greatest feeling in the world."

I concentrated on the road. It wasn't far now. I wondered if he'd only come along so he could say that to me, if he'd spent the first long minutes of the journey calmly selecting just the right words, but deep down I didn't really believe it.

They must have been so happy. They were *right*, it was that simple, and all along I'd known that.

But I had done the right thing, I knew that, too. There was no way I ever could have stayed.

"Did she believe in God?" I asked Scott, as we approached the left turn that would take us to the street.

"Why?"

"The service."

"Right. No, she didn't, not that way. That was more for her mum's sake. Gloria. But I knew she

wouldn't mind."

I parked Kelvin's Civic outside the house and cut the engine.

"Where are we, Danny?"

"Just come with me," I said.

I got out of the car and walked along the cracked stone path to the house. After a moment I heard Scott close the passenger door and follow me. Inside I moved straight towards the stairs, and glanced back to see Scott close the front door and frown at the bare walls, the dusty floors, the empty rooms. But he followed me up to the landing without asking any more questions.

I was shivering again by the time I'd reached the door and unlocked it. I wanted to ask Scott how strong he thought he was, because I knew we'd only be able to do this once.

"Rachel," I whispered, before he was close enough to hear me.

And then I opened the door.

Alan Frackleton (c) 2007



Artwork by Cécile Matthey (c) 2007.

'Coffin Road'

By Terry Grimwood

Illustration by JE MacMillan (c) 2007



Doug curled his gnarled old builder's hands about the steering wheel of his tiny hatchback and waited for his grandson to emerge from the garage where he had gone to fetch some digging tools.

A chill draught slithered round Doug's neck. The air had entered through the car's half-open hatch, which was tied down onto the lid of the coffin.

Lisa...

Doug swallowed, eyes, tear-blurred. Lisa was his daughter. Daughters should not die before their fathers.

He noticed that the front door of Lisa's Persimmon four-bed detached was open, giving a view of the hall and stairs. Fuck it. Let Steve sort it out. He was supposed to be a trouble-shooter, or project manager or some such. It would be his son-in-law's own stupid fault if he was looted. Let him sit up there staring into space like an idiot until the flu took him the way it had taken his wife. The way it was taking millions all over the world.

Nothing mattered now except giving Lisa a proper burial.

"You want me to drive, Granddad?"

Doug started and looked round to see Jason, peering in at the rolled-down driver's window. He carried a fork, and a spade. He was a good lad was Jason, only

seventeen and already more of a man than his father would ever be.

"No. No, thanks. Just hop in and let's get on with it."

The engine-noise was loud through the rear hatch. Exhaust fumes tainted the plastic sweetness of the car's interior. Doug always kept his cars clean and serviced. You never knew when there was going to be an emergency did you, when your car would have to look after itself.

The estate was deserted, its surviving, middle-class, middle-income, middle-England inhabitants trusting closed curtains, deadbolts, wood and glass to keep out both human-sized looters and microscopic purveyors of genocide. They would succumb though, Doug mused bleakly. Everyone would, except the elderly of course. The elderly had all been vaccinated. The elderly looked set to inherit the Earth.

Doug swerved to avoid an upturned dustbin and narrowly missed the neglect-mangy collie foraging at its spewed contents. Perhaps it would have been kinder to run it over. There were broken windows, smashed fences, possessions strewn over lawns and other, motionless bundles, sprawled on pavements and in their own gardens. Some were wrapped in poly-

there, others in blankets, all dragged from their homes by grieving and frightened relatives, lovers and in rare cases, where such relationships managed to survive, friends.

A van raced past and into the Close, a big grey Toyota with "Bryant's Carpets" printed on its flanks. Doug caught a glimpse of the driver and passenger and saw white overalls, a respirator. Corpse Collectors – Carrion Crows. Anyone with a van and a strong stomach was making a fast buck out of the pandemic, clearing up the dead for a fee (cash of course) or payment in kind; food, clothes, anything necessary to survival.

"Bring out your dead," blared the van's horn. The relentless, jarring blast sliced through Doug's skull. Why couldn't they just bugger off?

Or perhaps he should just hand over a couple of tenners and let *them* deal with Lisa...

They came to a junction. On the far side, trees bordered the town park. Doug was glad of the trees. They blocked off what the park had become – a vast, open air mortuary. At first properly controlled and attended, all bodies decently bagged and tagged by volunteers, anonymous in white overalls and masks. The volunteers were long gone now, many of them lying among those they once bagged and tagged.

Everyone was long gone.

Glancing at the fuel gauge, which was showed all-but-empty, Doug turned left. This would probably be the last journey he made in this car. He could, of course, try to find an abandoned vehicle and either steal it or siphon its fuel. Risky though. The army – what was left of it - was shooting looters on sight. No sign of any soldiers or even police on this street however. No sign of anyone in fact.

Other than those bundles of clothes and limbs that littered pavements, lawns and, here and there, the road itself.

A few of the living hid inside the bay-windowed semis that faced the park. Some of the houses were burned out. Most had smashed or boarded-up windows. Cars lined the street, all of them, vandalised wrecks.

Doug glanced at Jason, who hugged himself and trembled. "You alright, lad?"

"Feel a bit rough," Jason answered.

"I'm not surprised." Doug tried to sound reassuring. "We'll get this done and get you home."

The residential street gave way to shops. Smoke stained the air; a thin blue mist filled with spiralling ash and charred debris. And here, at last, were people. Some stood and stared, others moved in huddled groups, glancing at Doug's hatchback like frightened animals. Most of the groups consisted of pensioners like himself, gathered together for safety. Weapons were carried; bits of wood, gardening tools, even a shotgun.

And there was the funeral parlour Doug and Jason had raided early that morning. A forbidding 1960's cube of brick and concrete with a smoked-glass window that bore the company name, printed in neat cal-

ligraphy. Its door was smashed from its hinges. They had broken (no, someone else had already done the breaking by the time Doug and Jason arrived) in and taken (stolen) the most expensive looking coffin they could find. The funeral parlour smelled bad. The cooling systems were off. Jason had been sick. Doug had managed not to be.

"I'm sorry," Doug said.

"What for?" Jason asked.

Because you are probably going to die of the flu and there's nothing I can do about it because I'm an old bastard and it's only us old bastards who stand a chance.

"That I've dragged you out here to do this."

"We have to get mum buried properly," Jason said. His face was ashen and he shook badly. "Come on, Granddad, we've got this far. We'll be alright."

Doug nodded, not trusting himself to answer.

The street widened, now bordered by chain stores, Marks and Spencer's, Woolworth's, Boots, none unscathed. Stock and dead flesh was scattered about their entrances like vomit. The road was littered with debris, glinting with shards of glass. Smoke billowed. The smell slithered into the car through all the usual vents and gaps, but mostly through the semi-open back.

Doug's cough dissolved into a chesty, smoker's hack. Jason's went on and on until he was doubled up and gagging for breath.

Figures lurched out of the murk. They ran at the car. One carried a machete. Doug jammed his foot hard down.

For a moment the machete-wielder filled the world and Doug saw that it was a young woman in a fur coat, her grubby face was filled with hate, her nose streamed bloody mucus. Them or us, Doug told her silently, head filled with blood-roar, them or us –

There was a thud and the woman was hurled aside. Jason screamed and swore. Doug clung to the steering wheel. Figures danced out of their path. Something heavy crashed against the side of the car. Another. A third. There was a dull thud of brick on coffin-wood.

"You killed her," Jason yelled. "You hit her on purpose. Fucking hell, Granddad, *you killed her.*"

Yes, Doug answered silently. Them or us...

"You got any cigarettes?" Doug asked, more to shut Jason up than from any nicotine craving.

"Uh?"

"Oh come on, lad. I know you smoke. You stink of it under all that perfume and aftershave or whatever you call it."

Jason grinned weakly, reached into his jacket pocket and produced a pack of Marlboros and a lighter. The welcome and long-missed tang of nicotine blanked out most of the other smells.

They came to a roundabout, overlooked by a church where crowds had gathered, clutching blankets, sleeping bags and each other. Light flickered from the open doorway and through the stained-glass windows with non-electric uncertainty.

Never a religious man, Doug nonetheless found himself craving the warm soul-comfort of a church, because surely no one could touch you when you were hiding in God's house. The idea of a church as an unassailable sanctuary was strong in him.

Doug took the third exit onto a long, gently curving road. The road was busy.

It wasn't only cars; it was wheelbarrows, carts, vans, trucks, and pedestrians. All headed for the cemetery, all with their dead safe inside stolen coffins, muffled in sacks and bags, wrapped in polythene. The living were grim-faced and quiet and almost all past the age of sixty.

Doug carefully slotted the car into the stream, careful not to touch or bump. Even through the car's closed up windows, the sounds of the traffic were audible; the shuffle and flap of feet, the rattle of wheels and rhythmic purr of engines. Exhaust fumes hung heavy on the air. The river moved slowly with the polite caterpillaring of an English queue.

Closer to the cemetery, the stream of widows, widowers, orphans and other bereaved grew denser. Some sat on the side of the road, exhausted. Others lay, motionless and ignored. At the ornately gothic cemetery gates there was chaos, a great milling, pushing clot of humanity and vehicles, all trying to force their way through the main entrance. Doug stopped the car and turned to look at his grandson.

"Come on, lad," he said. "We'll have to walk."

"What? You must be joking -"

"Can you see a smile on my face?"

No, and you'll never see another one, believe you me, Jason (stupid name, by the way, Steve's idea no doubt, what was wrong with Robert or Michael or John?).

Jason sighed and was out first, already working at the knots that held the hatch down and the coffin in place by the time Doug got to him. The job was made awkward by the push and shove of flesh and metal, by elbows, wheels, curses and sobs.

They slid the coffin back. It jammed against the front of a van that had parked right behind their hatchback. A horn blared and Doug looked up to see a big man with earrings and a goatee beard miming obscenities through the windscreen. Still straining under the weight of Lisa's coffin, Doug shouted at him to reverse a little. The van driver pushed open his door, which scythed through a group of frail-looking men and women who were pulling a flat cart bearing two blanket-smothered bodies.

One of the pall bearers staggered back, then fell, clutching at a bloodied face. A woman sobbed his name and sank to her knees beside him.

"You fucking old bastard!" the van driver yelled. His tattoo-covered arms bulged with muscle, his fists were clenched. Doug held his eye. I know your sort, he mused silently. We had them in Korea. You're one of those big-talk tough guys who cry like babies the moment the shooting starts.

Someone else shouted. It was the van's gaunt, long-

haired passenger. Tattoo-man snarled something at him in return then forced his way back to the van. A moment later its rear doors opened and cadavers began to spill from the van's interior. Corpse Collectors, Doug realised, fucking vultures.

Emptied, the van crunched into reverse and bumped over its former cargo. The crowd was forced aside, screaming and cursing. A wheelbarrow on which a coffin had been tied was overturned, its owner knocked off his feet by the van's rust-spattered flank as it revved, spewed blue smoke and raced away.

Using his daughter's coffin as a battering ram, Doug pressed through the crowd and into the cemetery.

Which was a vision of Hell, a desolation where the grief-wrought living mingled with the dead. The ground was torn open, like the craters and slit trenches of a battlefield. People dug and howled and squabbled and collapsed from exhaustion and despair. Grave stones and monuments were skewed, broken, ripped out of the ground. Flowers were scattered.

And the stench...

There was no time to stand and stare. The light was deep orange, fading quickly. Doug, his grandson, and his daughter – oh yes, she was still his daughter, that old bastard death couldn't take that away from him – moved awkwardly over the churned and muddy grass. They slipped, stumbled and, at one point, the foot end of the coffin slipped from Doug's hands and thudded onto the wrecked soil.

The light shifted another notch towards dusk.

They found a small space, relatively undisturbed. It was nowhere near Doreen's resting place. Doug's eight-years-dead wife lay in a prime spot, atop a slope that gave a sweeping view of the town – with its columns of smoke and shattered buildings – but Doug could carry the coffin no further. His heart raced too fast, the papery old organ no doubt galloping into its final furlong. "It'll do," he muttered.

Will do? For Lisa? Do? Is that all? ... ?

"Go and get the spades, lad," Doug said.

"In a minute," Jason answered. He sat on the ground, arms hung over his up-bent knees, head bowed. "Bloody hell I feel bad."

"We're nearly done," Doug said gently and leaned over to ruffle his grandson's hair. He recoiled. Jason's head was hot. Exertion probably, he was unfit, like most of today's youth. It came from too much sitting in front of the telly and driving cars when you should be walking or even biking round the corner to work.

"You stay here," Doug said after a moment. "I'll fetch the tools. Just keep an eye on your mum for me, eh?"

"Yeah, yeah."

Jason sounded alarmingly vague.

The walk back to the car was a war, an upstream swim against a steady current of human beings and their dead. Progress was further hampered by the ailing; people who sat or lay where they fell, who hugged

themselves, shivered, coughed and sneezed out blood-flecked mucus. The rattle of their fluid-filled lungs was audible even above the sobs and cries of the grief-stricken, the relentless thud of feet and the smack of spade-steel against earth.

Jason was no better when Doug finally returned, if anything, he seemed worse. Exhausted and shivering... well, it *was* cold out here - he broke into a wrenching cough that doubled him over and left him clutching at the nearest gravestone for support. He wiped his nose on his sleeve. Doug was glad of the failing light. He didn't want to see what Jason had smeared on his jacket, didn't want to see its colour and consistency. Its *truth*. Jason drew the cigarette packet from his pocket and stood, huddled into himself like an old man. He wavered, almost fell then offered the pack to Doug.

"I'll use the fork to break up the ground, you take the spade and shovel it out," Doug said. Although you didn't look well enough to spoon tea, he added silently. They lit up. Doug coughed. So did Jason. His cough sounded wet.

Doug drove the fork at the ground. The impact jarred through him. The tines barely cracked the trampled, grass-tufted surface. Bones creaking, joints grinding, he pulled back on the handle and prised loose a chunk of earth.

His chest on fire, his back a web of pain. Jason didn't seem to be doing much better. The lad was forcing himself on and Doug was aglow with pride over that. Jason was obviously exhausted, struggling with the unaccustomed exercise. It had been a gruelling few days for him. And that cough, well, he smoked too many ciggies for a lad of his age. Mind you, Doug had smoked heavily enough in his teens, and like a chimney in his early twenties, especially in the army.

Especially in Korea, on that fucking hill after a squadron of Yank A20s had dosed it with napalm. He had thought the hill to be the end of the world, that he would never again see so many dead bodies in one place...

Doug stabbed and pulled; Jason lifted and tipped. Doug's eyes were drawn relentlessly to the coffin. His daughter, his child, his little girl. How the hell could it be her in there? It should be him, worn up old Doug.

Coughing again, doubled over and clutching his middle, Jason sank to his knees. His breath was a wet, gag, a claw for air. The spade clanged down beside him.

Doug picked it up. "Have a break," he said gently, and once more tousled that thatch of dark hair. He ran his hand down onto Jason's forehead, which was hot and damp. Then he began to empty the broken soil from the grave. The weight of earth increased with each load.

He stopped, crouched and felt about the grave, which had become an oblong of black in the gathering dusk. He estimated it to be to be two feet deep. Not deep enough for the coffin, but just deep enough for Lisa herself.

"Come on Jason," he said gruffly. "I need you lad.

One last effort."

Jason looked up and in the gloom his face was white and haunted, his eyes, pits of featureless darkness.

With Jason hanging onto his scrawny, hard muscled old arm, Doug crossed to the coffin. After a brief rest, bent over, hands on knees, they dragged it the two yards or so back to the grave. The coffin was crushingly heavy. Jason coughed, gasped and stumbled, Doug crushed all pain and weakness and hauled. Just hauled and didn't think or look or feel.

He stumbled up against a body, turned to utter an instinctive apology and saw that it was a broad, squat woman. Her hair was long and unkempt, her breath more wheeze than respiration. Behind her, two men dropped something into Lisa's grave.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Doug was breathless, not able to force enough volume into the shout to make the grave stealers turn round. So he pushed at the woman who rocked back then unleashed a mouthful of vile language that slammed against Doug's face like vomit.

It ended with "... so fuck off!"

She spun round to berate the two men, one skinny-tall, the other as portly as her, and both smudges in the dusk.

Doug's heart raced, his nerves and flesh on fire with whatever pushed rage about your body. This was Lisa's grave. That mouthy, ignorant bitch had stolen his Lisa's grave.

The spade was in his hand. Its weight was good, its weight was right.

"Hey!" His shout was a gasp. "I'm speaking to you, you fucking old cow." The woman half turned, even began another tirade, before steel met flesh and a judder shot into Doug's shoulders and through his head so violently it sent him staggering backwards until he bumped up against a gravestone and almost fell.

The woman was a crumpled shadow, looking no different from the piles of dirt torn out of the earth around her. Her men stood silent and frozen, even while Doug wrestled their child (and sister?) out of his own daughter's grave and laid it on the ground beside the woman he assumed had been its mother. The corpse was small and light, a slippery, awkward-to-handle bundle of sticks wrapped in mouldering flesh.

He glanced at the body he had felled. *Them or us*, that's what he had told himself, back in Korea. That's how it was now. Perhaps, he mused as he lifted the spade above Lisa's coffin, it's why the old have been chosen to survive, because we know how to fight, but not to hate.

He smashed the spade downwards onto the coffin's lid.

He was glad it almost dark.

When, a moment later, they rolled Lisa into her grave, Jason collapsed and fell in with her to lie, sobbing with his head resting on her shoulder. His tears dissolved into yet another bout of violent coughing. The cough became a breathless gag.

Doug gently tugged at him until he crawled back out of the grave and curled up on the ground, teeth clattering. His chest sounded as if it was full of water. Doug hunted through his grandson's jacket until he found his cigarettes, lit up then offered one to Jason. His answer was the incomprehensible mumble of delirium.

Finding a nearby tombstone to lean against, Doug sat down to enjoy his smoke. No use closing the grave

when he was going to have to enlarge it in a few hours time. Besides, he needed to make himself comfortable, it was his turn for guard duty.

And while Doug's cigarette ascended, flared, faded, fell then ascended again like a slow motion pendulum, the dark seethed with the animal utterances of the grieving and the thud and clink of spades as they wounded, fed, then healed the earth.

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Inspired by events in South Africa during the great influenza pandemic of 1918 to 1919



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'The Blood of Castalsara'

By William J. Piovano

Artwork by Djibril (cc) 2007 (left)

I came upon the singing man along a sloping road in the principality of Castalsara. The road climbed a hill, adjacent to one of the vineyards which textured the rolling countryside hills like carefully combed carpets. To the left, at the hill's top, was a circular clearing with a dead tree, one of the few patches of land untouched by agriculture.

I heard him before I saw him, really, wondering what in the name of Ajun that sound was, so akin to a dying cat. I was drawn to it out of irritation more than curiosity. Having decided that my current duty no longer deserved my attention, I cut briefly off the trail and tracked the sound—unmistakable and out-of-place in this countryside as a bawdy song in a church—through the stretch of grass.

He was sitting on the last healthy bough of the dying tree, legs dangling to the rhythm of his tune. In his hands rested a lyre, which his fingers plucked with what appeared a modicum of skill, accompanying his undulating voice (the real instrument of lament). I am no musician, grant you, to judge a song in play, but I knew that voice for a banshee's wail as soon as I heard it.

"Oi!" I cried, wincing as a particularly high pitch cracked from the man's chest. The wind brushed the leaves above him into a restless rustle—or was it his voice?

The playing stopped—by Ajun what relief!—and the man raised a hand in grinning salute. Close up, I took note of the peculiarity of his garb; a melding, rather, of a courtier and a pilgrim. White silk cuffs blossomed from under the sleeves of the brown coat—a most ragged and patched piece of clothing. Over it he wore a bright purple jerkin. The mismatched trousers might have passed as normal, had the swaying feet at their ends not been clad in checkered shoes with up-curving points.

"Why, good afternoon!" he called. "I have an audience, it seems, fit for a royal court." I glanced down at my filthy leather straps over brown and grey riding apparel, and scowling back at the jape. The man appeared not to notice his own jibe, saying, "forgive me if I do not climb down to shake hands, or bow, but the last traveler I met on this road was kind enough to try and shorten me by a head... *while* I played my song. Truly there is no respect for minstrels anymore."

"Are you sure it wasn't your song?" I said, judging the distance between us. One arrow could knock him out of the branches like a rotten apple. Was it worth the trouble, though? I said then, "I could belch my name and it would sound better."

"A charmer, I see," said the minstrel (minstrel in absence of a better name, really, since drunk-who-found-a-lyre is a tad too long). "While I'm sure your

belch would be lovely and perfumed in mirror of your splendid self," he added with a tip of his head, "I doubt your belly's air can strum the seven scales of Disero." He proceeded to pluck a sequence of notes in increasing pitch and speed, each one stretching a peculiar wince on his face until I thought the eyes might pop out like grapes.

Shaking my head, I said, "stick to the lyre, and you might get lucky."

I made to turn away, when a strum accompanied the minstrel's request.

"I woke feeling lucky this morning," he called, "how about a few coppers for as many songs?"

"I'd rather listen to the noises of my horse's arse."

"I see. Say, are you court-bred, or royalty?"

My bow was off my shoulder faster than his mouth opened, the arrow nocked. "Care to mock me again?" I said. "I must warn you, I've hit flying crows from horseback."

The minstrel had nearly dropped his lyre and toppled out of the tree. "Please do put that down!" He covered his face with his hands, as if that could help him in some way. "People are so touchy these days!"

After a moment of serious contemplation—contemplating the service I'd have done to the world's ears by silencing that mouth—I lowered the bow, growing gradually more amused.

The minstrel, cleverly sensing the lack of an arrow in his gut, peeked over his lyre-shield. "Who are you?"

"That's my bloody business," I said, placing the arrow back in the quiver. I did not think the minstrel posed a threat; I can tell a killer from a victim, almost every time. But I could not risk my Courier-Master learning that I had been strolling idly through the hills when in fact my task was to deliver the Queen's message to Duke Lusan. 'In all haste' I had been instructed. That's what all nobles said about their messages, though. Each one thought his letter crucial among all the world's trivial matters. Just how they regarded themselves.

"Well, I'm Gilnay," said the minstrel, "but some call me 'Cotton Mouth'."

"Cotton Mouth..." I repeated. "And why is that?"

"Because I have a soft voice, of course," said Gilnay, then laughed quietly to himself. I failed to catch the jest.

"Innislan," I said, giving in to some inner urge of etiquette.

"I don't think a brigand would have given me his name," Gilnay said, dropping off the branch. He landed with little grace, rubbing his rear. "I'll take the chance and trust you, Innislan."

"If I were a brigand you'd be in the grass with your pouches gone and an arrow in your chest," I replied.

"That's what I said." Gilnay slid the lyre into a linen bag hanging off his shoulder. Like the rest of his possessions, it resembled the patched remains of lordly clothing. "I'm glad you agree. So where are you headed, Innislan?"

'That's my bloody business' I wanted to say. I opened my mouth to say as much, then paused and said instead, "I'm delivering a message."

"To the Prince of Castalsara?"

"No. I'm just passing through."

I decided not to reveal the recipient and destination of my message. Over many years and more disappointments, I had acquired the good habit of withholding my trust, and been saved as such on a number of occasions. This 'Cotton Mouth' had already chattered me into some concessions, and it spoke praise to his honeyed tongue.

As he neared, I observed him more closely, searching for any potentially hidden weapons, or the shadow of an attack. He did not appear to be carrying any weapon, but maybe in the sack, or behind the belt...?

He was of unremarkable build. That ruled out a brawling assault. More importantly, I felt no sour-gut feeling (which rarely missed on such occasions). A distracted, sleepy look stretched his face, as if bored of the world and its pointless attempts. My suspicion relented.

"A profound pleasure, Innislan," Gilnay said, taking my hand and shaking it vigorously. The man had these spouts of energy, it seemed, between the gaps of nostalgic daydreaming.

I let my hand be shaken. "Likewise."

"Don't porcupine me for saying it, but I've never actually seen or heard of a courier on foot," Gilnay said, wagging a finger at my boots. "And so very... relaxed, shall I say? With his urgent duty." He leaned back slightly as if expecting me to lash out at him in some sudden spree of barbarian rage. My scars and shaved head had never put people at ease.

The minstrel's insinuation did not bother me. It would have, up to some weeks ago, when I had still been proud of my courier status.

"My horse broke a leg crossing a stream," I said.

And now I was late for my delivery. For some reason I could not care less. Smuggling messages across dangerous lands had been my life for seven years. Through fire and blood, my single focus. The Principal Army's finest courier, I had been. And now? A simple messenger, gone from infiltrating enemy camps to strolling vineyards in the company of failed minstrels. But perhaps that was the reason: there was no blood or fire anymore—no glory. I was just a servant scuttling around on a horse with little tubes of sealed paper, running to where the noble finger pointed.

"Broken horse, I see," said Gilnay, plucking his beardless chin. "Bad news that one. Twice for a courier. Well if I'm not too much trouble, I wouldn't mind tagging along... Only as far as the Castalsaran border, of course!" he hastily added. "You look quite the brawny type, can hold his steel, you know, useful in a

fight against Prince Nirio's hunter-guardsmen." He emphasized his point by flexing non-existent muscles and pretending a sword's thrust.

I waited a moment to make sure he was finished. Any interruptions on his part would only chafe my frayed nerves, and I might end up beating him to death before realizing what I was doing. The man clearly had read one too many tales—perhaps written a few himself—and appeared less and less of a threat to my eyes.

I had no intention of correcting his view of the world, but said nevertheless, "Prince Nirio is an ally of our Queen Leurala. And even if he wasn't, Ardentio has been at peace with Lavonie for almost a year now."

That was fact. We had won the war, the third war in as many years, against the age-old enemy, the Principality of Lavonie. I had done my part in every battle, delivered safely every message entrusted to my hands.

Had it really been only a year? It seemed decades since I was crashing my way through enemy lines, slicing misty Lavoniese encampments in half by night like a mounted ghost, in full gallop across rivers and down mountain trails while loosing arrows back on my pursuers. All for the message, the one and only sacred message, the ink on paper given gold's worth after its stamped closure with red wax seal.

Back then, it had been worth it.

I remember once, close to the end of the war between our kingdom of Ardentio and the Lavoniese northerners, that the Grand Marshal Giannis Vocan himself had handed me a vital message destined for the troops trapped by the mountains of Frassi. His thick-moustached face hovered before me, as he clapped me on the shoulder with the other hand, and said 'the fate of our armies is in your hands.' A maneuver, a tip of information; I don't know what it was, but I delivered it. I like to think it won Ardentio a battle. *That* meant something, made me something like my mother and father always wished.

And most of all, it dragged my mind off my tormented past.

Gilnay, meanwhile, continued with a wry look. "Yes well, the notion of 'peace' in Castalsara is, how shall we say... flexible? From what I hear, Prince Nirio is no saner than his father—or his grandfather—or the Lavoniese lord he conquered his land from."

Conquered! That was a false praise if I had every heard one. Prince Nirio, the Prince of Castalsara, had been an exile half his life. When Lavonie had surrendered Castalsara to Ardentio at the end of the last year's war, the land had been handed to him as a gift. Part of Queen Leurala's campaign to win over the nobility.

"And the people here are no better," Gilnay said, "should they find a sane ruler, one day, they'd make him go mad as them by the first turn of the moon."

"Speaking of the people, where'd they all go?" So many vineyards in Castalsara. I had noticed it during the past two days. And there was almost nobody to

cultivate them.

"Turned into grapes probably," Gilnay said. "Staring at them all day, cultivating them all day, eating them all day, drinking them all day. I wouldn't be surprised."

Sneaky Gilnay, I realized, had already talked me into his company. I had not agreed on it, and yet here I was. We made our way down the hill. Some grassy depressions spoke of old catapult fire, and it was not uncommon to glimpse the occasional sword hilt or greave buried in dirt, all engravings filed away by weather; or a nameless grave like a puddle of darker earth under feasting weeds. The untrained eye might not have noticed them, but I had already walked my share of forgotten battlefields.

I glanced at Gilnay, reminding myself to be wary of his tricks. I was myself no wizard of wits—I have no difficulty admitting that—and decided to probe deeper into his motives.

"What in Ajun's name are you doing in these parts, anyway?" I asked. "Castalsara's no place for a..." I waved a hand at his patchwork figure, "...whatever you are."

Gilnay barked a laugh. "With all my fancy words, I can hardly come up with a term to describe myself either. Go figure."

"A lunatic?" I offered.

"No, though you're not the first to suggest it." He shrugged. "I used to be the fool for Prince Erico of Ilisardin."

The clothing, and the lyre. I had expected as much.

"Until he cast me out," Gilnay added.

Yes, that made sense.

I regarded him dubiously. "How did you ever get to be his fool in the first place? Do you juggle well, tumble? Or is Prince Erico perhaps deaf?"

"I tumble and juggle as well as I sing. Wonderfully, as you have heard. Prince Erico's ears worked all too well, I fear, but fortunately his court is vast and it took him a while to fathom the source of 'that tortured scream', as he called it. He was always full of praise for my work."

"Tortured scream, yes... But if consoles you, your lyre-play is not as mind-splitting as your singing."

"My lord is too kind," Gilnay said, sweeping an exaggerated bow. "To my credit, I was the only musician to ever gain the full attention of his court *and* his guard."

I suppressed a smile and looked to the reddening of the western horizon where divine Oloras-the-Light was dipping the sun in the sea. I had an hour before darkness enveloped me—us—and by then we'd have to be safely off the road. Prince Nirio might be an ally of my Queen, but Gilnay had spoken true in claiming the Castalsarans were... well, mad? Or was that too strong a word?

Little did I know, I'd find out soon enough.

We walked on for a time. Gilnay had no clear objective, it seemed, sticking by my every turn and choice of forking road. What he didn't know was that I

had none either. For nine years, I'd never failed to deliver a single message. Through snowstorms, floods, enemy camps and trenches. I remember someone telling me once that I was like a drop of water, that I always slithered out, somehow, from between the enemy's clenched fist. Those words stirred pride in me for many years, and pride was what I needed. I had become a courier to get away from Mermere, from the memories of my ravaged homeland. Nothing stopped my rides in almost a decade. Amusing that I was to be that enemy, in the end. Devoid of pride, I saw the purpose no longer, and when my horse broke its leg, I did what I had never done in nine years: I decided not to deliver my message.

Before us the land rolled gently away, east towards the mountains of Frassi, north to Lavonie. The slopes were decorated with row after endless row of vineyards, wooden poles strangled by clinging clusters of grapes white and red. So different from the rocky outcrops and windswept pebble shores of my home principality of Mermere.

A pillar of grey smoke rose far off to the west from some other hill, its spread lazy, an easy victim to the wind indicating it belonged to a fire already dead. It surprised me to see it, for bonfires were erected in spring, not summer. It was a fleeting curiosity, and passed as such.

I confess to having ridden through Castalsara before. More than once, in fact. But those had been darker days—or better days, depending on how one looks back—during the Wine Wars. When driving a mad gallop against time, the eyes do not wander to the landscape and its scenery. They seek out pitfalls, ambushes and pursuits, judge the time of day and the hiding spots fit for camp.

Needless to say, this time round—lounging, literally, like some bored prince on his pleasure cruise—I saw the Castalsara hills in an entirely new light, and it made for a rather fascinating sight. The sheer exploitation of the land amazed me. If someone had asked me, days ago, what I remembered of this principality, my answer would have been 'vineyards'. Should they have pressed for details, 'grapes on vineyards'. No wonder, for as I gazed out to this endless field of cultivation, I could see nothing more besides trees and the weathering of the land. Beautiful, in its own way, but even the greatest beauties can grow monotonous.

Then again, I could not blame Prince Nirio and all his predecessors for such extreme agricultural obsession. I had tasted their wine, the Blood of Castalsara; painfully expensive, red gold. But what to expect with such a lovely bittersweet treat?

'The Blood of Castalsara tastes to a man as a royal's virgin blood does to a vampire'. It is a peculiar saying, but so it was described, from Mermere to Lavonie. I testify to it.

There were no royals, however, or vampires, in Castalsara. Only many—too many—prisoners left from the innumerable forgotten wars. Men mostly, but even women and children, Ardentian and Lavoniese,

hostile and neutral, locked in the dungeons beneath the Castle. Shackled by an absurd hate, but a hate which I do understand. Unlike the ransomed nobles, no one ever returned to claim them back.

I gazed out to the vineyards, the capillaries of this principality, and something in their endless silent files filled me with unease. I did not know what happened in this place. I did not want to know. For somehow, it was said, the black prisons of Castle Castalsara failed to ever run out of space.

For the first time in days, the night was clear. I picked a spot amongst the vineyards to set out my bedroll. Where else could one go in this bloody Principality, after all, but amongst vineyards? I unpacked a rationed serving of hard black bread and a slice of dried meat so salty I barely tasted anything besides it. Gilnay nibbled on some little food of his own, reaching up to pluck grapes from their gnarled nests. After collecting a handful, he spread his cloak on the ground and collapsed on it. I did the same, only on a somewhat more comfortable bedroll. After a great deal of squirming on Gilnay's part, I inquired with a touch of derision, "never slept in the wild before?"

"I'm rather terrified of crawling insects," he replied with a grimace, "and these vineyards host a healthy lot. By Ajun, I just want to go to sleep!"

"What the hell are you so tired for? You've been sitting in the damn tree all day."

"The lyre is very....," his words stretched and vanished under a prolonged yawn, "...very tiring."

"Try listening to it instead, for a change."

Unable to settle down, I reassessed the rest of my supplies. I had the acquired instinct of calculating their rationing for the journey. I don't know where I'm going, I thought. And wherever I went, it would take many times longer without the galloping speed of my horse. Four more days, I figured, to cross the rest of Castalsara—unless I purchased a horse at the castle. Yes, that was certainly the wisest choice.

"You never explained to me why you're up here in these lands, which you seem to distrust so much," I asked nonchalantly. Gilnay was a brigand for all I knew, a ragged, desperate brigand—but then aren't they all?—and I had still not been able to pry from him the reason behind his cheerful sojourn. Worse, I now *slept* beside him.

"You are rather curious for a man who does not deign to tell others of his own past," Gilnay replied, dropping another grape into his mouth.

"And you're rather skilled at avoiding my line of questions." It was beginning to irritate me, and make me no less suspicious.

A cracking noise, suddenly, sent me sitting upright and reaching for dagger's hilt.

"What?" Gilnay asked in alarm, scrambling to his knees, red grapes bouncing quietly over the pressed grass. "What is it?"

Sharp wits, but poor ears, this fool.

I brought a finger to my lips to silence him, and

slowly reached for my bow which rested by the bedroll, far from Gilnay's reach. Calmness seeped into me from the curved wood.

It had been a dry twig from the sound of it, to our left. A footstep, if my senses did not fail me.

Now another.

Whatever it was, it either did not care for secrecy, was in a great hurry, or simply failed to maintain any semblance of stealth. One thing was almost certain: it did not know I was waiting. I nocked an arrow in my bow.

Despite the leaves of the vineyard blooming thickly across this narrow path, I could see a great distance down the leafy corridor, aided also by a gibbous moon. Nothing but the wind did I see, however. The intruder, I realized, was advancing in a nearby corridor.

An adjacent one, it turned out, for the occasional crunches and snapping of dried branches—muffled initially with some decency—quickly deteriorated into a full run which I easily deciphered. Gilnay looked ready to bolt, but he stood his ground, probably figuring that I alone could protect from whatever danger approached. I was not about to try my luck firing blindly into the bushes. I lowered my bow and unsheathed my knife, crouched slowly by the grapey wall, a beast in lurking wait.

Closer.

And closer.

With a guttural growl I crashed shoulder-first into the vineyard corridor's wall. Thin vines, no matter how twined and gnarled, did nothing to hold back my allied weight and strength. The intruder took the full brunt of my momentum, knocked back under me with a muffled shout—a *female* shout—crashing down the next rack of grapevines, all a tumble of leaves and leather, long black hair and wetly squashed grapes. We landed with a thud, and my glinting dagger ended where it was meant to, its sharp edge pressed up against the tenderness of the throat.

Her throat.

After a momentary struggle of desperation she lay still, breathing heavily and staring up at me with eyes permeated with terror. It took me a moment to regain my senses, so close to her. I was close enough to smell her skin. Her eyes were puddles of fear spilling out like ink in a white pond. Her skin was smoothly pale—impossibly fair!—and in the starkest of contrasts her lips painted black as charcoal—perhaps *with* charcoal—and similarly the outline of her eyes. I stirred, feeling the swelling of her breasts against my chest, and with it the fleeting thought of how long it had been since I'd known a woman. Since that day.

"A girl?" came Gilnay's puzzled voice over my shoulder.

A girl. A stunning girl. It did not pass as strange to me that I lay on her still, gazing into her. I was hypnotized. Her own eyes had grown wide, mesmerizing as still pools. I did not move as her sight ran over my visage like a caress. Vaguely I noticed her head rising

gently, lips barely parted and advancing, and I could swear I felt her fingers brush the back of my head; a dream-like moment, lasted but a second, chained by the fluttering lashes.

Gilnay's throat-clearing jerked me out of it, and I scrambled back. As if the alleviation of my weight injected her with energy, the woman—or girl, for she could be no more than twenty—tore free of the vine tangle as a snarl replaced her previously pursed lips. What had happened? My dagger was on the ground too, slipped from my grasp without my slightest recollection. She snatched it from the flattened grass and held it out in front of her with uncertainty and panic.

"Step away!" she squeaked, edging back and perhaps expecting the vine wall behind her to part in magical obedience.

I could only describe her as a beautiful witch. Under moonlight the black paint on lips and eyes yielded an aura of damnation, crowned by a waterfall of raven hair, and the midnight dress with silvery linings was that of a darkly tempting sorceress.

She glanced back and forth, from me to Gilnay and back. A dark sorceress would not have looked so frightened, I thought.

"You're not guardsmen..." she said uncertainly.

"Quite the contrary," I replied, containing my irritation, and outstretched my hand. "Can I have my dagger back?"

"No," she said, swiping the air with a fierceness to make a kitten proud. "So you can kill me? Rape me?"

That stilled my hand. Rape, its mere mention, evoked my demons.

Gilnay suppressed a snort of indignation. "What do you take us for, highway robbers? We're not going to rape you. We were trying to get to sleep before you came prancing by."

The girl's personality had changed, it seemed. She had not seemed so shy and diffident a few moments ago, right under me. I was foolish enough to believe my charms had stolen her wits for those few moments. Whoever she was, she was no farm girl. Two rings adorned her fingers, thick and sparkly, and a gem-encrusted necklace hung around the pale neck. Not a farm girl, that was certain.

"She's running from Prince Nirio's guardsmen," Gilnay said. "Only thing that explains it."

Mention of such made the girl turn her head in brief worry towards the moonlit vineyard corridor, in search of pursuit. It was as good as an assent to me.

"Just give me my dagger back," I said, without advancing further, "and we'll let you run off to your lord father."

"What?" she frowned, then her eyes widened and she brought curled fingers to conceal the jewel at her neck. She probably weighed her threat to them as a highborn less than her value as a captive. "What makes you think I'm noble...?"

"She's has a point, Innislan," Gilnay said with diplomatic nod. "I've seen many a farmgirl gathering grapes in evening dresses. They use the diamond rings

to cut the stalks, you know, and the gold necklace keeps off the sweat. Very practical."

The girl's face twisted, her pearly skin blushing with anger. "I am *not*—!" she began, then pointed a finger as slender and decorated as the rest of her physique, "I can have bounties on all your heads!"

It was growing tedious. If Nirio's guardsmen found me with this girl, they would clap me in irons without too many questions. I had dealt with border soldiers before; suspicious of everyone and everything.

"Put the bounties on their heads, if you will," I said, "I'm not getting involved." And with one swift sweep of my hand, I plucked the dagger from her hands. She froze for a moment, staring down as if disbelieving the emptiness between her fingers. I held it up for her to see. "Was that so hard? Now off with you."

Her presence, fragrant and tempting, disturbed me.

As if the dagger's absence had loaded her with ten sacks of grain, she was suddenly on her knees. "Please, you have to help me!"

Had this girl gone mad? Threatening, begging... I blinked, turning to Gilnay for assistance.

"She seems to have a rather short memory," said the minstrel.

"Help..." I muttered. "Do you want our bounty, eh? Can both our heads buy you a new necklace, little girl?"

"A cheap ale, more likely," Gilnay said, letting slip a chuckle.

She was shaking her head. "My friends have been arrested by the Prince's men, and they're coming for me now! You have to defend me, or I *will* have bounties on your head!"

"You don't beg very often, do you?" said Gilnay.

I shook my head. "By Ajun, she could use some practice." Always getting what she wanted, this lord's daughter, no doubt. Gifts, praise, coin... men. She did not have to be a lord's daughter to command that latter, though. Even through my irritation, I could feel my own yearning.

"I'll have you rewarded, I swear!" she said, convinced somehow that we were no longer a threat. "Lots of gold, just help me! Prince Angilo of Alanzio is my father, he will reward you greatly, truly! I am his only daughter! Prince Nirio's guards took all my friends. They'll be executed! They're murdering people in the vineyards, I saw it!"

"Murdering?"

"Yes!" she gasped, then brought a hand to her mouth and glanced once again down the corridor's length.

"I think the guards would've been here by now, had they been pursuing," I said. I made a point of quirked an eyebrow. "You're not quite in traveler's garb, if I may say so, and between your squealing and the noise you make with that cart of a skirt..."

I don't know what words struck her. She collapsed like a rag-doll. Perhaps she realized that no immediate threat actually surrounded her, or perhaps it was just

some obscure female symptom, something I could not understand. Only rag dolls don't cry, and she did very much. Salt to the ground of Castalsara, I thought. Maybe this patch would stay dead.

The weeping continued, a seawater dam broken free.

"By Ajun..." I threw my arms in the air helplessly and turned away.

Gilnay took it upon himself to comfort her, kneeling by her side and whispering reassurances as useless as they were pointless. Irritated, I snatched up my bedroll and began jamming it back into my sack, venting the peculiar anger out on the worn cloth. It seemed that the more women were worth the trouble, the more trouble they created.

"Why won't you... believe me...?" she said between sobs, "...they're going to... kill them..."

"They're the Prince's guards," I said over my shoulder, "not mountain barbarians. If your friends are guilty, they'll serve jail time."

"But they're *not!*" she cried.

"Keep your bloody voice down," I growled, spinning to glare at her.

Jail time. Something told me it was unlikely. Phantom premonitions? I had heard tales of the Castalsara lands, how its continual use as a battleground had tainted the earth as well as the people. It was said the blood of the dead, seeping into the soil, gave the wine its thick taste. I had tasted man's blood before—my own, my friends' and my enemies'. Sometimes it tasted as good as the wine.

"We didn't do anything..." the girl whimpered at length.

"Then why worry?" Gilnay said cheerfully. I think he was growing fond of her already.

"The question is," I said, slinging the bow over my shoulder, "what by the gods were you doing that got you, and your friends, arrested in the first place?"

A difficult question it was, and wonderfully placed, for it dropped the girl into the most merciful silence. Guilty silence, perhaps?

Gilnay broke it. "Prince Angilo..." he mused for a moment, bringing fingers to chin, "of Alanzio... you're Lurielle, aren't you?"

Her head rose slowly. "How do you know me? Are you a friend of my father's?" Her eyes brightened hopefully. The reply was not quite what she expected, I'm sure.

"I played in his court—your court—once, when my lord Erico visited," Gilnay said, and his eyes grew distant as if tugged far by memory.

"You served Lord Erico?" asked Lurielle, after an initial frown of disappointment.

By then, I had had enough. "Very well, I wish you both luck on your journey," I said, checking I had left nothing behind. "I don't intend to sleep here with an escapee, in the bright middle of her flight path." Something in me was hoping either Gilnay or Lurielle—fine, Lurielle, if I must be honest—would ask me to stay. I was partly satisfied.

Gilnay scrambled to his feet. "Wait, I'm coming with you!" He looked down at the girl apprehensively, and added, "maybe you should come with us too."

I shook my head but of course made no move to protest. Lurielle pulled herself to her feet, the red juice of grapes dripping through her pale clenched fingers as if it had been thorns and not vines which filled her grasp. I glanced down at my own tunic, spattered and splotched by the wounds of a dozen invisible arrows.

"Will you not help me?" she asked, chin coming up with the defiance of youth.

"Springing criminals from jail is not in my notion of help," I said.

"But they didn't do anything!" She was careful this time to keep the volume of her voice—if not its pitch—under control.

"Look, just be glad we haven't done anything to you," I said. "I know many knights who would have had no qualms in planting a bastard in that belly of yours. And almost none who would have left you your golden trinkets. Now, are you going to sit there and cry, or stand and come with us?"

"If you will not help me," Lurielle said icily, "then I will have nothing to do with you."

Gilnay frowned at this display—childish, I call it—but said nothing.

"Very well," I said, waving the way open.

"Very well," she sniffed and, lifting chin and skirts, started down the vineyard corridor as if it were the carpeted hall of her very own castle.

I had to watch her walk away, black silk slippers sinking in and out of the grass, silver and black skirts swaying with the movement of her hips.

"Let's go," I snapped at length, starting in the opposite direction and doing my best to not look back.

When I closed my eyes, I saw that face, obsidian lips and marble skin drifting close and so very tempting. As my head had lifted off the ground in longing extension—what a dreaming fool I was—my eyes popped open. The starlit canopy of the sky stretched vast and quietly infinite, exactly as I had left it.

Gilnay, I saw, was awake. He sat cross-legged and scraping down on something with a stone, sharpening something. Or so it appeared by the look of his strokes. Sharpening... his *lyre*? At first I thought it might be a musical technique of tuning, something beyond my paltry knowledge, but as my eyes adjusted the weapon's blade became evident. See, I wasn't wrong about lyre—well not completely. He was sharpening a number of rust-splotched steel spikes protruding from the back of the instrument, some five wicked inches long. Indeed, the instrument's entire back side—conveniently hidden from me on our first meeting—was plated with metal.

"Doesn't it get a tad uncomfortable to play?" I asked, up on my elbows.

"Nobody likes spikes in their belly while they play," Gilnay grinned, showing no surprise at my sudden intrusion. "But you yourself said our great protec-

tors, the noble knights and princes, love slaughter and rape as much as any brigand. With a world *that* safe, it's useful to have options. And," he added, "if the odds are too great, I simply strum a tune and get mocked as a minstrel instead of murdered as a soldier."

Was he warning me, I wondered? I wasn't sure whether to be reassured or bothered by the weapon's open display, for if Gilnay did not trust me—and how could he, really, after a day?—then surely he would have hidden such advantage from me. And yet how could I feel more comfortable sleeping when the (apparently) peaceful minstrel rested a few feet away with a veritable spiked mace in his reach?

"So that's why you can't play the damn thing," I said, "you had a club and decided to conceal it with some strings."

"If only I had such an excuse." He sighed. "No, it's just I rather hate the bloody thing."

"You hate it..."

My question stated itself, and Gilnay answered, "Well, I can't strum it to save my life, and it's gotten me into more trouble than it'll ever do good. My mother forced it on me when I was twelve, in an attempt to craft a profession for me which would not involve my conscription to the army or plowing fields. A curse and a blessing, as they say." He shrugged, flipping the lyre around to play with the strings. Its metal claws were completely concealed. "Can't shake the habit off, now, and I don't want to offend my mother. Plus, it reminds me of her." He smiled at some mental picture of his mother.

And, gods help me, I wondered of mine.

I knew I would not be able to sleep that night. I never did, when such thoughts entered my head. My mother I saw, and the Lavoniese farmgirl, both defiled in their homes. It was partly the reason why I had made a life of sleeping in enemy territory, with nothing but adrenaline and fear petrifying my mind. But there was nothing to stop the memories now. Mother's crumpled body, a naked bloodied heap served to satisfy the passing lust of invading Lavoniese soldiers...

My hand tightened, ripping out a chunk of grass. Gilnay seemed not to notice, entranced in his own memories—if not pleasant, then surely more peaceful than mine.

Why did they have to kill her? I wondered, again and again, for the thousandth time. I pictured myself walking in, on that day, before the act, with an axe in my hand. By the gods, what a carnage I would have wreaked! I should have been there. A man has the responsibility to defend his family and his home. Instead I had been locked in a castle, defending a Prince who never cared about me beyond my grooming of his horse.

I heard the twanging of strings. Gilnay had taken to plucking his lyre, a few notes as melancholic as his expression. My brooding deepened, more flashes of that fateful day jarring me from the mercy of sleep. The images of mother flashed repeatedly in my head. They threatened my stomach to retching. The ones I

imagined, the actual act, were even worse. I wanted to hunt down those bastard monsters and skin them alive, slay their whole family.

The most haunting of facts, the gods' way of telling me not to judge, had been delivered to me three years after my mother's death, in a farmhouse of southern Lavonie. Just a girl, a rebellious girl... like my mother. I hated those men who had defiled my home. I know what hatred is; not that of love or words, but true hatred. It is what I feel. I felt it with the girl. She did nothing to me; but she was Lavoniese. I hated those men through her—and because of her, myself.

I hated those men because I was exactly like them.

Sleep fled before my restlessness. I twitched with the desire to hack something to pieces, scream at someone guiltier than me. It did not help, as it had not helped for five years. My insomnia, however, served that night a purpose.

I heard the noise. The scuttling in the bushes—for my claustrophobia of the vineyards had driven to me find another clearing—I noticed immediately, the tell-tale nodding of the branches. I had no doubt as to who it was.

"By Ajun," I said. "She followed us." Gilnay blinked at me, wondering how I had suddenly come to such conclusion. "Lurielle. She's in the bushes, you idiot. Happy now?"

"I didn't want her along," Gilnay replied defensively.

"Why did you ask her to come along, then?"

"Well, she's only a girl..."

I knew then that Gilnay was not immune—or in any way opposed, I suspect—to the charms of the noblewoman Lurielle. Neither was I, though I steadfastly refused to acknowledge the fact at the time.

"Come out of there!" I snapped to the darkness. When no reply came, I grabbed a stone and tossed it in her direction. "You're no bloody ranger, girl; I can smell you miles away. Either come out, or get out!"

"Are you sure you want to bring her in again?" Gilnay said. "I heard rumors, at court... of her. From many people." The conflict of mind and heart was writ plainly on his face.

"Rumors?" I squinted at the bushes. Nothing. It must have been Lurielle's hesitation which forced the delay. She was a fool if she hoped still to conceal herself.

"They said she was, well, insane," Gilnay said, but clearly that was not all, and after a pause he continued, "or that she was possessed, taken over by something. There were different versions, but everyone agreed that the girl had some sorcery on her, or in her. It was a secret her parents wished to conceal, of course, but you know court gossip. I heard it after a day, and from several courtiers. Very strange things I heard that... oh!"

A rustle, and Lurielle stepped out, a black temptress on black sky backdrop. Insane? Rumors of jealousy, I thought. Rich, powerful, beautiful. 'Every gift bears you twice as many enemies', my father used to

say. He was wiser than he knew. Then again, my father was never granted anything, and yet he was murdered in his own home, defending my mother.

Lurielle's presence came as doubly welcome for the distraction it provided, a rare anchor of escape from my torments. She took a few steps forward, stopping to stare at us both, obviously as unsure of our intentions as we were of hers.

"There's a bonfire," she said at length, her voice half a whisper. I thought I could see tears on her cheeks, dragging down the black paint under her eyes to draw grey lines over the soft skin like rain on a dusty window. "A bonfire," she repeated. "You know what that means."

"Do I?" I said, sitting up and rubbing tiredness from my eyes.

"How can you sleep knowing this is happening?" she seethed. "Lie here so peacefully in your sleep as people die unfairly, *atrociously!*"

Peacefully in my sleep. How little she knew me. If she saw what I saw when I lay down to sleep, she would never let a man touch her again, ever.

I turned to Gilnay. "I'm beginning to believe your story."

Gilnay regarded the girl with some apprehension. Without warning, Lurielle picked up a rock and flung it at me, or him—one of us, either way—but it skittered far from its target.

"They're *burning* them." Her voice cracked, anger and anguish fighting for supremacy over its wreck.

"Burning who?" I asked. "What in Ajun's name are you talking about, girl?" I remembered the bonfire, however. I knew just what she was alluding to. But it couldn't be true; the war had ended more than a year ago. And there were rules.

"I saw them," she said, sniffing up tears and dignity, "I saw the dead... people piled, one on top of the other. And now they're burning them."

"You saw this?"

"I saw them marching prisoners in the vineyards," she snapped back, "and they'll march my friends out there too. Why won't you help me? Are you so cold-hearted?"

"So you saw nothing..."

"I saw the men, and the prisoners."

"But not the bodies, or the bonfire."

She plopped to the ground where she stood, shivering with cold and distress, arms wrapped around her knees.

"What do we do?" Gilnay whispered. "I've heard disturbing stories, Innislan—"

"She's a bloody girl," I said, not bothering to keep my voice down. "I'm going to sleep."

I made sure to lie with my weight over the dagger. Despite appearances, it was Gilnay I felt threatened by. He was a man, and armed. Tiredness ordered me not to care. I had nothing to look forward to, anyway—so said the self-pity. Lurielle, I thought, will not trouble me.

By Ajun, was I wrong.

I dreamt of her, the girl-with-no-name, the Lavoniese farmgirl, for many hours. I always did when I thought about her before sleep. I was surprised to fall asleep at all.

In my dream I wept, having my way with her, as she looked up at me with a question stamped in her teary eyes. I've never been able to truly decipher it—she did not look so, that night, only cried. In the dream, when I clenched my teeth to cracking point and snarled the animal's rage, she clawed at me and wailed and cursed me... and yet I could not stop. It fueled me, drawing a curtain over that picture of mother. A farce, like the growls for the sobs.

When some hand shook me awake, I scrambled so hard my foot kicked a charred log out of the firepit. Coming to my senses, I saw Lurielle kneeling beside me, alarm coating her expression and drawing back her hands. She could have killed me so easily, had she wanted.

"Ajun," I whispered, bringing two fingers to my navel.

The dream came back to me in sickening detail. And as I looked up at the Lurielle I realized it had been her in my night's vision, begging for mercy and reprieve under my armored weight. Disgusted, I knew I had enjoyed it. I do not think it had anything to do with the fact that she woke me—though I suspected it at the time, used it as an excuse to explain my morbid fantasy. The vividness of it held me breathless for a moment.

"There's smoke," Lurielle said, seeing in me none of my torments, only groggy bewilderment. "Smoke, over there." She pointed. I gazed at her, instead, and she pressed insistently, "*Look! Bonfire smoke!*"

There was indeed a curly column of smoke rising not far off. To my right, Gilnay rolled over to mumble his displeasure at the wake-up, the untied length of his hair matted over his forehead. Morning had bled the eastern horizon, the sun still sleepily fuzzy in the sky between tufts of cloud. Wind swept up from the fields unhindered, whistling through the vineyard corridors.

"Smoke..." I grumbled, running a hand over my shaved head. A scar rolled bumpily under my palm—the result of my first fall from horse during a courier flight.

"I saw a column of Prince Nirio's guardsmen, too," Lurielle said, confident enough now to tug at my arm. "I saw others with them, too! Well?!"

There are pleasant and unpleasant things in life, and there are also unpleasant moments. When I am awoken from one of the nightmares, nothing is pleasant; the world is not pleasant, *I* am not pleasant. It is a moral sickness of mine, if you will, where for a short while everything—even the sweetest treat like Lurielle—is coated with the bitterest of flavors. I say this to justify my all too harsh reaction, burst out of me, onto Lurielle, when she took hold of me again.

"Devils, what do you want?" I growled, pulling away. The dream's aftertaste hung in my head like a

soured fruit.

"Help," she said. I thought I sensed another struggle against tears. "Please."

"I'm beginning to wonder whether she ran away from home," Gilnay mumbled into his bedroll, "or if they threw her out." Fortunately, for his own sake, he was unable to witness her scowl. I agreed with the minstrel—but silently.

"It's a bloody bonfire," I said, lying back down and barely aware of the forming of words in my own mouth. "Go away, by Ajun."

"No, get up!" she said, shaking my arm. Shake, more shake, and my anger frothed.

"*Get off my back!*" With a fury born of too many frustrations, I wrenched free of her grasp, sending her tumbling back in a bundle of black hair and silken dress. Even in disarray, so beautiful.

I expected her to spit on me, hit me—or try to, anyway—or weep again. Instead she sat there, and after a moment I was forced to open one eye at her silence. The contempt and disgust she glowered my way might have even forced me back into the argument, had I not been so shaken by the monsters of my sleep. I was not used to dealing with people; a courier's nights and mornings are lonely, like his life.

When I closed my eyes I saw the true girl again, the one from the sacked Lavoniese farmhouse. My sin. This time she was truly despairing. I tossed around. The gods were punishing me with all the cruelty I deserved.

Amidst the subconscious reflections of guilt, I asked myself and any god listening: when will I get relief? I got no reply.

Something hit me in the face. A stone, a berry, maybe a piece of wood. Then I heard running. The first thing I saw was the bushes swaying, right where Lurielle had come out from before.

"What in the name of..." My hands drifted to my boots and found only dry earth. Fingers raked the earth in confusion, then closed to grind what was left between them. The damn bitch! I scrambled to my feet, and Gilnay did the same in panicked confusion. "My bloody boots! Oh she is going to regret this one!"

"What...? Where are you going?"

But I was already off, sprinting as fast as my legs could carry me, bashing my way through the bush, past the underbrush, and out into the hill's clearing. The view exploded on my sight, miles of combed vineyard labyrinths, frighteningly monotonous and yet impossible as any labyrinth of legend. I glimpsed it all from my high vantage point, the solution to a riddle too vast to memorize or comprehend. The precise corridors, laid out perpendicular to the eastern sky, dripped with early dawn's blood-red light.

I sped on.

Clever girl, I thought to myself as my naked feet drummed down the hill. She could have stolen anything, but she stole my boots. My damn boots! Clever, but not very wise, for when I caught her... The anger spurred my run, and I could now see her dark figure

slipping its way into the vineyard ranks. I would have caught up with her sooner, with my boots, but now and then I hopped to a near-stop with some strangled guttural mix of curse and howl, extracting a thorny item from my foot. Every cut was like a poke to the lion in its cage.

"Come back here!" I bellowed after her, as if it could slow her down.

My dagger was out of its leather sheath as I raced into the vineyard, cutting the lagging leaves left behind by Lurielle's flight. Grapes old and new squished and popped under the soles of my feet, the wooden poles flying by me left and right with their leafy spiderwebs and grapes like clusters of eggs. They blurred with the sky above, my attention focused forward at the occasional telltale movement which assured me I pursued in the correct corridor.

It was not long before I glimpsed the fleeting black. First the trailing wisp of a silken dress, then her entirety. A passing farmer, seeing her, might have judged her a ghostly witch, a banshee raised from the blood in the Castalsara ground, wandering in torment. But Lurielle was real, flesh and bone, and I knew she was too unfit to continue escaping my pursuit. Another fifty feet, my progress handicapped by sharp stones. I would have reached her by now, but I was like a bull in constant charge-and-pause, unable to break into free run.

She must have seen me, then, for she ducked under an opening into the next vineyard corridor. Like a shadow, I imitated. And I was on her.

Her last attempt was to drop my boots in the desperate hope I might pick them up and be placated. I was well beyond that. The irritation of tiredness, the pain of my bruised feet and the anger at her theft, they knotted in my muscles as I dragged her down with brutality. All the nightmare's fault. She yelped, but the sound died in her lungs as I collapsed on her, pinning her to the grassy floor.

Lurielle did not mean to escape me, I understood then, but my ears were somewhat deaf to the voice of reason. She squirmed around, only to face open reprisal. A backhand slap caught her squarely on the cheekbone, and I felt the pain in my own hand as it connected. The raven hair whirled in the air like a shadowy fan. I struck again, cursing, venting a rage which was not duly hers to receive.

The *deja-vu* paralyzed my arm in next mid-swing.

Kneeling over the girl, the weeping trembling girl... So familiar. The grass seemed to harden into rough wooden floorboards, the vineyards into plain walls and the sky into a farmhouse roof. I shrunk back in horror, as if Lurielle's figure had suddenly taken the most terrifying demonic form.

"No, no," I said, outstretching a hand but backing away. "I'm sorry, I never meant... no."

Bloodshot eyes shivered back at me, much like a beaten dog's, wincing at my first tentative approach. Glistening blood and black paint drew a smeared scar across her left cheek, and the hair hung in wisps where

it had not been captured by the sweat of her forehead. She breathed heavily, unmoving.

"I'm so sorry," I repeated, and my eyes must have been as wide as hers. I edged closer but she scuttled back, whimpering. I was torn between the desire to run and embrace her, and that of stepping away from the sin, disassociating myself from the filthy physical contact. My skin crawled at the previous moment's recollection.

I was spared that choice—fortunately, as it turned out—for six men stepped in from the ruin of an adjacent corridor, swords drawn. Their red livery, embroidered with the black grape and vine of Castalsara, marked them as Prince Nirio's guardsmen. In their midst I identified their leader, a lanky individual with similar garb, only bearing an added coronet of black leather and equipment—sword, mail and boots—of decidedly greater value and lesser wear. The blade showed some engravings, most likely a family heirloom.

"Step away from the girl," said the leader.

I must not have looked very fearsome, splayed on the grass with tears streaming down my face and in evident stalemate fight with a young woman. I realized I was crying, and it felt peculiar. My wits and reason, in face of danger, returned to me slowly.

The guardsmen eyed me with perplexity, wondering surely what in Ajun's name had exactly been going on. Rape—but from a weeping man? A struggle—again, a whip-cord muscled male subdued by an equally broken woman? I wondered for a second myself, and then the leader's expression changed from suspicion and bewilderment to surprise and relief.

"Ah, it's her!" he exclaimed. "The wily witch! You caught her. We've been looking for her all night—escaped with her black magic. Why, well done!"

I figured then that they had taken me for a farmer or traveler. What they made of my weeping, I'd never know; they did not care, that was plain. I did not have my bow on me, and my knife was out of sight. Biding my time, I simply nodded. Lurielle made no attempt to escape. She sat heaving and staring up, her beaten face a mess of tears, blood, paint and dirt. Fear had replaced exhaustion, and all her angry words had gone.

"She's a witch, this one," the leader continued, sheathing his sword. Confident, I thought, too confident. "Came with another bunch of 'em, performing rituals at night in the vineyards. Blasphemous, and beautiful to tempt my men into mercy." He spat. "You have the gratitude of the Prince." He gestured to two of his men, one of whom had produced a short length of hempen rope. They stepped right by me as if my innocuousness were assumed.

A grave mistake.

I don't know exactly why I pounced; such moments are always born of many emotions, but guilt—much of it—certainly played a major factor. My dagger, gripped firmly between my moist fingers, flashed up with a reddish glint of bloodlust and sunk deep into the first guard's abdomen. He doubled over as I extracted,

and the second barely had the time to draw steel before my blade came forward in an arc. Bloodied steel bloodied tender throat, spilling a wash onto the livery of the same color.

Meanwhile, I heard the leader's shouts: the order to kill me. His three henchmen charged with half-hearted cries. I dodged one sword, parried another with the half-foot of my dagger, and wheeled out of the third man's lunge. Crouching back, I whipped out to buy myself time.

Back in the day I had been a formidable warrior, and these three moderately trained guardsmen would have been a routine dispatch. But with over a year of peaceful absence, I found myself somewhat groggy on the riposte. Blows were exchanged, my moves geared defensively at evasion. How I'd fight my way out of this one, I was not quite sure.

Lurielle at least was now safe—as long as I lived—and for some absurd reason it crossed my mind as the paramount of facts. Had it been yesterday I would have fled, run and left the girl to her fate. It was her they wanted after all. But I stood my ground, just as I had chosen to attack those first two guards. The damn nightmare, a voice repeated in my frantically in my head, the damn nightmare.

An opening presented itself, and I made desperate move for it, lashing out with my free hand to strike one guard in the face. His nose cracked under my knuckles, setting him off balance long enough for a quick slash at his hands. He yelled and dropped his sword. Four fingers fell with it.

I might have turned the tide, with the other two hesitating as it dawned on them it was in fact no shovel-armed farmer they faced—had the leader not bulled in to lend his support. With renewed courage, the trio pressed. Swords swung and jabbed, and I found myself ducking and spinning all at once. Faced with a skilled warrior—a skilled warrior with a *sword*, I care to emphasize—I began to see the futility of my effort.

A reasonable side of me yelled to run, break for the vineyard opening while I still had my legs to do it. The nightmare, Lurielle's stricken eyes under my abuse, kept me pinned.

It happened at the closing act, when I was sure one of those three darting sword-points would snake its way past my defense and into my ribs. They must have been truly shocked to suddenly be ambushed by a lyre-wielding minstrel of dancing patchwork, emerging from nowhere like yet another vineyard ghost. They might have doubted, chuckled, at the brandished weapon. But I knew the different songs that instrument could play. It did not shock me when the lyre—swung by Gilnay with fury from its slimmer end like a true warmace—bit and literally tore one of the guardsman's shoulders off. Blood sprayed over the grapes and leaves, the hint of a bone protruding from raw flesh and severed muscle.

Gilnay's second swing, all as barbaric, saw the leader ducking deftly. All to no avail, however, for his

squatting made him easy target for my own weapon. It sunk to the hilt into his back and he crumpled to the ground with a groan, one hand reaching back towards the gushing wound in some vain attempt. The last man no longer favored the offensive.

"Yield," I said.

The guardsman complied immediately.

Picking up the sword I turned to Lurielle. She remained where I had caught her, unmoving throughout the fight. I came to kneel by her side. She did not weep, transfixed instead on the mutilated corpses. My hand, rested gently on her bare shoulder, jerked her out of her stupor, and I almost pulled back. So much feeling in that touch, but I dared nothing more.

"Lurielle."

"I doubt we shall be welcome in Castalsara much longer," Gilnay's voice floated to my consciousness. "And I can say with some surety that my plans of playing for Prince Nirio's court are compromised."

A plucking of strings made me frown over my shoulder. Gilnay was strumming his lyre with critical eye.

"Nothing's broken, thank the gods," he said, apparently unaware of the red stains the iron spikes were leaving on his tunic. I shook my head. He broke into a grin and proceeded to bind the guardsman with the length of abandoned rope.

"Thank you, Innislan," Lurielle said, and I whirled my attention back.

So beautiful, that face, even under the marring of gloomy colors. Apologies and explanations formed and mixed in my mouth, but all I said was, "I'm sorry I hit you."

That reminded her, it seemed, for she reached up to dab the split lip with a finger. Examining it for bloodstains, she snorted softly to find her entire hand so smeared.

"I'm sorry," I repeated.

"If you really are," she said, pointing to the sky behind me, "then open your eyes."

My gaze followed her finger's indication, up to the clean blue sky and to the plume of smoke which defiled it. Very close, a fat grey-black snake dancing to a hypnotizing flautist. I had not noticed it during the wild chase.

So this was where she had been leading me to... Successfully, despite the incident.

Wordless, I nodded. In that moment, I would have run myself on my own sword had she commanded it, I'm sure, drenched in guilt—and perhaps something more?—as I was. My soul ached with its open wounds, old and fresh.

After having placed my boots back on—so painfully, but I took that pain as a penitent monk might, with grim elation—I wiped my dagger on a cloak and decided to investigate Lurielle's claim. She and Gilnay trailed behind me through the openings in the vineyard corridors, those from which the guardsmen had entered. We emerged in a slightly larger space, source of the smoking column.

A pile of ashes lay at its source, but its fuel had not been leaves, wood, or even some dubious artifacts. I recognized the bones immediately, charred to grey-ness, and in their midst some remnants of past lives. A belt buckle, some man or woman's last possession. A spoon, likely stolen from the feeding bowls of the Castalsara prisons. All as lifeless as their former masters, all camouflaged by the soot.

And there was worse.

Lurielle noticed first, covering her mouth with her hand. Corpses, lying in their flesh and blood, some piled and some lined out. Dressed, still, some folded over with the illusion of sleep, others visibly mutilated. I approached them slowly, the retch in my stomach clamped down by years of wartime experience.

They were prisoners. No doubt of that in my mind. Their wrists were shackled though they needed it no longer, and in all those lying face down I saw deep cuts below the napes.

"By Ajun," Gilnay said. "They've executed them all."

I noticed then that not all of them had been dispatched with the soldier's death—the sword thrust to the neck—for three of the corpses lay in a tangle, and about them a collection of rocks, the smallest the size of a fist.

I knelt. "Not all of them. These ones were stoned to death."

"Such cruelty..." Gilnay said, then glanced uncertainly at Lurielle. He, too, felt the guilt now.

"These were Lavoniese." One steel buckle was fashioned in the form of the swan of Lavonie, and a similar symbol was embroidered on another man's shoulder pad. The reason for their being singled out was obvious. Even in that moment, some hatred bubbled to the surface. "With an Ardentian lord, Ardentian troops... Our own people must have had no less last year, with Prince Valien in charge of the Ardentian prisoners..."

No Ardentians, as far as I could see, lay among the dead. I was not surprised.

Lurielle did not have to reprimand us. Our punishment was writ all over the dead bodies, the terrified final moments etched on their faces. The gods know how to exact their justice. Lurielle closed her eyes and suppressed a sob.

"Are your friends here?" I asked softly. It was cruel of me to demand such identification, but I knew she would search of her own volition, sooner or later, and I wanted to spare her the sight as soon as possible. Like with family on a battlefield, she would not rest until she found them. Only on a battlefield, men died with purpose.

Her eyes scanned the dozen corpses, and at last she shook her head. Little did the relief show, however.

"Why would they do this?" Gilnay breathed. "It's against all the laws of war."

"There are no laws in war," I said. And yet this *was* wrong, somehow more wrong than running an enemy soldier through with a sword, or burning a castle. Hei-

nous, I thought, staring down at the lifeless forms.

As heinous as rape.

"Changes of rule," Lurielle said, and we both turned. "So many battles, so many wars. Every war brings its prisoners, every battle. Too many prisoners to feed."

Gilnay was nodding. "More prisoners than soldiers, I don't doubt. The bad harvest, the draught. Nirio can't feed them all, so he executes and burns them. Bloody bastard of a Castalsaran..."

"The previous rulers all did the same," I said, though it did little to justify anyone. "To the extent of... this," I swept a disgusted hand over the carnage, "I don't know, but Castalsara is a Principality rooted in war and blood, ever since it was formed."

Gilnay wrinkled his nose. "This is not war. It's cowardice."

"And now my friends will have the same," said Lurielle. "They might be marching them out right now."

I did not quite know what to say. I was a loner, a courier tormented by his past with little social experience beyond that of servitude. What I did have was a practical mind, and I set it to work on what I knew.

Gilnay had knelt and produced his lyre. In the slow strumming—voiceless, by his mercy—I recognized the Ode of Farewell, slightly different as played in Ilisardin. Blood-splashed as the two of us were, a passer-by would have found it difficult to tell us apart from the fallen. Everywhere ghosts, come again to lament their comrades.

When Gilnay had finished, I placed a hand on his shoulder. "Gilnay," I said, "you said you forged papers." The minstrel nodded. "Do you have any scrolls here?" Again he nodded, and I brought a finger to my lips in thought. How to do this right...?

"What do you need scrolls for?" Gilnay asked of my brooding silence. "I hardly have enough to write letters to *all* their families."

"Your scrolls," I said. I pulled the bronze amulet from under my tunic, "my courier sigil." And the one missing, essential piece. I took Lurielle's hand in mine; she gazed at me with teary eyes, puzzled, then at her hand which I held up. "And the Principal Signet," I concluded, running a thumb over the heavy golden ring.

Gilnay quirked an eyebrow. "The signet of Alanzio. A Prince's letter?" he ventured.

"Indeed. From Prince Angilo of Alanzio, to be precise. A Prince's enquiry, a demand for a favor. Or so they'll think. You write it, Lurielle seals it, I deliver it. Nirio will never know the difference—until it's too late, that is."

Lurielle was on her feet, the candle of hope rekindled. "A letter? Saying what?"

"Whatever you want," I said, shrugging, "within the bounds of reason, of course. I doubt Prince Nirio would surrender Castalsara to your father on written request. Now, should you decide to relieve him of the costly prisoners..."

My sentence was cut off by Lurielle's pouncing embrace. She flung her arms around me with a string of hushed thank-you's, and I must say I did feel rather wonderful. The army taught me to fend for myself, survive alone in a take-all-and-leave-nothing attitude, and it had always worked. But today, at least, I was glad for the difference. Gilnay gave a huff, perhaps in tired envy, and placed the lyre back into the bag.

At the clearing's edge, the remaining guard sat on his haunches, waiting for death.

I could see it in his eyes when he looked up at me as I strode to stand before him. What other fate did he expect? What did he deserve? Beside him, dropped by one of his comrades most likely, was a glass bottle. I picked it up, uncorked it, and sniffed the contents. The wine's pungent aroma was unmistakable.

"What do we do with him?" Gilnay asked, coming to stand beside me. "He'll blow the whistle on us as soon as he reaches the Castle."

The phrase was, to the guardsman at least, quite directly a death sentence. Gilnay was right, of course. One word from the guard and we'd be marching to execution in some remote vineyard alley, to feed another spring bonfire. I slid the dagger from my sheath.

So young, I thought. Barely older than Lurielle, with the failing hints of a beard dotting the hunger-hollowed cheeks, and teeth red from wine's taste. I did not see a murderer in this man. Dignity, rather, composed and ready to accept fate as the gods delivered it to him. That was something I had learned to respect, in war. Then again, this was not war.

Lurielle's breath caught in her throat as I placed the dagger's crusted tip against the man's nape. I regarded her, the charred bones and the unburied bodies behind her.

What did this man deserve? To die for his sins? Or live with them? If this man did not feel the shame, I believed he eventually would. I left the justice to the gods. They are far more experienced than me, after all, in delivering it.

With one hard swing I shattered the wine bottle on his head, knocking him out cold. He toppled over with the glass fragments, drenched in the red gold of Castalsara.

Living with the shame is a lot worse.

We left everything as it was, for we had little time. That one guardsman we left alive. Would my decision have been any different, had it been a Lavoniese soldier on his knees? Perhaps. It was enough to know that from then on, every night, when I'd wake in cold sweats from my dreams, someone else's ghosts were somewhere more terrifying than mine. I felt them already.

I shivered.

For now the guardsman slept, and I wondered if the ghosts had already begun to haunt him. His blood mingled with the wine—a drink for gods and men alike—and seeped back into the soil to quench the vineyards of Castalsara.

Book and Magazine Reviews

Matt Coward, *So Far, So Near*. Elastic Press, 2007. Pp. 200. ISBN 0955318106. £5.99.

Reviewed by The Exploding Boy

One of the things that attracted me to this collection was simply the idea of a writer doing something different from the norm. As a lover of genre fiction (and someone who has a healthy appreciation of backhanded humour), the notion of witches running call centres and real-time cats killing people on TV proved a mouth-watering enticement. Who, in their imaginative mind, could resist?

Mat Coward's anthology of short stories, which range from the intriguingly elliptical to the downright hilarious, does anything but disappoint. Taking a handful of hackneyed concepts from the horror and sci-fi genres – UFOs, alien visitors, government cover-ups – Coward paints the reader a series of yarns that, like the title itself, turn these worn-out concepts on their head...and then makes them stand there for a few minutes. What happens to ghosts when they die? How does one successfully recognise the modern witch? What do you steal from the man who has nothing to lose but space? All of these things and more fall under the scrutiny of Coward's humorous intellect.

In each case, the results are delightfully compelling. The pace and tone of these sixteen stories are consistently spot on, while the themes themselves never dip below fascinating. The dialogue fairly sparkles with a natural wit and even in the wackiest situations (and there are plenty to enjoy here), the narrative never descends into the merely farcical.

Scott Lambridis, *Brainchild... a collection of artifacts*. Omnibucket, 2006. ISBN 9780877457908.

\$15.00.

Reviewed by The Exploding Boy

If you love zombies, then there's no question that you'll love *Brainchild*, last year's release from Omnibucket Inc. Between the 55 colourful pages of this "collection of artefacts", the fledgling zombie hunter will find everything they need to know about the basic genre, while the connoisseur will discover plenty of unique yarns to feast their eyes upon.

There is some terrific stuff here, from the broodingly serious ('Black Days' by Rebecca Brock) to the unapologetically gory ('SPQR' by David Senecal) and on to the repulsively erotic ('The Oldest Profession' by Scott Lambridis). The latter story is an astonishingly novel take on the undead theme, breathing new, putrefied breath into a sometimes-hackneyed genre.

And the originality doesn't stop there. There is a fascinating article from film scholar Mia Epstein

Instead, at the core of each of these tales, there is a genuine sense of humanity. Coward has an unerring ability to make us laugh at ourselves while raising some rather astute questions about science and, of course, science fiction, along the way.

Ever wondered about the inner workings of interstellar immigration, or why exactly one box of books goes missing every time you move house? Coward is not so presumptuous as to provide us with a definite answer, but this is precisely why *So Far, So Near* works so well – it engages your brainpower, and at the same time, tickles your ribs by means of subtle asides and outrageous speculative musings.

Overall, the consequences of such speculation are both refreshing and fully realised, breathing new life into tired subject matter. Standout story 'We All Saw It', reveals a writer at the top of his game, bold enough to take on the Big Issues, yet humble enough to make them easily digestible and utterly entertaining. Employing light touches of comedy and a genuine flair for storytelling, Mat Coward's *So Far, So Near* takes the reader on a journey into Sci-Fi's broom closet, a backstage pass to some of the world's most niggling mysteries, and the experience is nothing short of remarkable.

For anyone seeking a lesson in bona fide originality and narrative verve, this is the book for you. Many of these stories will stay in mind for a long, long time – and make you look that little bit closer at the bizarreness of the world around us. That, in itself, is no mean feat. The rest is pure enjoyment.

about the female undead in film and literature, guaranteed to make you view the entire genre in a different—though still delightfully red-filtered—light. The true origins of Snow White alone make the journey worthwhile. Hell, there is even some poetry, a strange, lopsided work from the same author. The imagery will leave you cold while the sheer inventiveness heats your blood.

Any production like this would not be complete without its artists, and here the art works brilliantly to support the stories. There is gruesome pop art from Paul Kelley III, macabre visions from the excellent David Senecal, and some genuinely sinister portraits from Heisler Mulano. All of the art suits the theme perfectly, a mesmerising collage of flesh eaters, mixed into a visceral soup of creative innovation.

I can't promise you an easy night's sleep after daring the pages of *Brainchild*, but I can promise a ghoulish treat for genre lovers. Dead or alive, or just surviving on the edge of the zombie apocalypse, you can't say fairer than that.

Joe Hill, *Heart-Shaped Box*. Gollancz, 2007. Pp. 384. ISBN 0575079126. £12.99.

Reviewed by The Exploding Boy

I approached this title with a great deal of enthusiasm. As an aficionado of genre fiction, there is little more thrilling than the appearance of a new, highly praised horror novel from a first time author. Such enthusiasm is easily understood, especially when said novel is lauded as "the best debut horror novel since Clive Barker's *The Damnation Game*," a benchmark novel that launched Mr Barker's glittering career over twenty years ago.

Big surprise then, following this monumental praise from genre stalwart Neil Gaiman, that once one reads *Heart-Shaped Box*, one might not only feel cheated by the overstated eulogy, but also wonder whether Mr Gaiman has actually read any other debut horror novels from the past twenty years. One thing is certain, those who do know their stuff will surely think that comparisons to *The Damnation Game* are utterly misplaced.

Ok, so *Heart-Shaped Box* starts well. There's an exciting air to the opening part of the novel, some genuine chills and a seemingly original premise—a ghost for sale over the internet. The writing has an undeniable energy to it, and the ride itself is initially gripping. However, as the story moves forward into what I can only describe as 'Koontz territory'—a spectral car chase across North America—the wilful plot-twisting eventually unravels into a central premise that simply doesn't hold water. The build up is strong and intriguing, agreed; the payoff as weak as communion wafers.

Too much here is left unexplained, and the plot does not support deeper analysis. Joe Hill writes in such a fashion that it's almost as if he expects the relentless action to cover the tracks of a dreadfully flimsy concept. The reader will be left wondering why the villainous protagonists—Craddock and Jessica—would have gone to all the trouble in the first place, not to mention *how*—an omission that becomes extremely irritating to say the least. The potential deeper

levels of the story are left painfully unexplored, as though the author himself has overlooked them, leaving a tale that can easily be dissected and then debunked by more critical minds.

Heart-Shaped Box is a ghost story, true, but the best thing about good genre fiction is that it seeks to make the unbelievable somehow believable, and regrettably, this novel doesn't come close to achieving that. Ultimately, this sad fact lets the whole show down. After the smoke clears, what remains is a dreadfully shallow tale that reads like a hastily scrawled horror movie screenplay—one of the endless straight-to-video efforts that already haunt the shelves of your local rental store. Examine the plot at your peril.

And then there comes the final kicker. Joe Hill is none other than horror maestro Stephen King's son, a fact that was apparently an 'industry secret' for eight years, unknown even to Hill's literary agent... ahem, forgive my scepticism.

This knowledge might even have been a selling point, but one must speculate whether, left to the publisher's slush pile, without the supposed benefit of nepotism, *Heart-Shaped Box* would ever have seen the light of day. In fact, whole tracts of the novel read exactly *like* Stephen King, from the 'voices of the dead' on the TV and radio, to the George Stark ruthlessness (see *The Dark Half*, Stephen King) of the novel's main baddie, the ghoulish Craddock.

In the end, Joe Hill has written a horror novel as though he has only ever read his father's works, and the result is anything but original. Dress it up how you like, the Gothic rock star chic and the timely mention of eBay, Hill has produced a novel as cynically soulless as his unconvincingly revenant ghosts. As a result, other, more worthy genre debuts from less well-placed authors will presumably stay buried under the overblown hype of *Heart-Shaped Box*, and that is the real horror.

Harsh? Perhaps. Yet this reader found that *Heart-Shaped Box* left him chilled to the bone—and for all the wrong reasons.

Andrew Hook, *Residue*. Halfcut Publications, 2006. Pp. 130. ISBN 0954953517. £7.00.

Reviewed by Karina Kantas

Residue, leftovers. Scenes that would have been deleted from a film. Unwanted, as there is no reason for them.

A collection of nineteen stories by author Andrew Hook. Unfortunately, only two of the stories created any impact on this reader.

The stories are hard to get into, as there are no actual plots. Hook writes about emotions and actions. Detailed, so you can picture the time, place, and mind of the characters. These stories, however, have no beginning or end. The author takes the reader into scenes and uses movement and senses to describe what he wants us to feel and see.

Hook displays skills as a writer of multiple styles. *Residue* has styles that will suit all tastes. Some will delight, others will torment the reader. The collection describes how warped ones mind can suddenly become when coping with a solitary life, or life with a partner and yet still feeling that there is something missing. These characters are searching.

'Dirt' is the first story in the collection. The reader appears in a scene with a lonely, lost man. Andrews shows how valuable mundane chores and objects can suddenly become, when faced with loss. I think it was a mistake to use *Dirt* as the opening story. Unless you enjoy over descriptive pieces, you'll find yourself skipping paragraphs, hoping to read something remotely interesting. Unfortunately, this is not going to happen: the first four paragraphs describe the main character

wakening up; another four paragraphs describe him vacuuming. The last line reads 'I towel myself down, open a can of tomato soup. I cut my finger on the lid but the contents make it hard to spot the difference.'

'Double Cross' is the only story that will make you smile. A delightful tale about a father who jumps to the wrong conclusion about his son, resulting in the boy seeing his father in another light. The reason this one works is the little twist at the end of the story gives the reader a reason to smile and incentive to carry on reading the rest of the collection.

'OffOf' is a story about a meeting in a launderette between two, not so different people. Dave is a homeless beggar. Andrew is an employed man who lives with his partner. The two strike up a conversation.

J. W. Bennett, *Practical Devil Worship (For All The Family)*. *Twisted Tongue Magazine* (via Lulu.com), 2006. Pp. 30. \$5.13.

Reviewed by Karina Kantas

The title of J.W. Bennett's chapbook, *Practical Devil Worship (For All The Family)*, makes you wonder whether you're going to be reading a "how to" guide. Nevertheless, after a printed quote from G.W.Bush, on the first page, you realize you're about to get involved in something very different. *Practical Devil Worship* is a short story separated into four parts: Denial, Devotion, Damage and Debacle. Free as a PDF download or only £2.83 for a printed copy; although the book is thirty pages long, the actual story only covers twenty two pages. (More please)

From afar, the Darksteins appear an average loving family. Mother, (Delilah) hard working husband, (Lucifer senior) one teenage daughter, (Jezebel) and a younger son, (Lucifer Junior) and as the names suggest, the Darksteins are Satanist's. Devil worshipers who refuse to hide their beliefs and customs—something that the residents of Goat Creek will not

tolerate. Against Andrew's better judgment, he takes a liking to Dave. Before the end of their discussion, Andrew is secretly willing to give Dave a room in his house. However, all Dave wants is a little loose change. Andrew is happy to handover money to the beggar, in payment for the needed conversation. There is not a lot of point to this story. Nevertheless, the dialogue makes you read this one to the end. You know the beggar is going to ask Andrew for money. You want to know how and when.

If you like to lose yourself in creative writing for writing sake, then you'll appreciate *Residue*. For those of you that enjoy excitement, a scare, a laugh, stories with plot, an arc, and more than just flashes of poignancy, you'll need to look elsewhere.

tolerate.

Since moving in to the Bible loving community, the Darksteins are constantly persecuted for displaying their beliefs. However, it is not until a young local girl disappears, that fingers openly point towards the Satanic family. Whereas the Darksteins have no intention of keeping their love for Satan (the low king) a secret, respected locals have dark secrets of their own, which are unveiled in a disturbing twist.

Quote from Lucifer senior: "This ain't no horror movie. You don't to wave a Bible and send me packing in a puff of smoke."

With edgy and decisive writing, *Practical Devil Worship (For All The Family)* is a fun read. Containing adult content it is not, as the title suggests, for all the family. Short enough to read in one sitting, yet long to tell the whole story, the way Bennett wanted to. Wrapped in an impressive cultish cover, it's worthwhile adding this book to your collection.

With characters you love to hate, here's hoping the Darkstein family will rise again.

***Sein und Werden* vol 1, issue 3. ISMs Press, 2007. Pp. 54. £3.50.**

Reviewed by Christopher Michaels

This "The Collaboration Issue" is the third issue of the first year of an adventurous quarterly "zine" or magazine project for promoting creative writing with a dark edge. It has fifteen pieces exploring collaboration in the writing arts.

The first story in this collection, by Paul Bradshaw and Peter Tennant, is the most conservative in terms of form though the content as a horror porn is reasonably confronting—Steven King with balls. 'The Birth of Athena: Redux' doesn't, however, connect in anyway with Greek myths or the stories of Athena, no reference or sense of mythic depth. Simply Gothic teen wank material. The only mythic connection is that two characters study Greek mythology. This was not an

omen enticing me to want to read on but *Sein Und Werden's* two earlier issues suggested I should look beyond this first impression.

What is interesting about this collection may be that it provides an opportunity to explore the boundary between pretentiousness and challenging word art, and that between intellectual game-playing and emotionally engrossing work that reaches inside you. So the question is can you play with and stretch form in a way that leads readers to connect more intensely than using old, more common forms with clear narrative structures and images that you can grab onto easily. This group of poetry, prose and sometimes interesting crossovers I think is patchy in living up to "Empress Editor" Rachel Kendall's target of hoping collaboration will give birth to "something new, something screaming, something monstrous and mutating, puls-

ing, a writhing homunculus”

The second collaboration, also taking a mythic reference, is a case in point. Julie Cook and Matt Williams take the Biblical reference for gender and creation embodied in Adam and Eve exploring them by exchanging media. A poet takes a prose work into his medium and a prose writer takes a poem into her medium, and they swap genders in the process. Each piece is a tribute to the writer who wrote it and to the writer who wrote the original. They seem to take ownership of the translated work yet there is a beautiful, dark and insightful sense of the gender point of view that refers back to the original.

The next poem written by 5 writers has the sense of one of the group writing exercises you play in creative writing classes but this seems to have a structure and point and is a straight out beautiful poem. The next two stories are strikingly creative; one, 'Haute Couture', a more traditional horror, the other, 'Career Path', a touching brother and sister story that takes takes horror to a different place. The abjectness of being drawn into identifying with the worst kind of disability and yet taking action—suicide and euthanasia or is it murder (an action that horrifies most but is a source of power and freedom here).

The only story that is credited to one person yet seems to be partly written with someone else called 'Keeping Angels—Part Three of Four' is the most confusing and masturbatory of all the pieces in this book.

This may be that it doesn't work out of context or that this critic is too simple a man to get it. The two writers' styles seem to collide and the structures don't fit for me. It's almost like taking a piece out of a mystery and expecting it to make sense, except this is a surrealist mystery and I just haven't spent enough time reading the dream encyclopaedia they're using as a reference. Mostly I just got too bored to want to make sense of it.

This collection is definitely worth the very inexpensive cover price and the high design, low-tech production of the book itself. The poetry excited me most, the prose was readable but not nearly as interesting or as adventurous. Horror storylines offer the opportunity for stretching in all kinds of ways. So why is it that so many writers think the confronting subjects are enough? They stick to more conservative ways of telling the stories and when they do experiment have problems keeping the reader in the story in away that lets them see something new about themselves and their fellow humans through the structure. Publications like this one are necessary even when they fail, and this one mostly doesn't, because they help us find the new voices for our generations. This group of collaborative experiments are what you expect of any attempt to enter new territory: you stub your toe sometimes, but that's par for the course and there are so many interesting, scary and beautiful things around you soon forget it.

Mark Howard Jones, *The Garden of Doubt on the Island of Shadows*. ISMs Press, 2006. Pp. 49. ISBN 9780955418501. £1.99.

Reviewed by Nader Elhefnawy

Mark Howard Jones's novella *The Garden of Doubt on the Island of Shadows* is the first book published by Manchester-based ISMs Press, which identifies itself as seeking "to merge and modernize the ideas behind Expressionism, Surrealism and Existentialism."

This mandate is nothing if not ambitious--and perhaps, a bit intimidating, in its hinting that idea and style might trump story and character. Fortunately, while *The Garden of Doubt* certainly qualifies on the score of surrealism, its accessible structure and clear, occasionally striking, prose making it quite readable.

The story starts in London in the autumn of 1974, where Jones's protagonist Sandy is forlorn after the disappearance of her rock musician lover, Michael, two months earlier. Everyone around her seems comparatively unconcerned, completely clueless but sure he will turn up safe and sound soon enough--or so they tell her. Listening to his records, however, she becomes convinced that there's a message to her in his lyrics, about a journey to a pale island, and she sets out to find out, sure that she will find him there.

Some of the tropes are not especially fresh, but the way that loss can stop a life and shove everything else into the background, and the alienation from everyone around her who can't quite share that feeling, are all artfully related in Sandy's early scenes. (Lukie's boorish insensitivity toward Sandy, his picking "a painful scab right off" in Jones's phrase, particularly sticks out in my mind.) The same goes for the obsessiveness that can set in at such moments, which is what Sandy's preoccupation with Michael's old lyrics might prove to be in a different story.

The Garden of Doubt, however, is not concerned with epistemological uncertainty; as readers realize early on, the pattern Sandy thinks she sees in all that noise isn't paranoia after all. However, that by itself is no guarantee of happy reconciliation, or even that everything will make sense in the end. This is a story about loss, both the depths of it, and its limits, and that is its real strength in the end. Where so much literature rejecting realist modes of storytelling reduces its characters to ciphers (consider, for instance, Thomas Pynchon's famously cold characters), the frustrations and disconnects Sandy inevitably encounters as she explores the dream-like island draw their force from the deep feelings of genuine characters.

Gary Couzens (ed.), *Extended Play*. Elastic Press, 2006. Pp. 320. ISBN 095488129X. £6.99.

Reviewed by Susan Mattinson

This anthology of short fiction combines music with life, taking the reader from one situational extreme to the other. Feeling the bass booms of nightlife at its most raw, catching glimpses of the metaphysical, experiencing the violence and disputes alongside the subtle nuances of romantic relationships will cause the reader to see music and musicians as never seen before.

Drumming allows a little boy to "go sideways" and astral project in order to escape domestic violence in 'The Little Drummer Boy' by Marion Arnott, while war in the borderline cataclysmic land of Tim Nickels' 'fight Music' uses musical training and conservatory to change musicians into war machines. 'In the Pines' by Rosanne Rabinowitz shows one song in its many manifestations, presenting music as a form of metaphysical transportation and a builder of self confidence and strength (even when faced by the Jersey Devil).

Music also becomes the soundtrack for relationships in stories such as 'Last Song' by Andrew Humphrey, where an open mic night brings three characters together into a web of dysfunction and sacrifice. 'Tremolando' by Becky Done introduces conflict to a group of chamber musicians that leads to a shifting of relationships. The complexity continues in Emma Lee's 'First and Last', where an interest in records and

music leads a middle-class woman through a series of disappointing romances to a fresh start.

Night lives get their due in 'Some Obscure Lesion of the Heart' by Nels Stanley, following the adventures of a nocturnal music reviewer with an appreciation for "pulsing skronk". Jazz music moves to the foreground through a famous sax player in 'A Night in Tunisia' by Tony Richards. 'The Barrowlands' Last Night' by Philip Raines and Harvey Welles shows us the last concert before the demolition of a music hall. This story stresses the connection between different groups of music fans, and caring between brothers, even as the Mosh Demon works his disruptions.

These tales of fiction are separated by short writings from musicians expressing how fiction has affected their song writing. The importance of timelines, the effect of writing from an animal perspective, and general inspiration from fiction are all presented in writings from songwriters JJ Burnelm, Rebekah Delgado, Catherine and Susan Hay, Lene Lovich, Gary Lightbody, Sean "Grasshopper" Mackowiak, Jof Owen, Iain Ross, Chris Stein, and Chris T-T.

While some of the stories in this anthology have a tendency to digress into obscurity or to points beyond bizarre, they lead to many fresh and unexpected destinations. Even though the book's summary states that "this anthology brings new meaning to the phrase one hit wonders", I definitely hope this is not the last we will see of these talented writers and musicians.

Maurice Suckling, *Photocopies of Heaven*. Elastic Press, 2006. Pp. 216. ISBN 0954881281. £5.99.

Reviewed by Sarah Ann Watts

Photocopies of Heaven is a collection of stories which gives the sense of a carefully-crafted whole. The book is structured like an art exhibition, pieces of work selected by the author that hang together to achieve the best combined effect.

Many of these stories in their varied and different forms link together. If you were looking for the mirror image to a novel this is what you might get—characters who wander in and out of each others stories like friends dropping in and out of each other's houses. There is a sense of familiarity: these are people we know, people like us—their feelings and emotions and their lives are not unlike our own.

Themes that recur include a continuing search for identity and to find meaning in life, a quest for spirituality and to find something to believe in. The objects we own become new household gods.

There are stories within stories—as in 'Nowhere And Other Destinations You Can Enjoy' where a group of friends meets for a reunion—the cars we passed at night all seemed lost but too on their own to ask for directions, like they'd just have to keep going till it got day, and only then could they work out where they were and how far they'd gone.' The characters are waiting for a break in the weather, the snow that didn't

fall ten years ago—another turn and twist on an age old device. They tell each other stories that are and are not the stories of their lives against a background of casual mayhem—accidental damage to the cottage they are staying in that bears the marks of their visit a decade ago. 'When you wash and dry and put away in teams you must never throw le creuset pans unless people are looking.' This is one of several stories that explore the cyclical nature of life as déjà vu experience—we have been here before.

There is a comic strip, 'The Amazing Adventures of No One In Particular', emails, stories in text. The collection opens with an urban myth that invites us into a world of shared experience. This is followed by 'What Happened Next?' 'A sad, funny and life enriching tale that tells the reader, this is going to be good.

In these tales consumer brands are important—in a secular and uncertain age they are the markers we use to define who we are and to show signals to the tribe—they mask our fear of being alone. They are also as indicators of time passing—that life is closing in and options shutting down. This is exploited neatly in tales such as 'A New Kitchen Is A Way To A New Life', 'Things You Can Buy' and '14 Everyday Brands'.

There is much to enjoy in this book—three stories in particular stood out for me—'Identity Renting', 'Televisionism'—rejection of the miraculous in a world that is too cynical—and the wonderful 'Infinite

Things To Do With Microwaves' which should definitely come with a don't-try-this-at-home warning. I didn't meet a tale I didn't like.

I think the author's achievement is the interconnected quality of the stories that reflect the surreal quality of the world we live in and also captures the uncertainty post 9/11. This is encapsulated in the beau-

tifully written 'September 12th'—'Let us build heaven here.'

The style is direct and engaging and the whole quality of the book is inventive—a celebration of the short story form that showcases the author's confidence and skill; storytelling for the twenty-first century with a human face.

Christopher Wood (ed.), *The First BHF Book of Horror Stories*. BHF Books (via Lulu.com), 2006. Pp. 194 + xiii. \$11.20.

Reviewed by Mario Guslandi

As a reader and a reviewer of horror anthologies I've had my share of cheap fiction by untalented beginners trying to elicit a few shivers by putting together gore, violence and obsolete clichés into implausible plots. So I'm wary of starting a horror book featuring contributors whose names tell me next to nothing and, more often than not, my caution turns out to be well founded. Fortunately, life sometimes has a pleasant surprise in store and that's exactly what this book represents for me. Users of the [British Horror Films](#) website have submitted their stories, nineteen of which have been selected by editor Christopher Wood and assembled in an excellent, captivating volume.

Truth be told, some contributions are no more than funny but flimsy vignettes either with a vague kafkaesque taste (John Reppion's 'Antony Clarke is sick') or with a touch of funny grand guignol (Bill Turner's 'The hermit' and 'Sidney') and there's even a humorous Sherlockian pastiche ('The case of the fragrant phantom' by Matt Bowlder).

As in any anthology not everything can be first-rate but the majority of the tales, unexpectedly, are of superior quality.

First of all I'd like to mention Chris Wood's own contributions. If 'Spaghetti Head' is a succinct but vivid tale providing a scary variation on the theme of the haunted room, 'Edward' is an outstanding piece displaying solid storytelling and perfect characterization, where a British couple vacationing in France meets with tragedy when the husband steals a wooden figure from the road.

Other favourite of mine are Daniel McGachey's 'They that dwell in dark places', an extraordinary story

about the spiritual and physical darkness haunting our lives, the very essence of fear, and 'Storm dog' by Paul Newman, a dark, frightening report of how ancient superstitions come true for a young, unlucky painter of landscapes.

Neil Christopher provides 'Surface tension', a compelling, atmospheric mix of horror and SF taking place during a stormy night on the Suffolk coast, as well as 'Secret recipe', a predictable but pleasant yarn featuring a not too seraphic old widow.

On the other hand Wendell McKay contributes both the elegantly told but deeply unsettling 'Brierley day' in which an ancient feud between a noble family and a necromancer comes to its tragic end four hundred years later and the powerful 'Hotel Naiade', a piece that, despite the lack of credibility of the plot (an American tourist interferes with the doings of two witches trying to find nourishment to a sorcerer imprisoned within the structure of a hotel building) manages to fascinate and entertain.

The best of Bill Turner's efforts is 'Fresh souls', a creepy, well told story of soul vampirism affecting a couple of friends during a fishing trip.

Finally, as an extra bonus, the reader will find, at the end of the book a sort of "Easter egg" disguised as a printer's mistake entitled 'Gory tales from England's gaols'. The story, apparently anonymous, but actually penned by the editor himself, is a truly delightful whodunit blending the gore of an effective horror story with the classic subject of murder inside a locked room.

In short, there's much to enjoy here for the good horror fiction lovers and I highly recommend the book. Moreover, I understand that a second volume is in the works and that a call for new stories has been issued for a third instalment.

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