

# DEATH AND THE MAIDEN

*Jointed, disparate images come to me.*

*I can see paintings on a wall (I've never painted anything, I've tried, but never got the hang of it).*

*I walked on the road past the old house. I walked in darkness, under the streetlights on the main road.*

*Streetlights of the old type. Not those with the great orange glow, but the ones satisfied with glowing in blue and pale light. I turned off the main road where there are rarely any cars at all at night, to the smaller road. I walked across the bridge over the roaring river (there was no river). On my right where I walked on the tarmac covered private road, a small yacht stood on a pedestal for all to look at and admire. It had been there virtually forever, fit for pedestals no longer. For some reason this particular, (older) pedestal, keeps reminding me of the way the American Indians supposedly were «burying» their dead.*

*That's when I see her. She has been walking some distance ahead of me for some time, but I haven't really seen her before now, before Now. I study her back. She doesn't turn around. The sleek, black hair is covering her back. She dresses in black. Black jacket, black pants. I walk only ten meters behind her. I want to cry out to her. She would then turn around and I would see the face I do not see now.*

*She turned off onto another road. I do know these parts well, having wandered through them since childhood. I walked merely ten steps behind the lovely snake body, when I turned abruptly around and hurried back the same way I had come. Over the bridge, over the main road again, towards home.*

*The red gate, the green gate. Some minutes later. A hundred thousand years. I walk by the old white house, empty, ethereal. I'm always looking at the dark windows to see if anybody is standing inside. There was no one this night either. But as always I'm hearing noises. Creaking of the old, decaying floor, rustling behind green bushes, the howl of poltergeists in the treetops. I ran the last stretch to my home one hundred steps away. It's a wise habit of mine, that I'll leave the lights on, when leaving the house for my nocturnal walks.*

*I stood as frozen on the concrete stairs fumbling with my keys, and watched my shadow casting long shadows in the light from the kitchen. **My** shadow, I told myself. I had never felt so shaken before and I had walked long trips in the night for many years now. What had changed? What?*

*I closed the door shut behind me and feverishly turned the key in the lock. The door was closed. I imagined that all kinds of hellhounds butted the green gate to the property. Creatures of fog searched for the keyhole. They might have found it already and were just waiting for the key to be pulled out. I had to pull it out, I had to. If not, they could have used it to enter through the door.*

*Nothing happened. I stopped breathing for a while to listen for any sound, anything suspicious. I was breathing easier just a few seconds later. There were a lot of small sounds in the house, but that was normal, wasn't it? I drew breaths of relief in the warm, cozy hall. Cozy, safe. I downed a glass of juice without being conscious of finding the glass or opening the refrigerator door or pouring anything. The taste felt better than it ever had, like life or death.*

*The refrigerator door shook when I opened it. I spilled juice over the table, on the floor and I lifted an eyebrow. It was supposed to be juice, but the fluid was red. It couldn't be. Not orange juice at all. Certainly not... The color had been... right when I had opened it a... a... long time ago.*

*It was at this time I heard noise from inside the living room. Unmistakably the sound when someone is standing up from a deep chair. Who can it be? A supple creature dressed in snakeskin...?*

*A shadow stretching her snake body on the dining table. Light is flowing from the two bulbs above, in vain. The shadow grew. I could hear the steps now, light, demonic. I couldn't move. Everything, also my own house, had become alien to me. Blood flowed from the glass filled with orange juice. The wall clock was transformed into a face grinning its vicious smile, greeting me with it. And whoever awaited me in the living room would come walking around the corner at any time now. I didn't dare move, staring blindly at the growing shadow. I had an infernal need to turn around and expose whoever was sneaking up on me from behind, but... I didn't dare. I heard steps behind me, I heard steps in front of me and the kitchen wall closed off the path to the right. To my left was the kitchen window. I ran to it, moving with swiftness completely unusual in this type of dreams. Hands shaking like any type of leaves pushed the window and opened it wide. And there she was, the girl from the Night. I saw her face. Death stared at me without its mask and she smiled at me.*

*I looked outside and she wasn't to be seen anymore. Not there. One blink of an eye and she was gone (not gone). I had closed all doors, every window, and I had not invited her, but still she had entered my house. I heard her voice and her steps everywhere. She... She was coming for me. I know she is and I can feel the shadow of her cold embrace, the touch of her ghostly limbs.*

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His office in daylight. Big windows. Much light, filtered through gray windows. Light, pale colored furniture and walls. Modern architecture. Little or no visible dust. The sounds of the city outside muffled, distant. The buzzing voices from the hall.

There were still 45 minutes to go before the nine o'clock meeting. He didn't have much left to prepare really. A few phone calls, perhaps. He made them. It took only a few minutes. The secretaries had pulled all the important files from his personal hard drive before he arrived and had done quite an adequate job of research.

He shrugged. Inactivity always got to him. He used it, used this... imbalance, to refine his approach to going through the meeting in advance, imagining the pointers and possible adversaries. This morning, though, he feared his timing was... off. He couldn't concentrate properly.

Mary Anne entered the room. Shoulder length blond hair combed back from her temples, serious, fast, efficient.

– They're ready for you, now, sir, she said.

He had already risen and straightened his jacket. He walked first out in the hall, and she followed.

– The changes will be made one day before schedule, according to your exact specifications, she offered, noticing his eyes wandering up and down the walls, on the incomplete work.

He nodded absentmindedly. It didn't matter if she saw him do it. She was used to his indifference when dealing with underlings and didn't notice anything different.

But he did, and it irritated him to no end.

– There is something you may want to know, she said hesitatingly.

– Yes?

– Workers have... there have been some *complaints* about working conditions, working hours and tight schedules.

He pulled breath in through compressed teeth. She noticed and virtually shrank, even before he started to speak.

– It is you who have the overall job and responsibility with the reconstruction and completion of the office, correct?

– Yes, sir, she said hastily.

– Then I'll suggest, for future reference, you solve problems, not create new ones, for both yourself and us.

– Yes, sir, of course, sir. Please rest assured that it will not happen again.

He congratulated himself with this move, this small show of force, through the rest of the day. By crushing her small show of defiance in its infancy, he had both prevented it from growing into a future problem and made her more valuable during the meeting. She was working, striving very hard to compensate for her earlier tactless remark and to regain her loss, to remain in his favor.

– But the risk, sir... a younger up and coming suit protested politely, when there were merely minutes left of the board meeting. – Surely...

– Risk is a part of the game, boy. He raised the voice an octave and then, uncharacteristically slammed his fist on the table before him. – We may obtain the same results if we go the slow and careful way, but it isn't very *likely*, now, isn't it?

– No, sir, the younger man replied sullen.

He had relied on his older, more experienced «sponsors» to come to his aid, but they had, of course, failed him. They had learned the game long ago. And relied on upstarts such as him, to blunder and generally make an ass of himself, to prod and prowl their opponents.

Robert Coleman knew this tactic well, as he often practiced it himself.

But this time that specific tactic had failed miserably. As his opponents now realized, they had lost the battle before the board meeting started.

He gathered his papers, nodded to them, rewarded his team by recognizing their existence. Such a gesture, he had discovered early in his career, was often sufficient, to make them work that harder, «go that extra mile». Fear and intimidation and rewarding gestures. All business ran on such fuel.

He drove home early, rather pleased with himself, the appetite for blood whetted even more.

His home was no more than a 30 minute drive from the business area, the center of the city. When traffic wasn't bad, like now, he could even manage the trip in 20. He had bought the rather estate like property five years ago, and lived in that rural environment since.

After taking off from the main road, there was a mile or so to drive on a more... rural path. There was pavement, he had made sure of that, but it was still considerably smaller than he would have liked. He saw the girl on the bridge and waved to her. She waved back. His good mood grew even more.

One long slope down, from the main road and he could just as well be in another world, a world where time had stood still. At least for five years, probably longer.

The red gate first. There were a number of other houses beyond this point, belonging to his neighbors.

The green gate. Beyond it there were only two houses, both belonging to him. The white, that he rarely used, except for the occasional bashes and parties. He lived in the green, by the end of the road - alone.

He parked the car in one of the two available spots in the garage and walked the last twenty steps to the house. He opened the door, went inside and closed and locked the door. Dinner was ready in the oven. His combined cook and housekeeper had, as usual, done an impeccable job. And disappeared afterwards without leaving unwanted tracks.

While he sat down by the table and ate, he did as he always did. He went through the day in his mind.

His opponents, adversaries, had thought the fist hitting the table, had been a deliberate, theatrical act, to throw them off balance, but in truth it hadn't been. He had been a bit out of... whack lately and was at a loss to understand why.

In his more despairing moments, he had considered going to see a shrink. Everyone else did it, so why shouldn't he?

But no, there were some things he just wasn't prepared to do, other than in a last ditch effort. Everything was fine, he was fine. This was no more than a challenge to be won, like it usually was in business.

Night came early this day. Earlier than he would have thought, even if fall was fast approaching.

He selected CNN news on the Internet, then some business channels. Everything told in vivid colors.

He retired early and fell asleep almost immediately. Not so strange, since he had slept rather poorly lately.

Outside the window was the rustling of leaves, the howling of wind and he slept.

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*I went outside, didn't turn around, could swear I couldn't hear the door slam shut behind me.*

*Autumn brought darker nights. The chill in the air was not summer. This late in the night, though, one was able to scout the first signs of morning in the east. A twilight light, seemingly stretching on forever.*

*I passed the garage on my right side. A bit further in the garden, the old house on my left. There was no sound, no wind, but I could hear wind howl through the building when walking by. The green gate was closed. I had closed it the evening before. While I opened it I used the opportunity to take a quick glance back at the house, at the garden full of bushes and trees, almost a forest.*

*Then the open field, the farm. The road seemed so narrow in between the tall, weedy grass. In the northeast, the barn, a dark shape against the promise of morning.*

*The road stretches on, making strange turns left and right, up and down, until it reaches the main road. One long slope up, and I could, looking left, see the endless road to the north, looking right, see the endless road to the south. There is a construct bridging the main road, making it safe for everybody to cross. I took a stroll on the bridge and I felt the wind grabbing me.*

*A car came from the south, driving under the bridge, as all cars had to do. It was an open car, a convertible. I could see her long, black hair, blow in the wind. The male driver stopped the car a bit further to the north, by the gas station, and let her off. She kissed him on the cheek. He drove further north, disappearing around a turn far to the north. She was alone.*

*I studied her as she walked by the gardener's house. She disappeared behind it, appeared on the other side, the other side of the bridge. I crossed it fully, following her.*

*Fog rose slightly off the ground. There was no fog. The road was broad and gray in front of me, but I saw her glimmering in red and color. The road was visible. There was no fog. The air (and road) dry and windy. The wind whistled in the trees, the boughs and branches moved. I couldn't see them move, but I could hear them, as I couldn't hear myself. And she didn't walk forward, but floated like a ghost in the night. She was dressed in a cloak, a hood and carried her scythe. The cloak hid her legs, hid her arms, her head. Only branches, boughs of her impossible long hair floated in the air. I saw her clearly from behind, as she swung her scythe, and the grass she cut screamed silent and bled its red blood.*

*I stopped, stood still, while she disappeared around the next turn. Up a slight slope in the road, the road turned ever so slightly behind a row of trees... and she was gone. I started walking, I started running, reached the turn almost instantly, or so it felt like. I couldn't see her. I ran further as my heart beat in my chest, to the next turn. She was nowhere to be seen, she was gone.*

*Sweat poured into my eyes, blurring my vision and suddenly, from one moment till the next, I was scared shitless of closing my eyes. And the sweat stung like hell and I had to close my eyes...*

*the slightest moment. And my breathing stopped and I turned abruptly around. And there was no one there. I turned again. Again*

*There was no one there!*

*There was no one there!*

*There was no one there!*

*I started walking fast. Back to the main road, to the bright lights. I started to realize she could be anywhere.*

*And it was quite... unsettling. The road back to the house was lit by darkness. Not more than a few minutes walk, but it had always felt like an eternity.*

*A car drove by and with a start I saw her face reflected in the window.*

*And for that to happen, she had to be close, very close.*

*But I couldn't see her.*

*She could be anywhere. She was anywhere. She was whispering to me through the air, through my feet each time they touched the ground. As I started the dark crossing between the main road and my home, I felt the smell of my sweat, I felt it pour down my face and neck, cold, cold droplets of fear. The temptation to start running was almost overwhelming. It wouldn't do. Not at all! Control - slow, careful steps, that was the ticket.*

*I do not remember how many times I turned around and looked behind me, during the next minute or so. I ran the last, few steps to the house, unlocked the door, stormed in and slammed the door behind me, turned the key and moved hastily away from the door.*

*To avoid her bony arm stretching through the door. I could almost see it, between the shadows and light, between the warm and cold air. There was nothing there.*

*I had been assuming that she couldn't walk through the door. She may be able to push her hand or arm through, but not her entire body. I realized that I've never really believed that to be accurate. The entrance, the living room, the kitchen, the bathroom, all rooms were lit, but I could sense her in the shadows. I kept telling myself that this was merely paranoid, creative delusion working overtime. Never quite convincing.*

*She's hiding in the mirrors, you know... Not just the visible mirrors, but that of our mind and soul. I can see glimpses of her, here and there, in the outskirts of the vision, the edge of consciousness.*

*On these nights I don't turn off the lights. I can't allow the shadows in the corners to spread all over the house. I'm checking under the bed, inside the closet, all the closets. I can't see her. I know she's there!*

*Why don't you leave me alone? I've done nothing to you. Go away!*

*And I hear her steps. And I can see dust float in her footsteps above the floor. Hell, the depth of her feet is visible in the carpet. I turn to defend myself, but she's not there. And then I feel her bony fingers touch my shoulders from behind and I'm SCREAMING*

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And then he woke up. He sat in his bed, shaking, his body, the bed, the sheets soaked with sweat.

Reality shifted around him, in constantly changing patterns. Changed - and shifted again. The bed was there, the walls were there. The next moment nothing was, not even him. And She was there. He could hear her silent laughter. And cold sweat froze his vision.

He sat there for minutes, sat still, frozen, wide awake. Fell back in the bed, attempting to sleep. He couldn't close his eyes. There was fear, but the fear subsided, as the nightmare faded. More than that, there was no... he wasn't tired. At least not in a way that allowed him to sleep. He closed his eyes. There wasn't the slightest hint of sleep. He rose from the bed with an irritated move of his head.

Insomnia had been another of his perils lately. After awakening from the nightmare, he was unable to get back to sleep, even after the hammering of the heart had stopped and he had dried his sweat-soaked body with a towel.

He dutifully completed the useless ritual this night, too. Then proceeded to dress. No food, he went straight outside. Slammed the door shut behind him. Didn't lock it. For some reason he never locked the door on these nocturnal trips. They could last for hours, but he left the door unlocked.

It was a bright late summer night. A full moon pale against the light blue sky. It never got very dark this far north in summer. He could see the road quite clear ahead. Light sensitive camera lenses might have problems catching enough light during these nights, the human eye didn't.

There was no wind, no sound coming from the old house. It was just a house. Even the barn between the green and red gate, the barn that had frightened him so, as a kid, was just a barn. It was a dark silhouette towards the northern sky, it always was. The sun would rise behind it a couple of hours from now.

(But not as dark as when passing it on a dark autumn night).

The temperature was pleasant, a typical summer night. Skin on nude arms didn't feel exposed, except for the permanent rush of fresh air to open pores. The chill he felt was entirely in his mind.

The dream still felt ridiculous, as it did even as he dreamed it, even as he was tossing and turning in his bed, running endless fields in fear of what didn't exist. He couldn't deny it any longer, he was slipping. It didn't interfere on his daytime performance yet, but would soon. Just a matter of time and the first cracks would start to show, as he had seen happen with so many of his former colleagues. He admitted that he was at a loss what to do, how to proceed. A shrink was definitely out. He knew it had helped some and they were discreet. They had to be, to attract his kind of demographic group. But things could still be revealed. They usually were, in the end. A revelation that would be just as damaging to a man as himself, depending on his hardball reputation.

These nightly trips had always benefited him, helped relieve the pressure. The wind against his face (there was no wind), the soft, ephemeral light (everything was clear as day). It had helped him, even to the point where he didn't need much sleep (and could work more).

No longer!

He had adapted a light, unconcerned walk. This was beneficial both in boardroom meetings and long nightly ventures. Usually he didn't get tired at all. No wonder really, since he paid a man to keep him in top shape.

Now the walk was rather erratic and awkward, revealing in full his rising stress.

He had to admit to himself that he had felt skittish for months. It was about time he did something, anything about it.

The bridge was there, as it was every time, every dream. He saw the girl, coming from the east. He didn't see her every night, but usually their migration pattern was amazingly alike. She was northbound, he followed her some lengths behind. He saw her back. In the dream he had only seen her back. He saw her butt and swinging

hips. Glimpses of her face haunted him. He had seen it in daylight, but it wasn't really the same. It looked the same, but wasn't.

Hello

*Hello!*

– Hello,

he called after her.

He managed to catch up with her, by the old gas station.

– Hello. She turned and smiled to him, a bit reserved, – another nightwalker? Nice to meet you.

According to statistics he had read, every man (and woman) thought the opposite sex was reserved and even hostile during initial contact, but he knew that wasn't necessarily the truth.

– Nice to finally meet, he said. – I've seen you walk these parts for quite some time now.

– And I've seen you...

– I do not doubt it, he said.

An awkward silence settled between them.

– Uh, where are you headed? he asked straightforward.

– North. Her reply was equally so. – And you?

– North... he smiled then.

The road went straight forward for quite some time, a long, long stretch of gray.

They talked about the weather for some time, or weather like issues, talking about nothing. Before they finally, after not so long a walk, started to talk.

– You like walking here, don't you, in the dark? You like the Night?

– Sometimes I can't sleep, he said almost apologetically. – And it helps clear my head.

She laughed, a happy satisfied laughter.

– I love *everything* about it, she cried out enthusiastically and turned and turned, made a pirouette, in front of him. – Not only what is accepted as «beneficial», but also what may be considered... dangerous, what is usually hidden, what present day people keep secret from themselves.

He refrained from comment on it. They walked on. They crossed a bridge, reached a stretch where there were no streetlights, they kept walking. Sometimes there was a car passing them, leaving them coughing and death and blind, for a few seconds.

But most of the time, there were silence. Their voices didn't really disturb the peace, but somehow added to it.

The dark was closer now, here, without a close electric light. He felt it creeping towards him, as a living entity.

She speeded up a little, gaining on him, stopped in front of him, looked into his eyes, he was drowning in hers.

– I would like to confess something, now, she said, – if you would allow me...

He looked incredulous at her. What strange wording she used, what a strange request. Certainly one quite different from what his secretaries and aides might do.

– I'm afraid of the dark, she confessed. – Or at least I was, that's why I started going out at Night.

– It's difficult to comprehend, he admitted.

She laughed throatily.

– First during summer nights only, then the walks stretched into autumn and winter... And I Changed!

They entered into an area heavy with mist, gray, wet, hard to see through mist. There was the actual road, and the other person, but hardly anything else. Shapes, indistinct extension of the surroundings, that was all.

– So quiet, he said. – No sounds everywhere.

– No people, she said, a bit haunted in her expression, in her voice. – You could just about imagine everything here, that everything is possible, everything.

Everything, everything, everything, he kept thinking.

– Let's have dinner tomorrow, he said, in his mind, stopping and holding her tight. – Lunch? Late dinner?

– I really can't, she laughed softly, regrettably. – I'm going away for a time, but I'll love to take you up on it sometime.

They walked back, took the longer, scenic route, not saying much.

– Let me walk you home, he insisted, when they were close to the bridge, where he would turn left and she right, turn west, turn east.

– There's no need. She shook her head. – I live just beyond the turn of the road.

She stopped and smiled.

– It was nice meeting you. Strange, isn't it? We've have both been walking here for ages, and we've never bumped into each other before.

She walked away, leaving him alone in the night. He stood unmoving, as she disappeared beyond the turn in the east... dissolving into mist and shadow.

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He walked the route, the path twice, the next night, without encountering her. There were no distinctive dreams, no nightmare beyond the frantic pace of his feet.

No fog but the long, endless stretch of cruel clarity.

The days, the weeks, went by, and he slept like the dead.

No dreams, no dreams about her, except in endless waking hours.

He could see the fog drift by his feet, light bending in the corner of his eyes. He had managed somehow by sleeping two hours each night for the last month. Now he slept like a baby every night and he felt like he might be slipping.

Control was a fine tuned tool. He had always known that. He knew his «associates», his underlings didn't notice anything obvious in his demeanor, but he was just as certain that they did notice that something was amiss or not quite right. And sooner or later they would make their attempt at taking advantage of the crack in the armor. They always did, of course, they always looked for openings, for cracks, so it wouldn't be anything new really. But sensing blood, they would be that much more dangerous, and they would probably make it a coordinated effort. A good opportunity to rid himself of opposition and excess baggage, for sure... if he was up to the task.

Doubt... had always been a foreign concept to him. Now, he felt it creeping towards him, creeping inside like a cancer, eating away at the bone.

The bone dancing on his calluses as rubber. He was presenting a project to an assembly of sharks. Minutes, hours later, he was alone in his office, looking out of the window, on the streets far below, wondering what was wrong.

What went wrong, damn it!

They hadn't bought it, accepted his «proposal». A bunch of losers he had been able to easily wrap around his fingers merely a few weeks ago.

Mary Ann entered the room. She didn't walk close to him, but stood by his desk, facing him.

– Rough day? she said sympathetically.

He looked at her with his usual icy stare, the look she didn't dare meet.

– Not really. People may be rough, not days. But don't fret about it! I've waited for some time, now, for them to make their move. It could just as well happen today as any other day. I think they'll really see this as a hard won victory, patting each other on each others back, congratulating one another. They might think themselves a match for me. So much sweeter, that much more devastating, the day I take them out completely.

She looked at him with a lot of the old admiration returned. Her confidence in him restored. He read trust in her eyes. She didn't notice any of the doubt in his.

The day ended. Finally! He had imagined it would be a thousand years long. He went home a couple of minutes later than usual. Walking through the office floor, taking the elevator down, he could sense the whispering, the staring, the rumor mill, buzzing even more energetic than usual. They couldn't see anything in his demeanor, of course, he made sure of that, but it was impossible to put a lid on the events earlier this day. News always traveled fast in places like this, and never faster than after a Shakedown.

He had time, he knew that. Dethroning, in the business world, as elsewhere, didn't happen over night. At least it didn't seem that way. It was over a month until next important board meeting. Though his enemies might use the interim meeting a fortnight before that, to strike the final blow. Yes, he had to assume that they would.

He was slightly speeding when driving home. That was unlike him, he knew that, but just now he didn't care. He had the roof off and the wind was blowing through his hair. It certainly felt good.

It was her, wasn't it, on the bridge? He saw her just a short while, and she was gone. There were always just glimpses, during the light of day.

He went out early that night. The sun hadn't set, as he walked east. And then, as the sun's last rays made everything red, he saw her, standing on the bridge, awaiting him. Her face colored by the fire of the sun, her black hair burning, as the wind was playing with it.

– Hello, she greeted him. – I just got back. It's lovely to be back.

She smiled and kept staring at him, undeniably posing where she stood, her hips slightly bent, speaking with pouting lips. As he reached her, he took her by the hand and pulled her close to him. A shadow crossed her face. His shadow, he realized. The red and yellow shadows mixed like fire.

– It's lovely to have you back, he said, his smile tight and bold.

And he kissed her on the mouth. She stiffened just a moment before melting, forming her body to his. Her mouth opening to him, like blossom fire.

The sun had set now, far below the horizon. Her face was clearly visible in the twilight. It was midnight. There was no one out tonight. The two of them walked west, to his house. The red gate, the green gate, he hardly noticed. Through the green gate, and he could smell the garden.

Truth to tell, he had smelled the garden from far away.

– Do you want to come inside? he said. They stopped a second before the door.

– Yes, she said.

He held up the door for her, and she was dancing inside, dancing in front of him, into the living room, enticing him with her movement. She took a look around the room, looking at him cheerfully.

. Hmmm, not bad...

She took the sword down from the wall and started to swing it back and forth.

– Balance is good, and it has a *name*. You paid blood and tears for this, didn't you?

– It did cost me some hours of wages, he said admittedly.

She laughed throatily, as she started swinging it more boldly, and he was amazed by her skill. Around the head, above the head, from hand to hand.

– I won't argue with you, since you seem to be an expert and all...

– I am! she stated as a matter of fact.– I've been in training since I was a little girl. Swords, knives, all kind of martial arts, I'm a veritable one girl army.

She put the sword back in the sheath with an elegant swing of the arm.

– Such a nice and tidy place, not at all your typical bachelor home...

– What can I say, he admitted, – I like to know where things are.

– But you don't know where you've got me, she said teasingly, – and you're enjoying that, too...

The shadow and the rainbow were dancing constantly around her, blinding him, binding him.

They were dining, with red wine and candles. There were hot stares over the table, toasts of liberation and mist.

– An excellent cook, too, but I would have been surprised if you weren't...

She revealed clearly that she was teasing by winking to him. Just a tiny wink, but her face was so... expressive that every change spoke... volumes.

He had opened all windows, all doors. The fireplace burned with a low, pleasant flame, not really turning up the heat anymore than it already was.

She was reading his diary. She had found it in one of the shelves and picked it up, before he had been able to stop her.

There was silence a while, before she finally spoke.

– Have you written this?

– My pastime pastime, he grinned.

– This is *good*, she said pleased. – I knew you were not such a hopeless bore, as you seemed...

Winking again.

– The world may seem both ordered and chaotic, but isn't really any of it, but is rather filled with chaotic and ordered strife... expressions of mind and Shadow.

They were dancing, two shadows, on the edge of the Night.

– You know, she was pondering, looking up at him from his shoulder. – Death, in occult symbolic tradition, is seen as Change, or the need for change. In some Tarot decks, for instance, it's not necessarily a negative card. Without change something falls asleep inside us. We need it perhaps even more than our bodies need water.

– Most people are afraid of it, she said, almost as an afterthought.

– There seem to be something missing from my life, he said, admitted eloquently.

She laughed softly.

– You should *embrace* this aspect of yourself, she insisted. – Many people go through their entire existence without expressing themselves. What happens to such people, to a person denying the Self, to one denying it so thoroughly that it seems to belong to a different person?

He took the initiative, kissing her so hard on her mouth that her lips started bleeding. Her eyes grew big and her body supple.

And she melted into his cold embrace.

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*She was levitating above the highway. She was smiling. It was the most frightening sight he had ever seen.*

*– You didn't accept the gifts I bestowed upon you, she said. – Know that you are forever damned.*

*And then she was gone.*

*Later that night. He was driving north (again). A boy and a girl were sitting along the highway, kissing. Suddenly the boy fell to the ground, merely a skeleton left. The girl was turning towards him, the man in the car, and she was smiling. And the car was gone. He was standing still in the middle of the road, while she started walking towards him.*

*– I'm inside you now, she said. – I'll never let you go.*

*And then she was gone, as suddenly as she had appeared. But he could feel her everywhere, in the air around him.*

*He woke up screaming.*

*The bed was wet with sweat. The air was so damp that the sweat kept running from his shaking body. He stumbled to the window. It was wide open. He had been thoroughly convinced that it had been closed, closed, closed.*

*He's half dressing himself in shorts and T - shirt and running shoes, hurrying out the door, closing it behind him.*

*It's autumn. It should be much colder, he thinks. It's as if summer is staying with him. Breathing easier, having left the house, he starts on his usual route, walking east.*

*It's summer twilight, light darkness. He can easily see everything, everywhere, light as day. He's glancing behind him one second, casting hurried glances to the side the next, hardly ever casting more than a glance ahead. He's attempting to look in all directions at once, like when he was a kid, often stumbling, almost falling more than once.*

*The single streetlight ahead is blinding him, preventing him from seeing properly. She's hiding in the shadows, he knows, just outside the blinding light.*

*The road to the highway has always been dark. A long stretch of charcoal, where dark corners are everywhere. Reaching the highway, with all its streetlights had always been a relief, a salve on wretched nerves. Not so anymore. Not inside his well lit house, not here, in the middle of the road. Even in the middle of the road there wasn't sufficient distance between him and the whistling bushes, the ground darker than the gray pavement. There are cars and he has to move a bit to the side. He has to look at the cars as they're passing, look at the blinding lights, obscuring his vision, blinding him to the threats from the edge.*

*No cars anymore. There were no more cars. He continued to look around him. His neck started to hurt, he hardly noticed.*

*He looked left, he looked right, he turned his head and looked behind his back. And with a sudden start, forward again. There was no one anywhere.*

*And then he looked up.*

*And there she was, floating horizontally above him, her smiling face close to his own. And he is SCREAMING from the top of his lungs. And without looking back he's running back to the house, to the fragile sanctity of his home. While all the time imagining how her fangs are growing, how her claws are reaching for him, sinking into his back.*

*He ran all the way to the door, doing the three steps in one stride. Stopping, looking around. Looking up. Looking down. Sideways. All ways. One more time, all the time. There are no one there. Fumbling in his pocket for the keys, finding them, dragging them into sight, losing them on the porch. Bending down, picking them up, unlocking the door, storming inside. Closing the door behind him, locking it tight.*

*He was breathing hard, folding one or two times, before standing straight. Sweat is pouring down his cheeks, his forehead, into his eyes, obscuring his vision. He grabbed a towel, rubbing his face hard, hysterically keeping his hair from obscuring his vision.*

*The house was silent. Even while listening he could hear no sound. He could feel himself calming down.*

*Opening the fridge, grabbing himself something to eat, something to drink, drinking juice from the bottle, he sat down by the kitchen table, staring at hands still shaking.*

*It was almost dawn when he walked to his bedroom, to his bed. He opened the door, walking inside, seeing her as she was turning in the bed, looking at him with gleaming, inviting eyes...*

=====

He couldn't tell if he was dreaming or not. He grabbed the desk in front of him, the desk in his office, in broad daylight, a warm, sultry summer afternoon. It felt solid, it felt as if he was actually touching it... but he wasn't certain, he could never be certain, could he?

There was the sound of the city traffic, the fans on the shelves, cooling the room. He started breathing and life receiving air burned in his lungs. Everything felt as it usually did, but how was it usually. For all he knew, all he feared, this was the dream.

Perhaps a man strolling in the night, wasn't really unusual? It could be common as grass (if grass was common). There was just *no way* to be absolutely, objectively certain.

Rachel entered the room. Or perhaps she had been here all the time, was here, all the time. Her gypsy look only moderately devaluated by her smart, modern business dress.

She walked up behind him and started scratching him softly in the neck.

– Trouble sleeping?

He nodded.

– You poor boy. She touched him lightly on the cheek.

He looked at his hand. It was bleeding. A part of the desk had broken in his grip, and penetrated the skin. She took his hand, lifted it to her mouth and started licking off the blood.

– It tastes good, she whispered, the rays of the sun entering the room, illuminating her pale skin. – So good...

He could feel her tongue, feel it inside his veins, inside himself. And the blood was like water to it. And it grew, in size and eagerness. The blood was nourishment, soaked up by the forest floor like a dry sponge. The eyes, all three of them, were like points, sinking deep into the head. And he sank with them.

Kissing her he took a small bite of her lips, drawing blood. Startled she took a step back, looking at him with big, deep eyes. Before reentering his space, snuggling her body tightly to his.

Mary Anne entered the room.

– Everything is in order, I gather? He exclaimed.

– Yes, sir, the secretary replied respectfully, eagerly. – You have seven meetings today. I’ve taken the liberty to sort them, by time and by importance.

She put a neat pile of paper on his desk and left it there.

– That would be all, Mary Anne, he told her.

She nodded and left quickly and efficiently.

– What a nice girl. Rachel smiled to him.

– She is, isn’t she?

– And quite indispensable...

He nodded, didn’t trust his voice.

Later that day deliverymen entered the office, carrying a new desk, an exact copy of the one damaged. They carried the old one away, leaving the new on the old spot. Mary Anne had placed all essentials in neat piles on the floor. He looked at his watch. It was time to leave. He knew everything would be in order by the time he returned here tomorrow.

He strolled to the elevator, took it down, down, down, up, up, up. The door opened and he entered the garage. His car was on the left, just a few steps away. He passed it and walked further off, all the way to the exit. Out through the exit and immediately he found himself in the swirling images of the city. He started coughing almost immediately. The exhaust from the long, long line of homebound cars surrounded him like a wet blanket. He took off from the business district, finally reaching its boundaries a few minutes later, to a street of restaurants, bars and shops. A bit quieter, quite a bit better air quality. He wasn’t coughing anymore, he just wanted to.

It was late Friday afternoon. Friday Night was emerging. Excitement was in the air. Dull, feigned excitement, but excitement nevertheless. Most people had changed clothes already, changed before leaving the office, throwing themselves into the fake-colored streets.

He sat by the bar in a noisy bar. Half of the people had wedding rings on their fingers, the other half did not.

– This existence is really quite insane, he said to the girl beside him. – We’re working our butts off the entire week, and for what? For some extra commodities in our home, a few hours of desperate partying by the week’s end. I don’t want to be a put down here, but sometimes a body has to wonder, that’s all.

– And last Friday we, my friend, and me, were at a party on the Westside, you know. It was one of the wildest gigs we’ve ever been to. Quite remarkable, I tell you.

The girl’s voice was modulated and soft. She looked at him with misty, pondering eyes.

– I take strolls in the night, he said. – I don't really know why. There are no other people out then, so it's really quiet and peaceful. And I get a change of perspective, I guess. But I really don't now why.

– We got to know a lot of new people and received an invitation to other parties, the girl said, – so it was a great move for us, going there.

– I mean, I don't know why I'm here either, I thought I needed a change of pace, you know.

The girl rose from her chair.

– I'm going to the bathroom, she said. – I should do it now, before they become too crowded. Crowded bathrooms are one of the major obstacles in these places. For the sake of me I can't understand why they don't make them bigger.

She left. Or did she? He didn't think she ever returned, but he couldn't say for sure. For all he knew, the girl who sat down on the chair a few seconds later was the same girl. Perhaps she didn't look the same, but he couldn't really tell. Not by her looks, not by her voice, not by her choice of conversation.

He rose steadily. Strange, he would've thought he would've become drunk by now. There was a buzz in his ear or in his brain. Probably the loud music, the screaming into each other's ears, but he couldn't say for certain. It seemed... different, somehow, in a way he was unable to quantify.

The bathrooms were crowded. He didn't seem to have any problems getting through, though, to relieve his pent up bladder. It could, of course, just be his imagination, pure wishful thinking. For all he knew he could be standing by the bar, pissing on the expensive, filthy carpet. The laughter was hard and wild at the same time. It both disturbed and excited him.

The room was red, shattered by red. Chairs, tables carpet, walls. The designer was obsessed by shades of red. Red light gave the mahogany bar, the shining mirrors and tools and glasses and bottles a rainbow shade of gray.

The... Buzz was calling his name. The Rose was calling his name, showing her thorns. He froze, looking up, squinting his eyes, looking at the other side of the smoke and haze filled room... and there she was.

There she walked, gliding between the other, transparent ghosts. Her feet touched the floor with her every step, but still it seemed as if she was floating above it. The wings protruding from her shoulder blades were black, shattered in red and fire. And her face was a marble white. The yellow mix shining like tears flowing down her cheeks. The buzz filling his ears silent, like thunder. In her hand she had a knife. An ebony shaft, an ivory blade, pointing to the floor, the red carpet, tearing it up like paper.

And he had a hard time breathing. And he felt the blade cut into his skin. And he had a hard time breathing.

And then he woke up, and he was home in his bed, and his bed was a pool of sweat and body waste. Her dark eyes shone in the air in the bright, bright-lit room and he SCREEEEEEEEAMED.

He looked around. There was no one here, no one there. As he jumped out of bed, standing on the cold floor shaking. Autumn winds howled outside. He fought his way to the bathroom, on shaky feet, opened doors with shaky hands. He placed himself straight in the way of the heat, foaming-like air from the wall heater. There was no heat. He could just as well be standing on a pile of ice.

Suddenly there was light outside. It had been dark a minute ago, hadn't it?

It was hot, a hot summer morning. He whimpered as he looked at himself in the mirror, the wild wide eyes, and the unhealthy complexion. How silly of him. Of course it was light outside. It was summer. The sun was about to rise, goddammit. HOW FUCKING SILLY OF HIM.

And he could smell her scent in the very air.

---

*I'm walking up the stairs. There is someone following me. I'm somewhere in the office building. The stairs are running along the wall up and down. I'm standing by the banister, looking up, looking down the center, infinitely far up, infinitely far down. There is the sound of the elevator, approaching no closer, the buzz of talk among the employees, the sound of the many computers.*

*Jointed, disparate images come to me, jagged hard-edged flashes of reality.*

*The hose of the fire hose, sticking out of the wall outlet. The elevator moving up and down, occasionally passing my floor, but never stopping there. Its passing leaves a brief light, then nothing. There is light on my floor, but it isn't illuminating anything. There is this big meeting coming up. I should come up with something. Anything. It has never been any problem for me before. Now my enemies are moving in for the kill, and I'm frozen on the spot, awaiting their move with passive indifference. My defenses clumsy, ineffective, unequal to the task.*

*I see the woman. She's moving down the stairs now, away from me, but her way of moving, her floating, unnerving steps continue to haunt me. She's holding one hand on the banister, floating down, down, down. I can see her feet well above the stairs. I can't see her face. Her body is usually visible to me, though, as it is gliding in and out of the shadows, and as it is hidden by the stairs presently above her. The movements are like clockwork. Now I see her, now I don't, as she's gliding towards the ground far below.*

*I can hear her voice. A whisper in the wind, a thunder in my ears.*

*“I dreamt that I was falling. Not through space, but through time”.*

*Or is the voice really my own?*

*See her, don't see her, see her, don't see her, see her, don't see her, don't see her, don't see her...*

*Suddenly I don't see her. Not until moving my attention several floors above. She couldn't have gotten there without me having discovered her. But she has.*

*She's moving upwards, towards me. And I can see her face. She's smiling at me. I can see the skeleton, the framework of her features, and she's smiling sweetly, enticing me to be calm, to be accepting of her gifts. A bony hand is emerging from her cloak. Its claws are clutching the blood red dagger. I can see Henderson, cheering her on, a passing ghost, vanishing in the shadows. But she isn't disappearing. She's turning more solid, ever more so, as she's closing in on me. Just one floor more now. And then she's walking the last few stairs. And as she's emerging from the stairway, she's smiling sweetly to me, and is raising her knife, her sharp scythe above her head.*

*And then...*

*And then the lights*

*And then the lights are out.*

*And I can't see anything, but I can hear, hear the whispers of her cloak as she's moving, moving closer, hear my own, ragged breathing, as I'm standing still, frozen in my path.*

=====

The fog is lifting. The velvet curtains are torn, shattered on the floor.

It's Time. Time for everything to finally be explained and understood. No doubt will remain, no stone be unturned.

The air stinks of exhaust fumes, of bad breath and rot. I don't think I've ever beheld a better dressed, better smelling bunch of rats in my life.

I can see Henderson clearly. He sits on the opposite end of the long conference table. He's very smug and cocky and confident, even if he's quite good at hiding it. This is just a minor meeting, a preparation. We're gathered, symbolically, in his office.

The mood is tense... and full of anticipation. A smell of blood is more than lingering in the air.

The windows are open, doing nothing to improve upon the foul air.

– We're a modern company. Henderson stands rigid as he's making his case. – But we still have remains of the older, geriatric structure. To further improve our profit we must ever strive to improve ourselves. There's no time for rest in this business, nothing to gain for those who want to rest on old laurels...

The room is empty. I've taken a stroll back in, to look at the battlefield. It's unnecessary, really. You don't need a crystal ball to realize the obvious. It went badly. Henderson acted very efficient, very modern, very clever. He did say enough, without saying too much. There were times when one could be tempted to suspect he was inspired by a higher power. That piece of stinking garbage.

Something on his extensive bookshelves is attracting my attention, a glimmer, a...

It's a blade, a knife, with a hand-cut pattern he claims he bought on his trip to Africa last year. He's talking incessantly about that trip, as if immortal truths appeared to him while he was living in a village hut for nine months.

I'm pocketing the knife. It slides comfortably in place hidden behind my wallet. Let him wonder who took it, let him suspect all the people walking out and in here today, including the cleaning crew.

Let him sweat.

The cold breeze on the roof is refreshing me. There's no sense of vertigo, as I look down on the street far below, as I turn and she's standing just a few feet away, looking at me with her auburn eyes flashing in red.

– You know what you have to do, she says. – There's no other choice, you know that.

As I stare at her, as I learn the true meaning of the old expression and reality of «a cold trickle down the spine», she turns and walks away, and is fading to nothing as I watch.

Rachel is curled in the chair, lightly dressed, her drowsy, auburn eyes are flashing in red. I'm stretched out on the floor below her.

– I *loved* that, she says huskily.

I can see her dripping wet cunt, her stiff nipples under the thin fabric of the t-shirt. I can feel my sticky wet, drowned dick between my legs.

The heat from the fireplace is heating up the room in ever-stronger waves of air. I can see them as veins, as blood running through the body. I can hear the blowing outside. It's a sharp, howling sound, cutting deep.

– You must do something, she says in a lovely, persuasive voice. – You must make a decisive choice, take control over your life.

– I'm so glad I met you, I tell her, kissing her foot. – You've made me see life in completely new and different and interesting ways.

She's laughing softly.

– It's mutual, she says pleased, with a momentarily glimpse of fear, soon forgotten. – I dream at night, I dream at day. I... I dream that I'm *falling*... not through space, but through time. I can't seem to remember why, but the images are so vivid, so powerful that they're keeping me awake all night. I paint, I strive and I can't escape it, as if I'm its slave, the slave of Time.

And I can hear the curtains falling, and the curtains are sharp knives, cutting every vein in the body.

– You know, I've never been able to paint, I say. – I've done a lot of other stuff occasionally, even if that, too, never turned out to be anything. But drawing and painting and sculpturing, that has ever been off my province.

– Come, she says, jumping out of the chair, grabbing my hand.

We walk through her home galleria, back and forth, back and forth. Her images have a form of extreme realism that is very... very...

There's one image of an elevator, painted in shadow red. A shadowy figure is walking up the stairs on its right side, seen from some obscure point, and far below, one can glimpse another shadowy figure, walking down the stairs.

There's a woman falling. Another painting, the same scene, painted from above. On a road, a twilight night, a car is driving by. A woman is floating in the air. Her face is a mix of extremes, radiant skin and a dry husk where the skeleton is clearly visible.

– Disturbing, aren't they? she whispers half aloud. – Some mystics claim that death is a metaphor for change and change can indeed be frightening.

– Yes, I say in a voice seemingly reaching me from far away.

– Why don't we go away somewhere? She kisses me hungrily, longingly. – Tell no one where we're going, so no one will ever disturb us? I've always wanted to do that, sailing away... into nothing...

– I know about such a place, I tell her. – No one will ever reach us there.

And her face is fading from view, as dew before the morning sun.

She's not there as I'm taking my night walk. She's not there as I go to bed or when I awake the next morning.

Her house is empty. There's only the row of paintings. I'm fully clothed and the bed is made, as if I've never slept there at all. In one of the paintings I see myself standing before the row of paintings, looking quite unresolved.

I hear the rattling of keys, and the sound of someone opening the door, and there she is, fully clothed, with two full plastic bag of food in her hands. And here I am, cobwebs in my eyes, standing naked in front of her. It doesn't really bother me though, not when drowning in the deep of her smile.

– I bought some tasty morning food, she says brightly. – We should fatten you up a bit. You've been looking more and more skinny lately.

Fast and effectively she's putting some of the food inside the refrigerator and leaving some on the counter.

A light, a flash is lit in her eyes. She walks around me, appraisingly, standing by the window a minute

– Yes, this has distinct possibilities... Hold that pose. Don't you dare move, not even an inch.

She made food then, made big, juicy sandwiches that made him feel upright, made him feel alive. He was allowed to eat while she sat down with a canvas and a brush and started on the painting. He could see it before his inner eye, his slightly lost expression, standing there looking at the paintings. She drew him with his clothes on, even if her teasing smile told him that she rather wouldn't. He stood still all the time. Except for moving his arm and chewing his food (his delicious sandwiches) he stood there most of the day. He heard the church bells ring. He saw the sun move across the sky. And in the layers of her art he could sense it all.

– You can take a pee now, she said mercifully. – When I think of it, you may dress. I've got you burned into my memory...

He did pee and he stood on the john a long time as the hot fluid ran from his loins.

She met him in the outer hall, as he had dressed and was ready to leave.

– Are you ready? he asked.

She took a look at herself, at them in the mirror, the costume of Death and The Maiden. They hadn't put on the masks yet, but they could sense them, as if they had already become a part of their faces.

She turned slowly towards him, with her arms lifted above the head.

– What do you think? she asked.

He swallowed hard. She laughed her thrilling laughter.

– I love costume parties, she exclaimed. – Everybody gets a chance to be exactly as they are.

She turned and embraced him.

– You may keep your key, she said, kissing him on the lips. – I've got a spare.

They took a cab to the festivities, to obscure their identities and put on the masks, as the car turned around the last corner before the intended stop, the main entrance of the rather large building ahead.

Everybody gathered here tonight, everybody being something. Both worried and expectant they smelled rust and blood. As ever there were a considerable number of onlookers and hopeful groupies outside, forming an honor guard to those allowed inside.

He looked at her, his companion, as everybody looked at her, at her face of light and shadow, half hidden by the mask, through the slits in the ivory covering his own face.

Lights blinked, camera flashes and other flares, and most of those present excelled in the attention. He saw Henderson almost immediately. The man moved around with a new confidence, almost bloated on it, in fact. He acted as if his future mark already was hit. Introduction was fast, formal. Rachel smiled sweetly to him, as they shook hands. Henderson smiled a bit insecure in return.

He danced with Mary Anne, but kept his eyes on Rachel dancing with Henderson. She said something to him, said more to him, and he lost his confident demeanor. It was palpable, almost visible in the very air surrounding him.

Mary Anne and Rachel were dressed exactly alike. They behaved alike and Henderson grew a deep furrow in his forehead as the evening progressed, as he could no longer tell which was which, as he lost his footing and no longer stood on solid ground.

He kissed Rachel as Mary Anne was dancing with Henderson... Or was that the other way around? He enjoyed himself as the evening progressed, as the solid walls crumbled and he crumbled, and he put himself back together.

The day after they were driving to the cabin by the coast. He sat behind the wheel. She sketched, did simple sketches on her pad.

– It's so beautiful. She stepped out of the car, embracing the place with her arms. – No one will find us here.

There was no sound of machines, only of the wind and wild, wild nature. It whispered to him. All of it whispered to him. Jointed, disparate impressions of sound and fury came to him. He could see the row of paintings clearer than ever.

Her sketches were about the road, the cabin. He wondered if she had drawn the cabin before she had seen it.

They walked inside.

– You're using gloves in this heat, she said teasingly.

– Sorry, it's my eczema acting up again, he said apologetically.

– I can't believe you, she said exasperated. – You're apologizing on behalf of your eczema...

She kissed him on the mouth, sultry, hungrily.

The cabin was huge, even excessively so. Her eyes widened. The furniture wasn't cheap, far from it.

– I'm not so sure this is you, she told him. – How many times have you been here?

– Counting this? One...

He slapped her on her butt.

– I'm sure we can re-arrange something...

He told her, kissing her in the neck. Her stiffened body softened in his grip. She leaned on him, warm and eager.

She moved away from him, walked to a chair, pausing a bit, lifting an eyebrow, before kicking the chair hard straight across the room.

– Not much to work with here... but we'll manage, won't we darlin'?

– We will indeed, he said, swallowing hard.

They started moving furniture around in earnest.

This chair, she said conspiratorially. – I gotta tell ya... it just plain hopeless.

– Straight on the fire it goes.

He took it from her. The fireplace had already burned for several minutes, making the cabin even hotter, making them even hotter. Her eyes really widened this time. He smashed the chair on the floor, smashing it to pieces and threw them in the fire.

The night, the darkness came abruptly, unexpected. They discontinued their re-arranging of furniture without really having started it. She turned on one light, the one above the bed, illuminating it, illuminating herself. He saw shadow and he saw fire and he saw the wall behind her. She sat down on the bed displaying herself for him. He turned off the single light. There was shadow, there was fire. Sweat penetrated his clothes, making him queasy. The sun rose, the sun set. He touched her body, the dry and warm skin. She penetrated him, the deeper he incursed her. And afterwards the dreams wouldn't stop. He had almost got used to them by now, like memories of friends and enemies from a distant past.

– I love your leather hands on my body, she whispered in his ears.

The deep and glowing red floated off and on her body. Her grin was hardly a grin, since he could only glimpse the skin. The light in her eyes was truly fire and not a figment of his imagination.

The fireplace didn't burn anymore. He could no longer be certain that it ever had. Absolute darkness surrounded them, as if it wasn't summer at all, but the blackest winter night. He could sense her in the darkness, but not see her. The smell of smoke lingered in his nostrils, but even if his imagination didn't play tricks on him, it might just as well be smoke from the neighbor cabin several hundred meters away. Smoke could linger in the air for a very long time. He knew that.

Her head was resting on his chest.

– «I dreamt that I was falling», he heard her mumble, heard her hum her song.

He heard the silent rain outside, in the dry summer night.

He sensed her close, even if his eyes saw nothing but soft unidentifiable shapes. Her face, as she smiled, showed nothing but blackened, charcoal features and hardly that, shifting swiftly in impenetrable night.

– This was only a test anyway, he said aloud to the empty air.

– Oh, how so? she inquired sheepishly.

– You know the white, old house by the garage? She nodded. He imagined she did anyway. – I've wanted to do something about it for years.

– So you do own it, she (probably) nodded. – I've been wondering about that.

– It's almost like a revenant in itself, he shuddered, grinning, – but the furniture and most of the interior is still in pretty good shape.

– So you used your cabin as a proverbial spontaneous try-out arena then? Effective perhaps, but potentially very costly...

– I have a confession to make, he told her, truly grinning now.

– I love confessions, she whispered. – It's good for the soul. Do go on.

– This isn't my cabin, he admitted willingly.

– Not your cabin...

– Both the cabin and the car belong to Henderson.

He heard her breathing in the dark, sensed her expectation, as it dawned on her.

– And he didn't mind you borrowing it...

– I think he definitely would have... if he had known about it.

She burst out in laughter. He imagined he heard the echo of her laughter long gone. She crawled up on him, as she started touching and kissing him.

– I love you, she mumbled. – I will do anything for you.

– I know that, he said.

– The rubber. She rose, sat with her ass on his chest. – Let's take it off.

– I would rather not, he said, kissing her hard, kissing her softly. – Not yet.

*Not yet.* He heard her whisper in the shadows.

Dawn, the color of rust and blood.

He awoke from the dream, drenched in sweat. He felt it grow worse every night, until he certainly would wake up screaming. As he sat down by the kitchen table, eating breakfast, he hummed a melody, with words he knew too well. And the morning sun didn't penetrate the big windows. He heard the echo of her song. Every shadow grew from the corners, to encompass the room. And it was night again. He passed the old derelict house, opened the gate and looked back.

Mary Anne entered his office, leaving a pile of papers, a pile of ashes. He sat there in the dark, unmoving like a statue, as the sun moved across the sky.

Finally moving he combed his fingers through the hair. The trees outside... they were dark. He could sense the wind, but the trees didn't move. Nothing moved around him, not even he. The still world refused to move on. He walked through the building, the cheap set pieces of modern human life. He didn't really walk, but sort of floated through it all, affecting nothing. Henderson walked around with a widening grin these days, one that threatened to break his face in two. He waved cheerfully to Henderson, seeing how the grin seemed to shrink a bit, before the man's face thankfully disappeared from view.

He met Rachel outside. She greeted him with a sultry kiss and they went on their way. A café, just a few blocks away, was filled with people.

– I've always felt... strange in my creative mood, she said hesitatingly. – When painting there's both elation... and fear.

– You're going to your depths, meeting yourself, he said lightly, grinning to her. – It's only natural to feel some discomfort.

She gave him a grateful smile.

– You know what I've heard? she smiled wickedly. – That it was the Storytellers, the Artists who originally created the world, and that, to this day, some of that Power remains. All creative people can sometimes make real what they create.

He looked teasingly at her.

– I feel it, you know, she insisted. – It's like I'm drawing something from another world, giving it form and substance.

And he actually felt a chill, a gnawing at his bones. He laughed.

He kissed her.

The food finally arrived. He looked at his watch. Just a few minutes. It seemed like they had been sitting here forever. His sense of time had really gone whacko lately.

They drank coffee. They ate their sandwiches. The sandwiches tasted like paper. Perhaps.... it was... paper?

– Yes, I know, she said, noticing his slight headshake. – Paper, right?

– Right, he nodded.

They sat there in relative silence for a few minutes. They did spoke, but they talked more with the body and their eyes then with words.

– What if it is paper? He said good humored. – Such a venture would certainly save them a fortune in expenses. I mean, it looks like meat, it smells like meat. One can say it even tastes like meat, to a certain degree, anyway, but who can really tell these days...

– I love your sense of humor, she giggled.

Fog hung heavy in the street outside. For once it didn't matter. He had no problem breathing.

– You're smiling, she said.

– I've always loved the city, he said. – The countryside has always been... spooky to me.

– I love the countryside, she said. – I would want to stay there forever. We met there, in the twilight, remember? Not a bad win for the countryside, huh?

– I remember, he said. – Believe me, I do.

Everything was close, so close now. He could almost reach out and touch it.

– Let's go home, she said.

– Yes, let us, he said, nodding.

They walked to the car. The huge, multi level garage facility felt gray and cold. He observed her as she walked by his side, as she shifted and faded, faded in and out, saw her face... turning bony and back. Sometimes as he looked down he couldn't see his own feet. He could feel himself walk, but there was nothing there. Sweat broke through his skin in waves and he nearly panicked until he was once more visible to his own eye.

They seated themselves. He turned the key and the car started with a roar. Wheels turned and he drove slowly and carefully out of the garage complex, the car engine humming and growling.

Could an engine hum or growl? Could a construct feel pain, sense life move within itself? He wrinkled his forehead a bit, before shaking his head, dismissing the thought.

The road, the car itself dissolved, giving way to forest. Trees all around them. They walked on the trail until darkness descended around them. They sat by the fire, grilling hot dogs. It was all so prosaic that it made sweat break out all over his body.

It was peaceful here, it truly was, but he yet felt wasps and ants roaming his stomach and innards. The fire was a beast reaching for him, clawing at his soft belly skin.

– This is such a thrill, isn't it? she said.

– Yes, he replied.

– We must do this far more often. She bent forward, leaning her tight, muscular body into his. – I want to come and visit you every night.

– I want that, too, he said.

– Oh, you're such a sweetie... She tempted him, letting him see, as she stretched her body, the arms high above her head. – You know exactly what to say to please a girl.

– Well, be that as it may. He looked at his watch. – It is time to head back. As you well know, it's a big day tomorrow.

She was disappointed, even though she hid it well. She was hurt. He knew that.

And he couldn't say he felt bad about it.

They left the woods well before the sky started to brighten in the northeast. It was actually a few minutes left until the night was at its darkest, too. It didn't get very dark in summer, but on a cloudy night like this, it wasn't so bad. They had some trouble walking the narrow forest trail back. She stumbled and he had to catch her and she laughed softly. They met no one, they saw no one. The night was silent, the wind itself was still. They crossed the highway at a spot where they needed to actually walk on it as little as possible. But it was still a surprise that no cars were passing them. Cars used to pass him all the time during the nightly walks, irritating him to no end. Now there were none.

Awfully convenient, he'd say. So convenient, in fact, that he turned seriously scared.

They walked through the red gate. Walked upwards for a while after that. Around a turn and the barn appeared on their right. Everything was turned around. Left was right. In was out. And he didn't feel too comfortable.

They walked through the green gate and behind it was the old, white house.

– You should really do something about it, she said, shaking her head.

– I have had plans for quite a while now, he said. – But I have been busy.

– Busy, my ass, she grinned.

She ran up the stairs, past the small, but growing tree (growing in the middle of the stairs), and into the house. He followed her inside. The air looked misty to him, as if unreal. Figures started forming in the mist. The walls reflecting the non-existing light could just as well be numerous dots of fog floating around in the humid darkness. He caught up with her in the living room. Everything caught up. She stood there, looking around, shaking her head.

– Christ, she exclaimed. – This is even worse than I thought. What's with the plastic on the floor?

– I recently made one, desperate attempt to keep the water from spreading to the entire place, he explained. – It didn't work.

– No shit, she whistled.

He walked closer to her, kept walking until he stood close by her.

The room seemed to... shift. The room stayed the same, but different. Everything shifted and turned calm and centered.

– So what did you want me to see here, she smiled teasingly to him, – beside a lot of water-stained furniture?

– I had no interest in you coming here, he said. – You came here of your own free will.

She had just started to shake her head when he stabbed her with the knife. It penetrated her skin just below the ribs. Pain riddled her face and she looked incredulously and shocked at him. He twisted the blade, tore her up inside. She attempted to grab the blade, grab him, but her strength was already waning. With a strength he wouldn't have believed possible he held her up after the hair, as he pulled out the knife and stabbed her again and again. There was a strange sound every time the sharp metal slid in and out of the mangled flesh. He pulled out the blade a final time and let go. She fell and hit the floor with a thud, like a dead sack of sand. There was still life in her eyes, but it died fast. Blood flowed from her open mouth and if she attempted to say anything it got lost in a waterfall of bubbles and thick fluid. She lay still. Empty eyes stared at the roof. Round, polished glass, nothing more.

He wrapped the body, the body of dead meat in the plastic. After it was completely wrapped up he undressed completely and wrapped his clothes up in another roll of plastic. He investigated his own body. There were a few stains here and there, but nothing a good shower wouldn't take care of. He wrapped the body one more time. Then he lifted it up and carried it to the car, both the heaps of plastic. He opened the trunk and threw the big sack of plastic in there. The house, the new house was quiet. There were no sounds he couldn't identify. The shower was done in ten minutes. He rubbed the skin a bit more than usual and that was all.

Lighting the fireplace was a true pleasure. He burned the smaller heap of plastic first. As the flames rose he sensed the heat return to his body. The heated, steamy shower had made him cold. He threw the diary on the fire, tore it apart and burned it page by page. Then he walked the walk, talked the silent talk through the night to her house, where he broke the paintings, tore them apart, burned them piece-by-piece. Everything happened so fast, so efficient. He had every reason to be proud.

Morning rose fast. The city surrounded him. His building surrounded him, in its comforting embrace.

There was a tense mood around the boardroom table. It shouldn't be, really. Everything was over and done, as far as Henderson and his cohorts were concerned.

– Before we begin today's meeting, I would like to change the order a bit.

He opened his map while looking at Henderson. A nervous excitement and fear rose in the room.

– Isn't that a bit late? Henderson spoke up instantly.

– Relax, he said. – I just want to add a bit, to slightly broaden the perspective. Will those in favor say «aye»?

– «Aye», most of them said without really thinking it through.

And that was it, easy as pie.

Henderson looked shattered already. He knew he had lost. And he crumbled to dust before everybody's eyes.

– Will someone tell me how much we're earning with the planned lay-offs?

There were no takers.

– Well, will someone tell me how much we're earning by *not* implementing the layoffs?

– I can, sir. Mary Anne rose from her chair. – I have the numbers right here.

There wasn't really any contest after that. The bloated balloon had blown.

He kissed Mary Anne hungrily on the mouth afterwards, as they were alone in the quiet room. The city outside was close, was below his feet. Balance had been restored.

He notices the details. He has never noticed the details before.

Down there, on the garden hedge, as he is closing the door behind him and start on his nightly walk, he is able to see a fly dancing on the leaves.

There is the garage on his right, up the slight slope. The old run-down house is on the left, the green gate just slightly beyond that. He's passing the old house, closing in on the green gate. The old barn is in the north, on the way east. There is a slight chill in the air. He's ignoring it, moving on.

He's opening the gate, walking through, closing it behind him. Reassuring thoughts are floating through the upper levels of his brain. A stray thought, and he's imagining the well-known figure in the living room window in the old house, staring at him with a direct, burning look. He's confident, as he's walking further east, that there is no one there.

But he doesn't turn his head and look.