

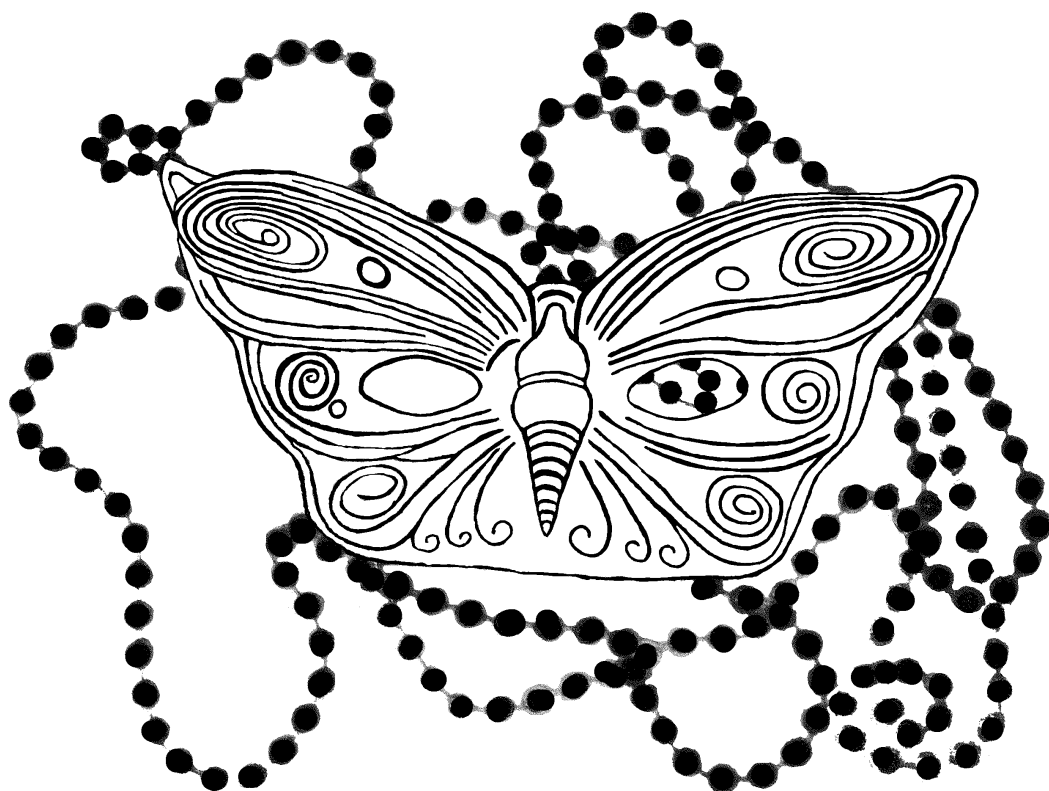
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Emerald Tales

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Carnivale

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Emerald Tales

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Saint Jake of the Funhouse

by

Douglas Kolacki

The house was alive. The front porch planks slid back and forth when Edward mounted them. The stairs leading inside rocked up and down, air jets blew his bangs into his eyes, and the whole place careened and rollicked as if trying to shake loose from its foundations. He clutched his hardcover book with both hands, sweated, cursed, struggled to keep his balance.

He *could* be out on the midway, riding the Tilt-A-Whirl or buying pink cotton candy—he'd always loved that sweet grittiness in his mouth—but not the shooting gallery. No, never the popping rifles of the shooting gallery! He refused to handle even a replica of something made to kill. He flared with anger, and in so doing, lost his balance and clattered to the floor. The book flew from his hands with a flapping of pages.

Edward sprang up, recovered the book, fell again. Fortunately, he landed on his left side, not his right where the amulet weighed heavy in his slacks pocket. Musn't fall on that. It weighed down the right side of his trousers, as if his pocket was full of gold coins.

Now a hallway of full-length mirrors confronted him; mirrors on the walls, on the ceiling, up in the corners. Each mirror showed a different hilarious distortion of himself: stretched tall or squashed nearly flat, tottering, finger up his nose or mugging, all jumping and dancing independently of each other and his own movements. A giggle escaped him—no, don't look! Too late; he snorted and guffawed.

Stop that!

He ran through the zig-zagging hall of mirrors until flashing yellow and blue lights dazzled him, and an older couple came shrieking up behind. He stood to one side and let them pass. Eyes watering, he shifted his book to his left hand and fumbled in his pocket for the amulet—cut glass fused with gold, the size and shape of a golf ball but three times as heavy. He held it up, studied it and he knew: Second floor.



In a room hammered together from raw planks, lit by two bulbs screwed into a ceiling fixture, Edward found the man he was seeking.

Jake—everyone knew his name—sat in a worn easy chair in the middle of the room. No other furnishings save a chest-high refrigerator sitting on a corner table, plugged into a wall outlet, and buzzing too loudly. The chugging of the house machinery, the faint laughter and shrieks of the patrons sounded somewhere far below.

"Ed?" Jake sat with crossed legs and did not move except for his eyes, which sized up his guest. His eyes were larger than most people's, just out of proportion to the rest of his face.

"Well, well! Quite a surprise! How long has it been?"

Edward supposed it didn't matter, for Jake appeared no different: no pudge around the waist, no graying or thinning of his blue-black hair. Only a face stubbled with the beard he hadn't had in Junior High, when the two shot paper wads with rubber bands in Mrs. Olson's English class. Edward allowed himself a grin. "Seventh grade."

That was before Jake, or anyone, knew of the talent forming inside of him. It was years after they parted that Edward started hearing the stories: gardens sprouting up where Jake had walked, people's cancers slipping into remission, atrophied legs restoring, dead eyes lighting up again.

But could Jake read minds? If so, Edward was done for. He was ready for whatever was coming. But those too-large green eyes did not change; no flare of offense or betrayal.

All right, then, Edward's mission was clear. If he failed today, he could not run the risk of the wrong people recruiting Jake. Many had tried; some had nearly succeeded. No time to lose, for people were being oppressed even now.

"How'd you ever find me, Edward?" Jake sounded genuinely curious.

"Well... it's just..."

Edward trailed off. He had racked his mind for every possible objection this man might raise, meeting and overcoming each one. Now it all fled and left him tongue-tied. Silently, he cursed. "You just run this place now?"

"Yes."

"All of it? No machinery or anything?"

Jake uncrossed his legs. He always paused a moment before answering, as if thinking every question through, however simple. "Well yes, there's machinery, but no gas or power needed."

"Just the funhouse, or the whole carnival?"

"Ah. Well. Just the funhouse, that spinning tunnel and the rocking porch, air jets and the flashing displays. Plus a few goodies I added myself—how'd you like those mirrors?" His eyes twinkled. "People get their money's worth, and it's a useful distraction for me. Rather like doodling."

A moment later, he said, "Ed, it's not polite to gawk like that."

"But you're like Christ!"

Jake shook his head. "There was only one Christ."

"Gandhi dedicated his life to saving the world!"

"There was only one Gandhi."

"Jake, look—remember *this*—?" And he thrust out his book.

Jake reached out and took it, balancing it in one hand. Gravity was nothing to him, of course; he could have just suspended it in the air if he wished. But generally, he used his hands like other people, so as not to freak them out.

"You have this?" He rustled through the pages. "Well. Good for you. 'Saints Among Men, revised 2010 edition,'" he read the title aloud.

"Yes, yes, isn't that you?"

Jake sighed, placed the book on his lap. "People keep showing me this, but I have my own copy. First edition 1869 featuring Abraham Lincoln, updated ten years later, now a new edition every January, I know all about it. Some of it's pretty amazing."

Edward pointed. "How about Russell Smythline? He's on page—"

"Two-twenty-five. Sorry." Jake flipped there.

Edward shivered; again he wondered if Jake could see into his thoughts. Or did he just know that page by heart?

"He came out of nowhere," Jake said, "in the Dark Ages. He helped the Irish monks copy every book they could get ahold of, religious, secular, anything. They preserved civilization."

"They *saved* civilization!"

"And Yasuo Nakamura, he brokered peace between warring clans all around Honshu. Another mystery man. A lot of them are like this, aren't they? Not much known about their backgrounds."

"Yes, like you!"

Jake rolled his eyes. "People know where I was born, Ed. You went to school with me." He clapped the book shut and held it out.

Edward batted the book from Jake's hand. It clunked to the planks, where it lay open and face-down.

Jake sighed and ran a hand over his hair. "Ed. One thing about this book, it's written like a blamed motivational pamphlet, all flowery and starry-eyed. Did you ever think maybe saving the world wasn't quite so simple?"

Yes, *yes*, he *had!* But when someone could make such a difference, an incredible, unbelievable difference for all mankind, he couldn't just do nothing! The injustice raging across the world, the innocents suffering while Jake just idled his time away in a damned funhouse! Edward fingered the amulet in his pocket.

Jake continued. "You must have heard about it when I first started doing all my good deeds. People came out of the woodwork, smooth-talking people who sat me down and explained what I needed to do. Get inside the president's head, appoint the right Supreme Court justices, pass this bill or that. But... all right," he straightened up and sat rigid on the edge of his chair. "I'll tell you. You want an oppressed people? How about the Chinese? The coup—remember how it followed a new period of openness from the government, like the Russian *glasnost* in the Eighties?"

Edward nodded. And then the revolution, the assassination and the overthrow, then another uprising, and now no less than six civil wars burned like wildfires all over that vast nation. At least Taiwan, out away from the mainland, was safe—for now.

"It all went so wonderfully at first," said Jake. "I listened to everyone's good intentions, thought long and hard about what they'd said. Then I looked at China and thought that would be

a good place to start. World's largest population, and one of the cruelest dictatorships—remember Tianamen Square? So I thought, I'll just give that dictator's mind the slightest nudge, instill love, joy, peace, goodness, kindness, faithfulness and all the rest. He'd never know how it had happened."

Edward, like everyone, knew the rest: the prisons emptied, the political prisoners freed, borders opened, the whole Bamboo Curtain toppling like Jericho's walls.

Jake was still speaking, quietly now: "—spit on me when I told them I wasn't going to interfere anymore with politics. Called me a devil."

Edward's shoulders slumped. How was he ever going to convince him? Feeling so brave just five minutes ago, armed with his resolve and the book that had inspired him his entire adult life, now deflated, impotent. He knew this and he hated it and struggled against it, because he knew what he'd be forced to do then.

"But..." He croaked it out. It sounded pathetic, pleading. What would Lincoln, Gandhi, Smythline and the rest think of him now? "So much *need*..."

"Ed. You haven't been listening. Magic of this magnitude is a double-sided coin. You can do a lot of good, yes, but the slightest misstep can do no end of harm. It makes sense that people say God has infinite wisdom as well as infinite power, and that he's perfect. You'd have to be, to handle it all without wrecking everything. If I so much as think one careless thought or look at something the wrong way... you have no idea. No one walks on eggshells like I do."

"But you're wasting it all on a carnival!"

"I don't feel that way. You heard the people laughing, troubles forgotten at least for now. What's wrong with that? Here I bring some small measure of joy to people, a shot of well-being. Their lives don't get upended, no big shake-ups. They just go on as before, but a little happier. Best that way."

Edward groped for words, found none. It didn't matter. Jake's mind was made up and that was that—for *now*, he reminded himself. What if other smooth-talkers, evil ones who invaded other nations or suicide-bombed airports, came around to poison his all-too-human mind? Edward had prayed he wouldn't have to do this, but—he reached into his pocket, grabbed the amulet, and pulled it out.

Jake remained still. "People have brought those before, Ed. I don't like to make it known, but I *can* read minds."

For just an instant, Edward flew into a panic, thrust the amulet at his friend.

Jake stood up. "Do you know how those work?"

But Edward was sending out his thoughts, to activate it: *spark, spark, spark*.

White flames erupted around the room. Edward had known to expect this. They made no sound, no crackling or fwoosh; he'd expected this, too. Jake's voice rang clearly through the flashes of white.

"Ed, Ed! It doesn't kill you, it breaks down all the barriers around you, what we call space and time, and there's no telling where you could end up—"

The walls seemed to fly apart, the two ceiling lights exploding into lightning bursts, and in the middle of it all stood Jake. He wavered, out of focus, disappearing. Then Edward realized—nothing was happening to Jake. It wasn't touching him. It was Edward who was starting to vanish.

Jake was making some kind of motion with his hands. Edward shouted and let go of the amulet, but he knew it was too late. New synapses fired in his brain, and then he was gone.



Jake stood alone in his attic chamber. Beneath him, the tunnel spun, the mirrors mugged at giggling patrons, the air jets blew and the floors tilted and rocked. The white flames had vanished, along with the amulet—once used, it burned down to white ash now settling around the floor. Only the book remained, still lying face-down.

Jake dropped back into his seat, shut his eyes, and concentrated. He could not control where or when Edward had landed, but he could probe back and detect it. After a minute, he opened his eyes. He got up again, stooped down, picked up the book and blew the ash from it, then flipped through until he found a chapter that had not been there before. Jake read it.

Venice? Really? He raised an eyebrow. All the way to Italy, Ed had gone. He ended up in Jerusalem, where he founded an order that cared for pilgrims. He and his men considered the sick as their masters and made no distinction with regard to faith. Jake felt a swell of pride. Good old Ed!

As for Smythline, he'd been blown further north, to Ireland. Nakamura was fortunate, by sheer coincidence, to land right back in his homeland, though on a different island. There had been two others besides. In the moments before they vanished into the white flashes, Jake had managed to grant them all an advantage, pass on a speck of his talents. To Ed, he'd given a healing touch; to Nakamura, a voice to calm warring peoples; to still another, the ability to transform deserts into fruitful orchards—enough to do some good, but without Jake's own potential for catastrophe. To all, he granted what he hoped was exceptional wisdom and decreed that they would never want for anything.

Five more amulets existed in various parts of the world; this Jake knew. He did not know who had fashioned them, when, or why. But if more should find their way to him, then maybe, with enough people in enough places and times...

Jake sank back into his chair, smiled, and allowed himself to relax. Below him, patrons flocked to the funhouse, braved the tunnel, and laughed at the enchanted mirrors, then tumbled down the exit ramp and went on their way. And Jake lived in his upper chamber and was happy.

END

New Profession

by
Guy Belleranti

Eighty year old Glen
was not happy when
his wife, Beth, said that he should retire.
Glen didn't want to quit
his carnival gig
of walking on the high tightrope wire.

But Beth did declare,
"It gives me a scare
that your nickname is the Death Defier.
If you want to work
please do something else-
find a job on the ground, not up higher."

Glen took a deep breath...
he did love his Beth.
He would go to his boss and inquire.
Old Glen was in luck.
He got work down low
as the carnival man who eats fire.

Offbeat

by

Lauren McBride

“Great costume,” she shouted while twirling up beside me in time with the samba music.

“Thanks,” I answered in my best Earth accent: Brazilian speech, I think. The language was new to me, but if costume meant covering, then she liked my look. Smiling, I asked, “Want to dance?”

It was the music that had called to my ship from the blue planet as we hurtled past on our first cargo run in this sector. Ship’s sensors had detected the irresistible, rhythmic beat that drifted out into space and touched our souls.

The crew all agreed to stop for a visit, but there hadn’t been much time to learn the planet’s languages or customs. Fortunately, in the region from where the music originated, everyone was dressed in odd coverings that hid their true forms, so we dared to transport down and walk among them.

The female beside me gyrated in time with the music, a bit like our females do before sex. We don’t usually move like that in public. But here, I did the same, guided by the driving beat.

I couldn’t help but stare. Her smooth skin, green eyes and dark hair fascinated me. Hair. We don’t have hair. Hers was the color of starless space and moved as if alive. I reached out to touch it. She caressed my arm.

“I like your scales,” she said. “They feel real.”

Because they are, I thought.

She brought her face close to mine with her lips slightly apart. I assumed she was hungry. “Want to eat?” I asked.

She stopped dancing and glared at me. “No,” she replied. Her tone was sharp. Then she grabbed my hand and started swaying again. “Lets go back to my place.”

I was pleased, having never seen the inside of an Earth dwelling before. I would have stories to tell the others.

We danced together down a few streets. I nearly lost her among the crowds, but she seemed to have no trouble finding me. At last, we entered her dwelling and were alone. I felt free to touch her hair and her smooth skin.

She grabbed my hands and placed her lips on my palms. So I placed my lips on my palms in the same manner. She dropped my hands and just stared at me. With no idea what else to do, I started to dance again. The music was loud even within her dwelling.

She did not dance, but got us containers of liquid. I licked mine. She giggled and said I didn’t have to stay in character. I searched my mind, but her words had no meaning for me in this new language.

She took both our containers and set them down on a table, then pulled me down on a couch beside her. For some reason, she placed her hands on each side of my face and again brought her face close to mine with her mouth slightly open. Maybe I was supposed to hold her container so she could lick it, a sign of friendship among my people.

When I reached for her container, she jumped up and asked, “Don’t you want me, Sugar?” Then she started to remove her covering. Her skin was completely smooth underneath. I stood still, mesmerized, watching. She turned completely around for me, swaying again with the music. That’s when I realized I should leave.

“Your turn, Sugar,” she said and tugged at my scales, which of course did not come off. Poor girl. She was still screaming when I called my ship to transport me back on board.

END



me and the fair

by
josh byer

for one day

when i was fifteen years old
i worked in the dart booth

at this tiny fair
which set up shop
on the lawn
of a community center

the fat man with the darts
he had diarrhea
and needed to dash
to the can

me, i was just there
debating on whether or not
to cough up a buck
and play his game

“wanna make ten bucks?”
he said
quickly explained
how to run the booth
and took off

he was gone for four hours

me, i started to get
the hang of it

i started to work the crowd

i made five hundred dollars

when he returned, he was amazed
gave me my ten bucks

and a poster of christina applegate

him, i never saw again

christina applegate
she still does tv movies

The Hurdy Gurdy Man

By

E.Hull

This was the end of an era for Seamus and his barrel organ. A few families stood around with polite smiles that said, 'I am not really bored.' A hurdy gurdy man was once the main attraction of a carnival, and then tastes changed, so he made the barrel organ; now the rides took precedence. He pulled his woolen hat tighter over his head, nostalgic for a time when he could have worn a flamboyant costume to disguise his nature. The gray, knitted cap and a dark greatcoat left him looking ordinary.

"Hey mister, can you change the tune? That's old stuff." A fair-haired boy stood alone, looking up at him.

The child looked about ten by the reckonings of these folks. Such a child, with such an attitude, excited his sense of wonder. Seamus wanted this one. He wanted him badly, and yet fate must run its course. The bargain must be struck.

All of the others had drifted off while he adjusted the music roll on the barrel organ. The fair child stood belligerent, waiting for his demand to be met.

"It is a fine old instrument, my son. The music is not what you are used to hearing." He selected a livelier piece. He couldn't risk frightening the boy away. Damn this modern age with their perverts. The child must not think him one of those foul beasts. The very idea made him sick to his stomach with the wrongness of the thing.

The boy winced at Seamus' selection. "Is that the best you can do?"

"Did your parents teach you no manners? Is it to be all of the modern jangle and nothing of the past for you, to be sure?"

"Can you do it, or not?" The boy began to look bored.

"Is it that your folks are waiting for you, so you have none of the patience?" Seamus held his breath. This was the all-important question. Did the boy have those who cared close by?

"Nah, they are off to the pub already." The boy started to turn away.

"I can play whatever you want, but there is a price. Is it willing to pay that you are?" Seamus made a show of digging through a big box of rolls as the sun began to sink under the horizon, a blood-colored orb.

The boy hesitated, fingering deep in his pocket. "My money is for my rides."

Seamus smiled kindly at the child. "The price is a game. You find the hidden compartment under my barrel organ, and then I will play whatever you wish. Does this sound fair?"

New interest lighted the boy's face. He accepted the challenge with a swagger, darting beneath the contraption. Seamus' smile deepened while he pressed the lever to scoop up the boy,

to swallow him whole. A few necessary moments elapsed before he released another lever. A fair-haired boy with hard eyes scurried from underneath the barrel organ.

“You know who you are?” Seamus asked.

“Yes, I have all I need. I will be on my way, then.”

The changeling slinked into the crowds. Another mission accomplished, if the last Seamus would do under his present guise. Everyone had to get with the times. When the carnival dismantled on the morrow and he delivered the son of men to his king under the hollow hills, there had to be a reckoning. He needed a much more up-market approach for successful substitution. Perhaps one of those rides...? A fedora would cover his pointed ears so much better. Yes, a nice forest green color.

END



Lagniappe

by Catherine Moore

Under sweet scented crape myrtles
in putrid sewage-laden breezes,
sidewalk entrepreneurs
shouting and selling;
half-starved artists
circulate, entertaining.

Street theater of the talented
and the absurd, painted
yellow and purple
on chicken wire.

More dancing and music
than one city can hold
the crazed carnival
spills into each street.

oh, oh, Mista, Mista!
yo sur look good littl' sista
ey toss ya a doubloon
if ya show yo fille festoon

Laughter barks in every
language imaginable. Sirens
shout in the distance, revelers
continue their chant . . .

(part religious celebration,
part abandoned-conformity
part madness)

hey, hey, Mista, Mista!
o' darlin' trinket, bling bling
ya make m' heart sing
lawdy lawdy, Miss Clawdy

Then the invitations, by
clumsy youthful grins and
knowingly jaded smiles
in dark ageless quarters.
A bottomless glass
of liquid introduction
accompanies each
would-be suitor.

lawd cheré - danser, danser
Ah sookie sookie all nite
Iko, Iko, yeah come on bébé

Warm heady embraces or
fevered lovemaking, easy
finds in the purplish haze
but I wait, for a little bit more.

Farewell to Flesh

by

Lindsey Duncan

The other students of the Conservatory cheered and shouted advice as I walked to the front gate. My body hummed with the song of anticipation.

The steward handed me a heavy pouch of coins. “Enjoy your last night, Pavane,” she said.

As I stepped onto the street, the bracing air of the winter night beat against the inside of my lungs. It stung, but I inhaled deeply, savoring it. Once at the cross-street, I paused. To my left, confectioner and pastry shops that emitted a symphony of aromas. Straight ahead, the market district with its clamor of merchants and madmen and hints of places that I had never seen. To the right, the pleasure district...

My cheeks flushed. Moving on.

Tonight was to be my own private festival, a last celebration, and though I had thought through a dozen plans, none seemed right. Money was not a concern: the pouch was generous. It had been decades since anyone had returned to the Conservatory without a few coins left.

Then there were those who never returned...

I put the thought out of my mind and hurried towards the market, skipping over icy puddles with my skirts lifted. The city’s stonework loomed on either side, lumpish buildings without poetry. The city squatted on a high hill; the solid architecture channeled the wind until it seemed to croon.

I heard music emanating from a balcony. It was a familiar ballad played in an expected style by a boy a little older than I, freckle-faced, eager as he leaned towards his beloved. There was no inspiration or invention... not without a chord-dancer, and I didn’t feel one nearby. Those of us born with the ability knew each other by instinct. It was how Conservatory students were selected. It was why I’d been taken off the street as a baby.

I had to think of it that way. That I had been given seventeen years of comfortable life, and the chance to be something amazing—once I shed my physical body.

Into the night market, where gold-skinned vendors flashed gemstone teeth and haggled over jewelry, silks, and statues. The air was smothered with citrus. I bought a meat-skewer and gnawed as I skimmed the offerings. Some subtle desperation pushed me forward, seeking; I stumbled with the knowledge that I didn’t know what I was looking for, might not know if I found it.

Maybe I wasn’t ready for this to be my last night, but what would I do with more time? I hadn’t given serious thought to the idea of fleeing. I wanted to be a chord-dancer—so what difference if it were now or later? Time to gather myself and say my farewells to flesh.

As if that were a sign, the clear, pensive call of a flute drifted over the market. The flutist was talented, weaving subtle trills and ornaments into a simple melody without overpowering it.

I followed the sound, entranced. Players like this were the reason for chord-dancers—to inspire them, illuminate them, and create new music through them. For centuries, it had been the only way for new melodies to emerge.

The flutist was a lanky man with a red fringe of hair, cut raggedly about the ears. He was dressed poorly: I could see patches of skin through some of the holes in his clothes. Occasionally, someone tossed coins into the basket at his side, but most wandered past, oblivious.

I wondered at this as he segued into another tune, a dance piece that imitated the piping of baby birds in the nest. How could anyone ignore it? The music had an almost tangible presence, a warming crackle—as real as the chord-dancer who might have inspired it, years ago.

My feet twitched of their own volition and guided me closer. I was pivoting with the rhythm by the time I reached the open spot in front of his mat, and that turned naturally into a trill. The flutist straightened, emphasizing the downbeats. We were partners: I danced, he played, and the world narrowed to a mat and a strip of cobblestones. As a trained musician myself, I admired his work on an intellectual level ... even as none of that mattered and the emotion of the music carried us.

For the first time, I felt as if I could celebrate.

He changed tunes again, the lilt smoothing out as the music speeded up. I shifted my footwork to match the style, hauling in a breath at the turn. This was what I wanted, to give the gift of something entirely new to a person like this—

Something slammed into me. I tumbled forward. My palms skidded along the cobblestones. It felt like ice needles sliding under my skin.

“Watch where you’re walking, little girl,” a rough voice said.

“She wasn’t walking,” said another—high, nasal, “she was da-a-ancing.”

“Maybe she’s doing it for the money.”

I looked up. Three men stood over me, dressed in the rough clothes of dockworkers and smelling of saltwater and sweat. I wasn’t sure which one had plowed into me.

“Money, eh?” The first speaker was as heavy and overbearing as his voice. “She’d have to show more flesh for that. If she’s got it.”

I flushed as I crouched on the cobblestones. “I was only enjoying the music. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Except when you get in the way.” Surprisingly, the nasal voice didn’t belong to the small one, instead emitting from the man with the broken nose.

I glanced over at the flutist, hoping for some defense, some explanation of the partnership we had shared. He shook his head, busying himself with a smudge on the instrument. He looked nervous, even a little afraid—and this man I had thought deserved more music was not going to get involved.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Sorry,” the small one snorted. “Say it like you mean it.”

The crowd moved around us as if we didn't exist. I bit my lip, easing out of my crouch. "I didn't intend to disturb--"

One of them shoved me; another grabbed my arm and jerked me about; then I was free, spinning, plunging through the crowd until I collided with the support pole of a market tent. I held on, cheeks burning. The men laughed and strolled away.

I stayed where I was as fury rose inside me. The men had mocked me, the crowd ignored me, and the flutist left me to fend for myself. Were these the people I wanted to give my soul to? Was this why I was going to give up sweet cider and the feeling of an instrument in my own hands? No more close friends and warm fires... and unlike others who sacrificed, for a chord-dancer, the abstinence was permanent.

Perhaps this was not a night of farewell.

I pushed away from the support pole, shrugging away the concern of the tentmaster, and wandered again. This time, I felt heavy, no urgency spurring me on. I detoured from the main streets of the market down a quiet avenue and found myself in front of a tailor's shop. Through the window, I could see that the proprietor was closing up for the night, but he had not yet locked the door.

Hurriedly, I pushed in, and found myself confronted—and comforted—with delights. Silk gowns, lace shawls, luminous hues woven into blouses and skirts... the elegant disguises of a person I would never be.

Then I saw the cloak.

It was deep cerulean blue trimmed with silver, ankle-length. Subtle metallic flashes moved through the fabric as well, causing it to shimmer. The thick fur hood made it more than decorative, but who would wear it except a wealthy wife or noblewoman?

The tailor looked irritated when I first entered, but when he saw the way I approached the cloak, he brightened. "Can I help you, miss?"

"I..." Without a body, I would have no use for the cloak. I touched the velvet gingerly, stroking it with two fingers. "I want to buy this."

I was not going back to the Conservatory.

If the tailor had some idea how a waifish young woman with a boy's bob of black hair could afford something so fine, he was too interested in the sale to look askance. I counted out coins from the pouch and swirled the cloak over my shoulders. Instantly, I felt exotic, mysterious, important.

"Thank you," I said.

"Thank you, mistress."

I set out with purpose, breathing out icy puffs. I headed for the dock district, down steep inclines that gathered slush and treacherous ice. I had enough for passage halfway across the world.

A few of the travel stations were still open. I bought a ticket to one of the southern islands and watched as the clerk wrote my name down: Pavane Dorian.

I didn't intend to use the ticket: it was a feint. Few people ran away from the initiation—but even though the Conservatories denied that they pursued, denied ever forcing anyone to return, I knew that some students were dragged back, plaintive, protesting... and then gone. No way of telling how a Conservatory decided which runaways to chase, but I wasn't going to be one of those.

Tucking the ticket inside the cloak, I headed to the high waterside. Though deserted now, the area was cordoned off for local leisure and wealthy travelers on holiday, and was mostly safe—but I still watched the shadows for hints of motion.

I sat in the sand, the cloak tucked meticulously about me—bundled here so it did not touch the sand, stretched out there so it did not wrinkle. I felt like a queen in exile as I watched the waves, feeling their rhythms, hearing the lulling hum of the water.

I had been raised to love music, even worship it, and the subtle pattern of nature flooded me with a sense of contentment. I imagined I could almost hear a tune in the turning water... but that was fancy.

I could still turn back, I knew. The cloak, the ticket—other students had made flashier gestures before becoming chord-dancers. But why? Ahead of me now lay hundreds of possibilities: cities, towns, remote vales with no one but myself for company; countries with a hundred customs, from silence after sundown to worship of the moon; and the chance to be a musician, a gambler, a traveler, even a wife...

Behind me, there was only one possibility, that of music. I knew what the world had in store for me as a chord-dancer.

I rose, snuggling deeper into the cloak. I moved with purpose, already knowing how I wanted to leave the city. I would need to cut across a rougher section of the docks district to get there from here, but it was only three streets, and if there were trouble, I could run.

As I left the high waterside for the streets, I passed people with their heads down and shoulders forward, bulling hastily to their destination. Few looked up.

The second street held businesses catering to dock-folk: a dodgy tailor-shop, closed, a butcher's, and a tavern. Shouts and laughter emitted from the latter.

As I neared, the patrons launched into a rousing song, a bawdy drinking ballad about dressing customs in other countries. I had meant to hurry on, but perverse interest pulled at me, and I lingered. The lyrics made my cheeks heat, but the floor-pounding and the belting voices spilled out onto the street and seemed to warm up the frigid night. These people needed no reason for a celebration.

Someone warbled a solo about a land where women veiled their eyes—and nothing else—while others thumped whatever was handy in chorus. I crossed in front of the half-open door and stumbled in surprise.

To one side of the crowd, yowling with the tune, were the men who had shoved me around in the marketplace. They looked younger, giddy—boys at play. I stared until one of them started to turn; then I scampered away, anxious not to be seen.

The song wafted after me. It was not what most people thought of as music, but I could hear the energy and even the beauty in it. Thoughts percolated in my head. I had thought of becoming a chord-dancer as one possibility, but that was not true. The gentle ballad of a lover;

the haunting, sweet or lively music of a flute; even the raucous romp of a tavern chant—all were avenues the music might pursue.

I left the docks district behind, still thinking hard. Did every student go through this? Or was doubt enough to make a runaway? With either choice, there was no going back: I would soon be too old for the ceremony.

I paused at a cross-street, getting my bearings. The wind sang through the buildings, a voiceless aria. I closed my eyes, listening, searching for my answer.

I opened my eyes and turned to the right. I had a task to complete.

I passed through the night market, weaving my way around the burgeoning crowds. It would reach its height with the moon.

To my surprise and relief, the flutist was still there. I approached him.

“You’re the dancer,” he said. “I’m sorry about that, but I didn’t want to cause a scene.”

“I understand,” I said, and on sober reflection, I did. He was obviously poor, possibly a traveler, with few resources that he wasn’t carrying. He couldn’t risk anything he had.

He bobbed his head. “You want another dance?”

“I think I’ve gotten in enough trouble,” I said.

“Never.” He grinned.

I laughed and undid the strap on the cloak. “I want to give you this.”

He stared. “But that must be worth...”

“You can keep it or sell it,” I said, feeling a twinge, but knowing it wasn’t a practical garment. “But take it. Please.”

“I’ve done you no favors,” he said.

“You did,” I replied. “In a way.”

“Thank you, mistress.” He bowed his head low.

“Perhaps we’ll meet again,” I said, turning. “But I don’t think you’ll know it’s me.”

I walked away, feeling lighter than I had all night. I didn’t need the cloak; I didn’t need the ticket. At dawn, I was going back to discover what kind of music I would inspire, to move as a whispering phantom in search of the right listening ear.

But that was dawn. I turned with new purpose to the market, feeling excited rather than uncertain. Tonight, celebration, exploration—tastes and touches of a life I now could leave, with just as many opportunities ahead. First pastries, and then... who knew? It was my night for a farewell to flesh.

END

Venice

by
Patricia La Barbera

Red velvet embraces you,
and your mask blooms with feathers.
I am a harlequin in black and white.
Angels dance with gargoyles
in the dreams of fools.
Bridges arch under lovers' feet.
They walk on rainbows,
but my shoes are black,
and I do not cross the canal.

You stand in the doorway
of Villa Modano, and a man
in red takes your arm
and my dreams. There'll be
dancing and wine and a feast
for you and the one whose color
you share. But tell me, Bella Mia,
when the sun lights your face
in the morning, will your mask
still be smiling?

The Tattooed Woman

by

Christine Rains

“The Bearded Lady gets treated better than I do.”

Trina stroked his balding head and bent forward to kiss it. Her breasts pushed against his shoulder with the movement. They didn't have the firmness they once had. He didn't seem to notice at all and she noticed all too much. “You know why Remy makes you share a trailer with your cousins. Stop fretting over the things that cannot be changed.”

“Yes, we're half the size, so that means the bastard can stick all four of us in one tin can.” Bernard snorted, but he closed his eyes and she knew he was savoring the feeling of her fingers on his head.

“Remy's good at swindling money from people and even better at keeping his purse strings tight. It's not so bad, darling. At least you don't have to share a trailer with Lena, and I'm his star performer.” Trina continued to soothe him, but there was no love in her voice for anyone she mentioned.

“Lena sleeps with her mangy lions.”

“In here, sometimes,” she added, which brought out a chuckle from him. “She cries in her sleep for her mother, too, and tries to touch me. Yet she's not the one I want touching me.”

Bernard turned to face her and cupped her decorated face in his hands. “You're such a sweetheart, Trin. One day, we'll get away from this crap and retire to a cozy little house. You'll not have to do any of this again. I promise you.”

She kissed his thick lips and smiled. “One day, darling. For now, I dance and I'm happy.” Trina leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs. She nudged the corpse lying to the right of her and crinkled her nose, causing the pointed end to turn up. Her robe hung open, and she wore not a stitch beneath it, but she was far from naked. “Take the body out now, Bernard. It's beginning to stink.”



Smoke twisted around her like an incorporeal dance partner. Her hips swung slow and purposefully from side to side, in time with the music. It sounded rusty coming from the old phonograph, but Trina could see no one was really paying attention to the music. She smiled at that.

The music slowed and changed into something darker with a primal beat. The lights were lowered, and the audience crowded in further to get a better view of her curves and the tattoos that decorated them. The brass disks that adorned her belt jangled like a rattlesnake as if to warn

them off. She dipped backward and let the colorful wrap she had draped over her arms flutter to the floor.

Trina's back was bare, along with all her legs and most of her front. When she straightened herself out this time, she no longer danced alone. An Asian woman on her stomach rolled and slithered about like a serpent. She was always the first to join the act and glare at the audience with her piercing red eyes.

The people that could see gasped, and others attempted to push their way to the front to catch a glimpse. Trina spun slowly, dragging her feet to leave them with prolonged views. The warriors and soldiers on her legs readied their weapons. They silently cried out for battle and struck out at one another.

A lot of the people stared at her in awe. A few squinted and whispered to their companions, sharing their theories about what sort of trick was used to get her tattoos to move.

The couples upon Trina's arms lay entwined and began their own erotic dances. One man took his exotic lover from behind as another woman rode hers in an ornate chair. There were two women tangled in sheer crimson sheets, kissing one another as if it was the only way to sustain themselves.

Trina held out her arms, hips still swaying, and made sure to get close enough to the audience for them to see. The few women that were there with their boyfriends or husbands gasped at the pornographic acts upon her arms and the violence on her legs. One of them hid her face against her man's shoulder.

Dancing back to the center of the stage, Trina turned her back to them. One tattoo covered the entire expanse and she counted her as her most reluctant partner. The woman was drawn with exquisite detail and dressed as if she were to be a bride for a sultan. The tattoo's hair was long and dark, hanging in lazy curls. There was fierceness in her features that only added to her beauty. The music was luring her into the dance, and with her arms elegantly twisted above her head, her wide hips made rhythmic circles.

Trina let the beat course through her and mimicked the dance she knew the tattoo on her back was performing. She was slimmer than the inked woman, but no less beautiful. The effect was hypnotic, and any members of the audience who had still been whispering or whistling at her were silenced.

The song reached its climax, and Trina flung out her limbs one more time before she curled up, going still as the whole tent was quiet.

As she unfurled herself, the applause started. It gained momentum and men hooted out their appreciation. She didn't doubt a good number of them would come see a second show while they were in town.

Not allowed to throw coins at the stage or touch her, people handed money to Bernard at the door on their way out. As the last man left, Bernard closed the flap and grinned in her direction.

“Gorgeous as always, Trin. Even the new tattoo performed well.”

Trina scooped up her wrap and shook it to chase off the dust that had gotten on it. “That he did, but as the others tend to pick on the new man, he didn't have much of a choice in the matter.”

“Still, it was a good choice to pick him.” Bernard hopped down off the stool he had been standing on and held out the purse that he had collected the coins in to her. He gave it a shake, raising his brows at the great jingle it made. “I think we should celebrate. You made quite the haul tonight.”

Bending forward, she kissed his hairless head and pulled back when he began to nuzzle her chest. Trina was in no mood for his particular affections, but she thankfully didn't have to say so. The carnival's tall and gaunt owner threw open the flap of the tent.

“Remy, what's going on?” Bernard turned to face the other man.

Remy's dark eyes looked at both of them and lingered on the coin purse for a few seconds. He then gave his head a shake and gestured to them. “Come. One of Lena's pets killed a cub and we can't calm it. We'll have to put it down. Lena wants to speak to you first, ma chere.”

“Damn lions.” Bernard muttered as he strode out of the tent.

Trina frowned and paused, sharing a silent look with her boss. Remy shook his head and reached out to take her hand. He led her out of the tent and through the crowd to the rear of the carnival. She could hear the lion snarling before they came into the view of the cages. Beneath the beast's noise, she could hear sobbing.

Most of the troupe who were not working booths or the rides were circled around the cage. Trina could see the big male with his blood-splattered mane pacing back and forth. Every third or fourth round, he would ram his massive head against one of the wood walls. One side was already starting to splinter.

Lena, with her long, dark hair and matted curls, was kneeling on the ground outside of the cage, cradling the mangled cub in her arms. Her body shook with her cries. A second cub was locked in a smaller crate nearby and meowed pathetically for its fallen sibling.

“Lena, I've brought-” Remy didn't get to finish before the lion tamer turned and wailed out the other woman's name.

“Trina! My King! They're going to kill my King!” Lena pressed the dead feline tight against her chest. “I want him to live forever. Please. Please take him as one of yours.”

All eyes were on Trina. Even the blind fortuneteller seemed focused on her.

Compassion was a difficult emotion to fake, but she did it like a thrust of her hips. “I'm sorry, Lena. Animals, they're harder to do than humans. Considering how wild he is, I don't think it would work. Besides, my dear,” she gave her a tender look, “it's not like you haven't lost one of your cats before. You still have the one baby that needs you to care for it. Treasure the new life rather than try to hang on to the old.”

“No, please.” Lena's hand darted out and grabbed Trina's hand. Her face was ferocious with emotion. Her grip was painful and slicked with blood. “King. He's my special boy. I raised him, I nurtured him; I love him so much. You did it once before for me. Please, Trina, please!”

King's mad growls and the splintering of more wood punctuated her pleas.

The tattoo on Trina's stomach silently hissed at the lion tamer, and the warriors stared at her with cold eyes.

The Strong Man came forward and knelt down beside Lena. He wrapped a thick arm around her and pulled her to him. His eyes were wet with tears. "It'll be okay, Lena. King had a good life. If Trina says she can't do it, then she can't do it. Let go of her hand, honey."

Trina yanked her hand free and stepped back, rubbing her fingers that would likely be bruised. Remy put a hand on her shoulder and then gestured to the other men surrounding the cage. "Alright, gentlemen. Let's get this over with quickly."

Five men, along with Bernard and one of his cousins, closed in a circle around the twelve by twelve foot cage. Two men had shotguns and the rest wielded spears. King could feel death near and his snarls became frantic roars. He rushed the steel bars and tried to swipe out at one of the men, but he could not reach. The spears, on the other hand, poked into his sides to push him back toward the center of the cage.

A shot was fired and a great spray of blood soaked the thin layer of straw. Lena screamed out with her lion and buried her face against the Strong Man's chest.

King bellowed again and threw himself at the already weakened wood wall. With a terrible crunch, he flew through it and pounced upon the nearest man. Bernard went down under the furious beast with a cry that sounded more like a child's than a man's.

The others were fast upon King. Half a dozen more shots rang out before the lion toppled over to lay motionless in a pool of blood.

"Heave!" Two of the attackers shouted and they pulled the animal off of Bernard.

Trina hurried forward with Remy. His hand was still on her shoulder and trembled at the sight before them. Everyone crowded around. Most of the women let out screeches and had to turn away. Only Trina and the Bearded Lady kept within the circle.

"He's still alive." Bernard's cousin dropped to his knees and cradled his head in his lap.

"Trin . . ." Bernard's face was screwed up with pain. One hand touched the intestines that had been torn from his belly and immediately recoiled. "Trin with you forever."

The cousin nodded, looking up with a grief-stricken expression. "Do it, Trina. He wants it. We'll all feel a little better knowing a part of him lives on with you."

Encouraging whispers echoed his request, but this time, Trina didn't want all their eyes on her. She shielded her face from them with her unharmed hand. "No, I'm sorry. I can't do it. There's no place for you, Bernard. You were a good man. People will remember you well without my bearing you."

Bernard opened his mouth again with another plea, but a bubble of blood encompassed the words.

"Don't be such a cold-hearted bitch, Trina. He loves you. Just give him this one thing." The cousin's teeth were clenched. His anger and sorrow hissed through the gaps.

She shook her head and didn't look down again as she spun on her heel to leave the circle. Trina yanked away from Remy's touch and ignored his call. Her feet picked up speed to take her in a run toward her trailer.

Behind her, she could hear Lena scream out to her. “It should have been you, Trina! Bitch! Not Bernard. Not my King. It should have been you who died! I'd kill you myself if it weren't for her!”

Trina slammed the door, shut and locked it. She knew Lena was all roar and no bite, but grief did strange things to people. She went to the small basin to wash her hands as she took in deep, calming breaths.

Looking down, she could see her tattoos were riled up. The warriors shook their weapons and the lovers made rude gestures at her. She rinsed her hands thoroughly and dried them on a soft towel. “Don't give me any trouble. You wouldn't have wanted that mad beast to play with, and Bernard was such an ugly little bore. He did what he was told and that was all we needed him for. Men are easy enough to come by. I'll find another for my purposes.”

Trina slipped out of her sandals and began removing her costume. Her inked companions continued to revolt and grow rowdier. “It's useless talking to any of you. Protest all you want. I don't care. I treated Bernard fine enough when he was alive. I didn't owe him anything.”

Out of her clothes, she stood in front of her thin floor-length mirror to make sure she was not dotted with any more blood. Trina froze as she saw a pair of arms come around from her back along her flesh from under her left arm. The dancer's head followed and she looked at her with hate in the mirror.

“Fetish,” Trina's voice wasn't more than a whisper, “you want to throw in your protest, too?”

The dancer never interacted with her other than during her act. She knew Fetish had never wanted to be part of it in the first place, and her life out of sight on Trina's back was what she preferred. Now, for the first time in several years, the two of them were staring at each other.

Fetish continued to climb upwards. The red-eyed woman on Trina's stomach crouched back away from her, slithering off to lie on her right. The lovers reached toward the exotic tattoo as if hoping for a brief caress. The warriors riled themselves further and pushed up her legs.

“What are you doing? You'll only drain your own energy.” Trina sniffed and reached over for a long skirt. “Was it the lion? Your precious Lena loses one every few years. If I took on one beast, she'd continue wanting me to take them. I will not be decorated with her filthy cats.” She stepped into the skirt and pulled it up to fasten around her waist so that she could no longer see the encroaching army. “Or was it Bernard? I wouldn't have thought he was your type. He'd be an ugly mark on my body.”

She snatched up a white shirt with long sleeves. “Did he wink at you when he took me from behind? Do you think he had any sort of affection for you? He loved me. Not you.”

Fetish was fully around the front and crossing the mounds of her breasts. There was a purpose to her movements, and Trina didn't want to think about what it was. She pulled her shirt and buttoned it to the top.

She lay down on her bed and heard whispers outside her trailer. Trina could drown out the noise of the carnival, but the whispers were clear. Remy argued with a few of the hands and convinced them to leave her alone for the night. They each stomped off in opposite directions to leave her in peace.

Sighing, she stared at the ceiling of her trailer. She felt a tug at the corner of her mouth and her face twitched. A second tug and she scratched at the spot. She was determined there would be no guilty twinges over Bernard's death.

Then Trina's mouth was suddenly being stretched wide to either side. She let out a squeak of pain and surprise, sitting up so quickly her head felt light. She grabbed at her mouth, but there was nothing there she could feel that was pulling at it. Opening her mouth wider only increased the pain, and one of her lips tore near the corner.

With a cry, she sprang up to look in the mirror.

Fetish had a hold of both corners of Trina's mouth with her inked arms wrapped around from behind her head. She couldn't see the dancer's body, but she knew those arms. Fetish pulled tighter, making Trina cry out again. She dug her nails into her flesh, scratching and flailing about as if she could dislodge the tattoo.

She screamed a protest as the sides of her mouth ripped and Fetish slowly began to peel her skin upwards. Trina fell back against her vanity, spinning around and sending her mirror crashing to the floor. Her nails delved into her cheeks as if she could grab the inked arms, but it only served to make Fetish's job easier.

Trina's bare feet were assaulted each time she stepped on the broken glass. The pain and the slickness of the blood sent her tumbling backward. There was a sickening crunch as her head hit the corner of the table and she struggled no more.



“She must have regretted not giving Bernard his last wish. Trying to peel her own flesh off . . .” Remy leaned against the trailer, wiping his face with a kerchief as if he could wash from his soul what he had seen in there.

“You thought too much of Trina. She wasn't one for regrets.” The Bearded Lady shook her head and gave Remy's hand a squeeze of sympathy. “After she took on Fetish, she lost any ability to feel such things.”

He pocketed his kerchief and ran a hand through his black hair. “Fetish was her teacher. They were close. She did it for Lena, too, so that her mother could watch over her. She was the heart of our troupe, Cherie.”

“Come now, Remy. You know better than that. Trina loved no one except herself. Those that she wore once loved us, but they are long gone. Let us mourn and move on.” The Bearded Lady slid an arm around his slim middle and urged him away from the trailer.

“Yes, I know you're right. It's just that sometimes I forgot when I looked at her. You're always the wise one, Cherie.” Remy dragged his feet as he walked, and slung an arm over her shoulders to caress her furred cheek from the other side. “That's why you're my favorite. Anything you want is yours. Always.”

“I already have my own trailer, and I'm the star performer in a fine show with a handsome boss. What more could a girl want?” She smiled, dimples under her whiskers.

END

New Orleans, Circa Fat Tuesday

by
Darrell Lindsey

Cajun and zydeco music fills the crawfish streets
as revelers toss beads from balconies
to flirtatious masked strangers;
some even body-painted
in purple, green and gold.
Perhaps some of the characters in costumes
as exotic as passing floats
could be celebrating
some momentous battlefield victory
not unlike Venice,
making it new again
with rosy-cheeked laughter
for days and nights on end.
It seems more than a little likely, though,
that most are simply escaping
their cares for a while,
letting the good times roll
as far as possible
without getting their alter egos
arrested.

Ashes, Ashes, We All Fall Down

by

Damien Walters Grintalis

Ash Wednesday

6:45 a.m.

“Get up.”

The sweet darkness of dreams tried to pull her back down into its warmth, but a calloused hand shook her shoulder and gave her head one quick rub as if she were a puppy.

“Come on, get up. Make me coffee while I shower.”

Opening her eyes, she caught a glimpse of dark hair and tanned arms before the owner of the gruff voice disappeared through a doorway.

She sat up, the covers pooling around her waist. It was all wrong. The walls, the furniture, the blanket, even the smells—stale sex, cheap perfume, and underneath, the scent of unfamiliar humans in an unfamiliar home. She rubbed her eyes, sure it was a bad dream or an illusion; it had to be. She jumped out of the bed when the shower cut off, the last vestige of sleep fleeing like a rat from a burning building.

The dark-haired man came back into the room with a threadbare towel wrapped around his waist. Her fingernails dug half-moons into the skin of her palms.

Not Ted. Oh no, not Ted.

“Damn, woman. You’re moving like pondwater this morning,” he said, but gave her a small smile.

“Sorry,” she whispered, her heart racing at the unfamiliarity of the voice.

The man dropped the towel. She looked away. A mirror hung on the far wall above a low dresser. She approached it with tentative steps, wanting, but not wanting, to see at the same time.

“I’ll be late tonight ‘cause Kevin asked if I could give him a ride home. His piece of shit truck is dead again.”

She nodded her head in reply, afraid to hear the

not mine

voice again. When the reflection came into view, she moaned low in her throat.

“Julie, baby. What’s wrong with you this morning?”

My name isn’t Julie. It’s Rachel Morris.

Rachel Morris did not have blonde hair curling down past her shoulders, blue eyes, or double-pierced ears. She had a sleek bob haircut, dark eyes, only one hole in each ear, and she did not wear sleep shirts with cartoon characters on the front.

“Julie?” The dark haired man stepped up behind her, curling his arms around her waist.

She pulled away, turning to face him. “I’m not feeling
very much like myself right now
well.”

“I got to get to the site early. I’ll just grab coffee on the way. Call in sick and go back to bed. You got the time. Might as well use it.”

I have to call Ted.

“I think I will.”

She stood with her back to the mirror, her fingers clenched tightly on the dresser’s edge. A small splinter of wood dug into the little finger of her right hand, not quite hard enough to break the skin. She forced herself to stay still as he kissed her forehead. Laughter bubbled up and threatened to spill out, but she held it in. She needed this man to leave, and if she laughed...

He’ll know something is wrong. How can he not know? How can he not see? I’m not his Julie, not anyone’s Julie. I’m Rachel, Rachel Morris.

“If you don’t feel good later, call me. I’ll ask Brian if he can give Kev a ride home.”

She nodded again. He walked out of the room with quiet steps, and when a door banged shut and a car engine revved up then away, she grabbed the phone from the nightstand and dialed Ted’s cell phone. The phone rang once, twice, ten times, but the voice mail didn’t pick up. After thirty-eight rings, she hung up and dialed their home number. When the message came on informing her the mailbox was full, she slid down to the floor as if boneless, tears burning in her eyes.

This is all wrong. Ted and I were at the parade. The girls wore feathers, beads, and masks. The guys standing next to us were drunk and yelling nonsense. Drunkspeak. We were laughing and then... then what? The music, yes. The band passed by, all of them in dark suits, and the music—

“—was so loud,” she choked out in that strange voice now thick with tears. She wrapped her arms around herself and rested her forehead on one knee.

The streets were crowded with people and laughter, and the parade kept moving. The band. The musicians. The man in the back tipped his hat in our direction. He smiled, and Ted leaned over and put his lips close to my ear, but what did he say?

Ted’s voice, a polite accountant’s voice, whispering, teasing...

“And he said—”

It was right there on the tip of her tongue, but she couldn’t remember. She could hear Ted’s voice in her head, but she couldn’t hear the words. Her tears turned to harsh, hurtful sobs; she rocked back and forth curled up in a tight little ball, her nose filled with the strange smell of the

wrong body. A *Julie* body, not the Rachel body, a Julie body with traces of cheap soap and sticky thighs from a construction worker's sweaty efforts of push and love.

The laughter came then, hard and joyless, mingling with the tears. She rolled over on her side, shaking so hard the Julie-belly ached; then anger, dark red and screaming, twisted up inside because it wasn't right that she couldn't remember what her husband of ten years said to her at the parade. Her tears dissolved into the rage. She stood up, holding onto the dresser with both hands, glared into the mirror, into the stupid Julie-face, and shrieked.

"What did he say?"

The Julie-face didn't answer, just looked back with tear-stained cheeks and swollen eyes. The air shimmered around her, the colors faded, a sick feeling twisted in the pit of her stomach, and everything slipped away...

Fat Tuesday

11:59 p.m.

"What the hell is it?" Rachel Morris looked at her husband then back to the bed, to the small object lying just below the pillows.

Ted shook his head and bent over the mattress to take a closer look. "I don't know. It looks like a bone."

"A bone?"

"Yes, that's what it looks like. A bone, a couple feathers, and some string. Maybe it's a joke."

Rachel swallowed hard. "If it is, it's not very funny. Is it real? The bone, I mean."

"I doubt it. It's probably just something the hotel puts on pillows instead of pieces of chocolate. I mean, this *is* New Orleans."

"It's a little weird even for New Orleans, don't you think?"

"Sure, but with the whole Mardi Gras Carnivale thing, it sort of fits," Ted said.

"You don't think..."

"What?"

"No, it's a stupid thought."

"Come on, Rachel. What?"

"Well, that weird guy at the parade and the restaurant. Do you think he..."

Ted laughed. "He what? Came in our room and left us a present?"

"Well, maybe."

"Rachel, I can't imagine we're the first people to laugh at him. This is New Orleans. He was playing up the whole thing for our benefit. He probably gets a cheap thrill acting like a voodoo magic man. You know, give the tourists a scare."

"He scared *me*. Did you see his eyes?"

“He’s probably half-blind. You saw his face. I think he’s older than dirt.”

“Throw it out, okay?”

“Sure,” Ted said, stretching out his hand.

“No!”

“What?”

“Don’t touch it.”

He gave her a long look. “He really has you spooked, doesn’t he?”

She wrapped her arms around herself. “Yes, he does and that thing bothers me. It bothers me a lot.”

“Okay, hold on a minute,” he said, disappearing into the bathroom.

He returned with a wad of toilet paper and picked up the bone; it made an unpleasant rattling sound when he dropped it in the trash can.

“There. It’s gone.”

Rachel sighed. “Good. I’m going to wash my face.”

In the bathroom, when she pulled her birth-control pills out of her purse, a small piece of paper fell to the floor. Her mouth went dry; her hands shook as she picked it up.

It will smear when I touch it.

She shook her head and stared at the note, at the grimy paper and unfamiliar handwriting.

Come and find me.

She opened her mouth to ask Ted if he’d put it in her purse, but a strange feeling ran through her, a very not-Rachel feeling.

Just like in the restaurant.

The ink smeared when she ran the pad of her thumb across the words, just as she thought it would.

Because it isn’t ink at all.

She rubbed her thumb and index finger together. No, it wasn’t ink; it felt like ashes. She thought of calling out to Ted again, changed her mind, and ripped up the note instead.

Better to get rid of it.

Rachel threw the pieces in the toilet and watched as they flushed away, hoping in the morning it would all seem like a distant memory.

Ash Wednesday

7:30 a.m.

“Rachel.”

Yes, that’s me. I’m Rachel. Rachel, not Julie. Wait until you hear about my dream, Ted. It was crazy, one of those dreams you call a two thumbs upper.

“Rachel.”

Ted? Why do you sound funny?

The voice, most definitely not Ted’s, spoke up again. “You gotta get up. Mom’ll kill you if you’re late again.”

Rachel opened her eyes and pressed her hands to her mouth.

Not again.

She sat up, surrounded by boyish faces—almost-men posing with chests puffed up, pouts to rival a toddler’s, gelled hair, and pants baggy enough to show the top of their underwear. The posters hung in a haphazard collage, a chaotic mix of teenage lust and marketing genius.

No construction workers or sticky thighs here. And no Ted. No Rachel. Not the real one, anyway. Not the me-Rachel.

“Rachel.”

“Looks like a voodoo man,” she whispered, hearing (and hating) the girlish other-Rachel voice.

Yes, that’s what he said.

“Are you talking to yourself? You are so weird.”

“What?” she asked, glaring at the boy standing in the doorway.

He doesn’t matter. None of them do. Ted and I weren’t in the hotel when it happened. After the parade, we went to dinner. The voodoo man was there. And Ted—

“Oh please, let me remember,” Rachel said. Tears pricked the back of her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. Not this time.

“Mom is so gonna kill you.”

“Ted said, he said.” Rachel groaned. The memory would not come.

The boy shook his head. “Freak.”

“Go away,” she hissed.

There was something wrong with his eyes.

“Better get moving,” the boy warned.

“Leave me alone.”

A voice drifted up into the bedroom. “Kids, move a little faster, please.”

“Fast,” the boy said, then disappeared.

“Rachel, are you up?” The drifting voice again.

I kicked Ted under the table, but he didn’t notice.

“Rachel?”

No, he didn’t notice.

“Rachel Anne Howard. Get out of bed this instant. You’re going to be late.”

Come and find me. The note, yes, there was a note.

A woman with her hands on her hips stood in the doorway this time.

It wasn't written in ink, but in ashes. When I touched it, the words smeared away. I ripped it up, and we went to bed. And then...

"We didn't wake up. No, I did wake up, but I woke up somewhere else, *someone* else."

"What?"

"Nothing," Rachel muttered.

He was just a crazy man with crazy eyes. That's what...

"I don't understand why we have this fight every morning."

... I thought.

"Please just shut up."

"What did you say?"

Rachel bit the inside of the other-Rachel's cheek when she felt the laughter build up again. She couldn't let it out.

No, I had my cry and my laugh when I was the other one. I have to stay calm now.

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that. I expect you downstairs in three minutes. I mean it."

I have to find my way back.

"Did you hear me?"

My way out.

She got out of bed and grabbed a pair of jeans from a pile on the floor.

"I said, did you hear me?"

It's crazy. It doesn't make sense. Maybe I'm crazy.

The air shimmered around her, the colors faded,

no, no, not yet

a sick feeling twisted in the pit of her stomach, and everything slipped away...

Fat Tuesday

7:00 p.m.

Ted said something, but between the people shouting, the music, and her own clapping hands, Rachel couldn't hear his words. An endless stream of feather-clad women walked by, wearing headdresses rivaling anything a Vegas showgirl might wear. They tossed beads into the crowd and smiled brilliant red-lipstick smiles.

A group of drunk men stood next to them, yelling nonsense at the women. A flowery perfumed smell hovered in the air, competing with the reek of beer and cigarette smoke. Music drifted down the street, mournful yet joyous at the same time. The women passed by, a group of black-suited musicians took their place, and the music swelled up, loud enough to shake the pavement under Rachel's feet. She grabbed Ted's hand; they swayed along with the music, clapping with everyone else when the band stopped one song, bowed, and began another.

A lone man, also in black, followed the musicians, his skin like polished ebony, his teeth too bright to be real. He carried a large stick, swinging it back and forth with each step, and tipped his head in their general direction. Ted pulled her close.

Don't say it, oh no, please don't say it.

"He looks like a voodoo man," he whispered in her ear, sending a shiver, not a good one, down the length of her spine.

The man in the suit nodded again, but his smile had turned upside down. Rachel's fingers tightened around Ted's. A strange, not-quite déjà vu feeling raced over her in an ice cold wave. The man's eyes caught and held hers for what seemed an hour, then he walked on. Rachel let out a breath she didn't remember holding.

"Hey, Rach, are you feeling okay?" Ted asked. "You look a little pale."

"I think it's all the noise."

"Then let's get out of here and get something to eat."

"Okay, I think I'd like that."

They found a quaint little restaurant at the end of Bourbon Street; halfway through the meal, Ted nudged her elbow. "Look who it is."

Rachel looked up. The voodoo man sat alone on the other side of the room.

Her husband wears construction boots, and she smiles at him, but she's screaming on the inside because she's not, she's not,

"That's the same guy, right?"

she's not Rachel.

"Honey?"

And when he leaves, she sits on the floor and she cries, and she shouts something. She's lost, so lost.

Rachel put down her wine glass. "Ted, I'm—"

No, it's not déjà vu. It's something much worse.

"Uh-oh, don't look now. He's coming over." Ted lowered his voice. "He's coming to put a spell on us. He'll kill us with his dark, voodoo magic."

No, he won't kill us, he'll—

"Rachel?"

She forced a smile on her face. “Don’t be silly. Voodoo isn’t real. He’s just an old man with a stick.”

Ted laughed.

He isn't, and I know it, but I don't know how I know.

Rachel kept her eyes down as the man walked by their table, his stick tapping on the floor with each slow step. He passed out of her line of sight. The tapping stopped.

He knows we're laughing. No, I'm not laughing. Ted is, but it doesn't matter because we're together.

Rachel lifted her eyes and couldn’t hold in a tiny gasp. The voodoo man stood right by her side. He wore a smile, but it didn’t reach his dark, intense eyes.

“Come for da Carnivale, yes?” he asked.

“For Mardi Gras, yes,” Ted said, returning his smile.

“Dey call it Mardi Gras, but Carnivale is da real name. Dere’s magic in da Carnivale. You don’t b’lieve in da magic, I can tell. Da real magic.”

Rachel kicked Ted under the table, but he went ahead and opened his mouth. “Nope. Sorry buddy, I’m an accountant. I believe in numbers, not hocus-pocus.”

“Das a shame. An wha’bout da lady?”

Rachel wanted to speak, but she could not make her mouth move. Ted thought he was being funny. The voodoo man didn’t think so. His eyes...

He's crazy.

“My wife doesn’t believe in it, either.”

The man tapped the edge of the table three times with his cane and grinned. “You will. Promise you dat,” he said before he walked away.

When he left, Ted started laughing again. Rachel managed a small chuckle, although she didn’t feel like laughing at all. He might just be a crazy old man, but the encounter filled her with dread and left dark thoughts swirling in her head like cotton candy around a stick.

He does it because he can. Because he's crazy. We aren't the first, we won't be the last, and they'll never catch him because no one will believe it.

The waitress brought over their dessert. Rachel tried to push it all out of her head, but her hands wouldn’t stop shaking. Ted didn’t notice.

On their way back to the hotel, they passed a homeless woman dressed in rags. Once they’d walked half a block down the street, Rachel stopped and told Ted to wait. She ran back to the woman, who stood with her shoulders slumped, mumbling to herself. Rachel dug into her purse and handed her several dollar bills. The woman’s eyes widened, then curled her fist around the money, whirled around, and shuffled away. Rachel walked back, fighting the strange not-quite déjà vu feeling the entire way.

“Why did you do that?” Ted asked, his eyes filled with curiosity.

Because she's lost.

“I don’t know,” Rachel said. “It... it just seemed like the right thing to do.”

She linked her arm in his; they walked back to the hotel in silence.

Ash Wednesday

8:30 p.m.

“I’ve told you before, you can’t sleep here.”

Rachel opened her eyes to find a man in a stained apron leaning over her.

Oh no. Please. I can’t go through this again.

“Go on, now. Get out of here.”

She got up, and the quiet filled with a papery flutter as newspaper drifted down to the alley’s concrete surface.

He gestured toward the paper. “And take that with you.”

She bent down to gather it up, wincing at a horrible ache in her joints. No, it wasn’t just her joints. Everything hurt, from her teeth down to the soles of her rag-wrapped feet. And the smell... she tried to breathe through her mouth, but the foulness caught in the back of her throat. When she saw the faces on one of the newspaper pages, she pushed both the pain and the stink away.

My face. That’s me. Me.

She brought the paper close to her face, ignoring her dirty hand and ragged fingernails. “Rachel Morris, thirty-six years old, and her husband, Ted, also thirty-six, were found unconscious in their hotel room on Wednesday morning. No further information regarding their condition has been released at this time. This is the third time in two months tourists have been found—”

She held up the paper. “This is me.” Her voice was a scratchy whisper, another not-Rachel voice, but she didn’t care.

“Lady, I said you can’t sleep here. Move out.”

I have to make him understand.

“No, this is me,” she said, her words coming out in a rush. “I’m Rachel Morris. My husband is Ted. We were at the parade. We saw the man with the stick. He did something, something terrible, and we’re not the first. See, this article says so. I woke up in someone else’s body, then I was someone else, and now I’m in here. But I’m not this woman. I’m not her. I’m not any of them. I’m Rachel. This is me.”

“Lady, I don’t care if you’re Cleopatra. You can’t sleep here. Move out before I call the cops.”

“Call them. I’ll tell them I’m Rachel.” She gave the newspaper a small shake. “This is me. My husband might be out here, too, just like me, just like the others. Please, you have to believe me.”

He looked first at the paper in her hand, then at her face, and shook his head. "Please just go. Don't make me call the cops, okay?"

"But I swear it. This is me. I know it sounds crazy, but I'm telling you the truth. I can tell you about our house and our dog Tucker. I can..."

I can tell you everything.

He shook his head again then disappeared into the building.

"I'm not crazy," she whispered. "I'm Rachel."

She started to make her way down the alley, wincing with every painful step, the newspaper clutched tightly in her hand. She rounded the corner and caught her reflection in a storefront window. An old woman with a stooped back, dressed in a motley assortment of tattered clothing, stared back. She hurried past the window and walked until her not-Rachel feet left trails of blood behind her, unaware she was mumbling aloud.

"I just have to find my way back, that's all. I'll go to the restaurant first. They won't let me in, not like this, but I'll look in the window. If the voodoo man is there, I'll wait until he comes out. I'll make him fix everything, somehow. I'll wait until he shows up. He has to sometime. Or I'll listen for the music. He can't be that hard to find."

The sun disappeared below the horizon, a night wind began to blow, and she sank down on the curb, near a building with a faded For Rent sign in one window. Someone had dumped the contents of their ashtray by the curb; she traced her finger in the mess it left behind. A stray piece of paper blew by, landing in her lap. She held it in her hand then smiled. A note. Yes, she would write a note and give it to...

Who?

She didn't know, but she dipped the tip of her finger in the ashes again and wrote it anyway.

Come and find me.

She tucked the note inside her sleeve, put her head in her hands, and waited for everything to slip away...

Three Months Earlier

6:05 p.m.

"So do you want to go? I mean, you've mentioned it a bunch of times."

"Yes, no, I don't know."

Ted laughed.

"I thought I wanted to, but it'll be crazy with all those people. Maybe we should go someplace else," Rachel said. "Why don't we go to Vegas instead?"

"Honey, Vegas will be just as crowded as New Orleans."

"Well, sure, but there won't be any parades with crazy drunks."

Or voodoo men.

She shuddered. Voodoo men? That had to be the strangest thought she'd ever had.

"Are you sure?" Ted asked.

"Yes. Absolutely."

"Okay, Vegas it is. I'll book the flight today. Hey, were you expecting a package in the mail?"

"No, why?"

"This came today. I almost forgot."

He handed her a small box, wrapped in brown paper, with her name and address marked in spiky black handwriting. There was no return address. Rachel gave the box a shake; a strange feeling washed over her, almost like déjà vu but not. Something rattled loose inside like a piece of candy or costume jewelry.

Or maybe a bit of bone.

END



Winter Carnival

by
Patty Saturn

white crystals
crunch
under our feet

properly placed hand
gently touches back

hand in hand
across the stage

we sway, twirl

moonlit highlights
play in your hair

star fire eyes ignite

your lips tease
tickle mine

revelers pass

obnoxious
bawdy laughter

disturbs our intimate
solitude
amongst the crowd

bonfires blaze

extends day
throughout night

welcomes
sun's rebirth

as I welcome

your heat

The Wild Hunt

by

Kristina Lee

“Are we going out tonight?” Reyna’s question made Aisling smile as she leaned closer to the mirror to apply another layer of eyeliner.

“We go out every night, Rey. Why wouldn’t we go tonight?” Rey made an impatient sound behind her, her dirt-caked fingers tapping an anxious rhythm on the desk she was sitting behind.

“You know what I meant. Are we going *out* tonight?”

Aisling’s smile was answer enough—Rey’s heart soared and her breathing quickened even as Aisling made a show of carefully capping her liner and turning her head with the faintest of grins.

“It’s a full moon, Rey,” Aisling simpered, brushing past with alien grace as she reached for her jacket. “Strange things have been known to happen on nights like tonight.”

Rey trotted behind Aisling as they left the house, heading for the fair lot where the town’s latest attraction, a traveling Carnivale, had taken up residence.

Their lights could be seen from Rey’s bedroom—flashing and distracting, sending her from her tumbling dreams to the window to watch them dance.

She hadn’t slept in the four days since they’d arrived, something her manic demeanor could readily attest to.

Normally, Aisling was the wild-child—the girl everybody knew better than to mess with. Rey was the background noise—the one who was there when present, but invisible the second she left their notice.

Tonight, though—there was something in the air, fresh and primal, that was calling to her, making her impatient, restless.

“Declan’s bringing Kara,” Aisling informed her off-handedly as they wove their way through the crowds in the parking lot heading for the main entrance.

“And? So? Why should I care?”

Aisling’s cupid-bow smile was back with a vengeance.

“Come on, Rey. You can’t honestly believe I haven’t noticed the way you’ve been eyeing him these past few weeks?”

Rey fought the urge to flush under Aisling’s knowing look and failed most spectacularly. She was random in her attentions to the opposite sex—much like her view to them, the majority of boys disappeared from her thoughts once they were out of sight. But Declan... there was something different about him, an edge that had her curiosity piqued.

He was new to the town—had only been here for less than a year, arriving alone one summer night in a car no one, not even the richest in town, could afford. He'd rented a house, established himself as a good kid, and integrated himself quietly into the population. In a Bible-belt town where the nuclear family was the only way to go, the fact that the local parishioners were leaving him be was what had initially spiked her interest.

These past months, she'd made it a point to pay attention to him. His study habits, his hang-outs, and the girls he deigned worthy of his attentions—few and far between as they were. Kara was only his latest conquest—the good girl who wasn't as squeaky clean as her father believed. But she was beautiful by anyone's standards and quietly popular with her naturally kind demeanor. Why Declan was dating her, Rey didn't know—he had a restless edge to him that never went away when he was with her—or any of them, for that matter.

It didn't make sense, which drove Rey's curiosity higher to a near obsessive point—not even Aisling had any idea just how deep her interest was in the auburn-haired, caramel-eyed boy. And there were times when she would look at him that he would be looking back, and those eyes... there was something in them that reminded Rey of a leopard or a tiger, camouflaging itself to blend in with the local flora as it stalked the local fauna.

She shivered lightly, drawing herself back to the present as Aisling deftly paid both their entrance fees, drawing them deep into the wonder of the Carnivale.

Bright lights hung from every corner, colorful and full of motion. If you stared too long, though, they had a tendency to make you sick. As fascinating as they were, though, the world at ground level was just as interesting. People wore costumes—gauzy affairs that fluttered with the faintest of breezes, revealing glimpses of flesh otherwise kept hidden. Eyes flashed with knowing looks as the WASP occupants of their fair town flushed scarlet, ducking their heads in shame but always peeking up for a second, third, or even fourth look.

Rey felt no shame as she walked past a woman clothed in voluminous white lace that floated around her, giving her the appearance of an angel in one light and a devil in another. The woman's eyes flicked for a moment as Rey met hers, an uneasy familiarity sparking between the two of them that had Rey's steps faltering. She knew those eyes...

"Rey!" Aisling's shout drew Rey from her confusion, prompting her to turn her head towards her friend only to find Aisling standing just beyond one of the Carnivale rides—the spinning teacups that never failed to make Rey nauseous—Aisling's expression delighted as she gestured Rey forward.

"What?" Rey called back, obediently trotting towards her friend.

"Come and see!" Aisling's face had lost some of its maturity in her obvious excitement—instead of a poised young woman, Aisling looked more like the young girl she was.

Curious—as always—about this change in her familiar environment, Rey continued forward until it hit her. Soft, haunting, strains of a beautiful melody that was so faint it seemed as if she was imagining it. She took another step forward and the melody grew louder, firmer.

Another step and her heart was beating counter-rhythm to the sweet flute as it fluttered around her, drawing her those last steps forward. Breaking from between two of the Carnivale attractions to view the source of the sweet song, Rey's heart beat a stuttered tattoo against her ribs at the sight.

The music swirled around her—intoxicating her ears, sending one kind of rapture through her body as it swayed in time. The player of the haunting melody inspired a different kind of rapture—one that sent flushed heat through her limbs and sucked her mouth dry.

He was beautiful—achingly, soul-numbingly gorgeous. Just looking at him made her want to weep at his beauty. He was more than Adonis, Cupid, Paris—every man through history who'd ever been worthy of praise paled in comparison. Soft lips, dark eyes, hair that curled in a copper halo around his head, caressing down his face and nesting against his neck with such closeness it inspired irrational jealousy. He could be Narcissus and she would still adore him. And his song...

“Isn't it beautiful?” Aisling was awed next to her; her eyes closed and her head tilted back as she breathed out in a happy sigh.

Rey could not fault her for the beauty of the music, but her attention was rapturously fixated on the boy—no sound could possibly be as beautiful as his face, no note lighter or softer than those perfect lips. She couldn't bear to close her eyes as the music continued to soar through the Carnivale, enrapturing them all one by one.

Time lost meaning—space ceased to exist as well as matter.

There was nothing to Rey except the boy and his song.

He moved with grace and dignity, a predator's walk if she'd ever seen one. He strolled with impunity through the masses, his eyes closed as he deftly navigated his way through the Carnivale, with all of them following in a dazed trail. He was gripping in his motions, twisting around so he was walking backwards, his body swaying hypnotically with the tune to draw them still closer to wherever he was leading. His eyes, opening half-mast, rose to caress over them, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth that had her breath catching. That smile...

There was something wrong with that smile—something just plain soul-wrenchingly wrong that she faltered in her obsessive attention, blinking and stumbling with startled confusion as the masses behind her continued forward, brushing past her or out-and-out pushing her out of the way in their dreamy haze to follow the player.

His smile darkened—became even less of a smile and more of a threat as his eyes—those caramel orbs she'd been so admiring of before—seemed to flash, to spark with fire until his eyes glowed with it. *Come*, they seemed to whisper, coupling with the smile as an invitation to draw her forward. *Follow*.

She took a faltering step forward, the music drawing her in once more and those eyes—they heated until she could feel them scorching her skin, drawing a sweat-slicked line down her back as she trembled with conflict.

Come, follow, whispered around her again.

Her foot lifted against her will, drawing her forward once more even as she resisted, the hot heat of his gaze eliciting a sudden cold chilling dread that sank deep into her bones. Something was wrong here—so very wrong. That thought seemed to balance her and her foot quickly dropped back to the ground, drawing her no closer to the player than she was before.

“What's wrong?” A whisper of movement and the softly uttered words drew a startled cry from Rey's lips as she whirled to find the Woman in White standing there, her clothes floating around her in hypnotically soothing waves.

“What?” Rey licked her dry lips, her heart beat kicking up a thundering rhythm as the woman turned her head, those familiar eyes flashing with overlaying textures of black and white as she smiled softly.

“You look confused, child,” the woman murmured, stepping deftly around Rey, her clothing fluttering laconically in her wake.

“What’s going on?” Rey asked, moving to the side as a group of people moved past, their expressions glazed. A double take had her drawing a startled breath—she recognized Kara among them, leading her to turn her head, frantically searching for Declan.

“The moon is full, child,” the woman floated forward, her expression rapturous as she tilted her head back and stared up at the sky. “The Fair have been given this night to do with what they will.”

“What?” The song was tugging at her again, the boy appearing between two of the Carnivale attractions, his feet dancing as two others joined in his song, adding strings and a faint rustling beat to the hypnotic melody.

Her concentration faltered, and she had vague memories of the woman’s smiling face and flashing eyes before she was drawn under once more. Time drifted in a haze, people fluttered around like ghosts, floating through the world without thought or care.

Reality reasserted itself gradually when the first of the Carnivale workers brushed past her in a hypnotic swirl of color, eyes flashing and lips peeled back in a taunting snarl that had her heartbeat stuttering. Her footsteps faltered, and the music seemed to dip as she became aware of laughter—low, creeping, eerie laughter that held vicious delight that had her head turning from the player to follow it to its source.

Her eyes widened and the music, the boy—everything lost its delightfulness as soon as she saw him.

“Declan!”

He was slouched against one of the Carnivale stalls, hunched over in such a way that it was obvious he was in pain. He clutched at his middle, his jaw line tight as he stumbled to his feet and moved forward with purpose.

Rey pushed her way through the crowd, ignoring all thoughts of not harming familiar faces as she struggled against the tide to get to him. A flash of white was all the warning she got before she was jerked around, the woman from earlier appearing in front of her—still beautiful but with an edge that sent shivers of unease down her spine.

“Where are you going, child?” she questioned, her accent taking on exotic hints as she smiled, flashing a mouthful of more teeth than she should have had. “The night is young and the dance is not finished. Come, join us, help us! Dance!” She whirled Rey back into the crowd with a rich, deep laugh, her eyes flashing as she turned and disappeared into the crowd of dancers.

Rey stumbled, bumping into dancers and Carnivale folk alike as she struggled to get her bearings. The music was suddenly there—loud, pounding, and incessant in its quest to draw her back in, to possess her. She pressed the heels of her hands against her ears in an effort to draw it out, but with the noise muffled, suddenly all she could see was the player’s beauty.

He appeared in front of her, body swaying so hypnotically it occurred to her that music would make his movements better, more beautiful.

Her hands were slipping down her head, the music soaring in volume as the player smiled—a soft, inviting smile that made her want to smile back. Her lips were sliding upwards, her eyes taking on a dreamy glint, and she raised her foot to step forward, only to be abruptly jerked out of her revelry.

“Reyna!” Rey stared at the boy in front of her, confused. His touch was cool against her skin, a welcome relief from the feverish press of bodies and lights.

“Reyna!” A second call had her drawing further away from the music as she swallowed, suddenly parched, and stared at him.

“Declan?” she questioned, so off balance that she wasn’t completely certain she hadn’t been drawn back into the dreamy haze.

“Reyna, thank the Goddess,” Declan breathed, looking so relieved it only added to Rey’s confusion.

“Declan,” she repeated, drawing the boy’s gaze from their surroundings to her face. “What’s going on?”

“Later,” Declan promised, moving his grip from her wrist to her hand, lacing their fingers together as he glanced around once more before tugging her away. “Come on!”

They slipped between two attractions, ducking inside one of the rides when another of the Carnivale workers seemed to swoop by, those inhuman eyes coloring the way until they vanished back into the throng.

“What—” Rey started, only to draw a startled breath when Declan deftly placed a hand over her mouth.

Blinking, she frowned when Declan carefully placed a finger against his own lips, catching her eye and narrowing his gaze until she nodded her understanding.

Keep Quiet.

He waited several moments after the worker’s disappearance to carefully pull her forward through the Carnivale. They made their way through riderless rides and peopleless booths until they came upon an empty tent.

“Come on,” Declan instructed, drawing back the flap and ushering her inside. “I can protect us here.”

“Does this mean we can talk?” Rey was angry and afraid and when given a choice between the two emotions, anger was rapidly winning as she whirled in on Declan, not bothering to wait for his response. “What the hell is going on? Why is everybody acting like this? And why weren’t you affected? I saw Kara earlier and you weren’t with her, so—”

“The music doesn’t affect me,” Declan interrupted, watching her carefully as he stayed close to the tent flap to keep watch.

“And why’s that?”

Declan let out a small sigh before turning to face her, his expression tired. “Because I’m one of them.” He tilted his head back towards the throng.

“Them?” Rey’s heartbeat was racing as she wiped her sweaty palms on the legs of her pants. “Who’s them?”

“The Fair Folk,” Declan replied, giving the outside one last glance before turning to face her fully. “Faeries, if you will.”

“Faeries?” Rey’s voice squeaked as she gaped at him, gobsmacked. “They’re Faeries? You’re a freakin’ Faerie?”

Any other day of the week, Rey would have happily chalked this up to a bad dream. Any other day of the week, she wouldn’t be stuck in some Carnivale tent with a boy who had weird eyes and a predator’s edge who claimed to be a Faerie.

“Fey, Sidhe, Pixies; Faerie is just one solid term used for all of us. It’s easier for humans to remember us that way.” Declan studied her for a moment, and Rey found herself freezing under his scrutiny.

“You don’t... eat people, do you? Cause I don’t think I’d taste very good. Not enough meat on my bones and—”

“I don’t eat people,” Declan’s lips twitched, and it took Rey a second to move past the memories of those vicious smiles of earlier to realize that Declan was genuinely amused.

“But they...” she trailed off, her heart catching in her throat as Declan’s grim expression said it all.

“I have to go out there—I have to get Aisling!” She didn’t make it halfway to the tent flap before Declan was there, stopping her with his too strong, too cool grip.

“No!” he hissed, his eyes taking on a frantic gleam. “You can’t! They can’t have you! You have to stay here!”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Rey tugged fruitlessly at her wrist. “I can’t let them eat my best friend!”

“They’re not going to eat anybody unless you go back out there,” Declan shot back, tugging her with minimal effort back to where she’d previously stood and pushing her roughly but with care into the seat there.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Rey repeated, tensing in preparation to run for the flap.

A dark look from Declan made it abundantly clear he knew her plan.

“This!” Declan motioned to their surroundings before sweeping his hand back towards where the masses remained. “This whole thing, didn’t you ever wonder why they were doing this?”

“Well,” Rey faltered, her thoughts swirling in chaotic patterns as she struggled to make sense of everything. “Yes, I guess.”

“You, this,” Declan motioned to the two of them. “This is what it’s about.”

“What do you mean?” Rey’s mouth was still dry, but fear was flooding her senses at Declan’s grim look.

“The Carnivale is a Faerie Hunt, a Wild Hunt, one of many,” Declan stated, crouching so that he was in front of her. “They travel through towns, drawing people in with their lights and amusements and keeping them here with their songs and beauty.”

Rey thought back to the beautiful boy from earlier and flushed in understanding. Five minutes ago, she would have gladly given anything to spend her life basking in the beauty of his smile.

“And if they can keep all of them for the night of the moon, they can keep them forever.”

“What?”

“If you go back there, and they get you back under their thrall, everybody here will be gone by morning.”

“Gone?” Rey swallowed. “As in... dinner?”

Declan shook his head as his lips curved in a humorless smile. “The majority will go to feeding the Hunt. Some, though, will become part of the Hunt, the ones who resisted the longest, who fought the hardest.”

“And you? How do you fit into this?”

“I’m a *maith anum*, a good soul. It’s my job to keep them from succeeding.”

“And you do it so well, my son.” Rey let out a startled scream as the lady in white reappeared, all presentations of human beauty stripped away, leaving her with a feral gleam.

“Mother,” Declan greeted, deftly inserting his body between Rey and the woman, his entire being coiled tight in preparation for an attack.

“Mother?” Rey squeaked, gaping at the back of Declan’s head. “She’s your mom?”

“Real role model, isn’t she?” Declan’s voice was harsh and without humor, drawing a hissing snarl from the woman in front of him.

“I was a brilliant role model, you mongrel! You were simply a horrible student with all your sympathy and love for these weak humans.” The woman sneered at Rey with such utter derision, Rey felt anger give fear a kick as she scowled back.

“Hardly weak, mother,” Declan sneered back, raising himself slightly as he turned halfway towards Rey. “You’re the ones who couldn’t ensnare one measly human before dawn.”

“Oh, but it’s not dawn yet, and we have the best player with us tonight. Faust?”

The beautiful boy stepped around the woman, his flute already fitted to his lips as he drew breath to play.

“No!” The first note echoed through the tent, drawing a startled gasp from Rey as it seemed to reach inside her, grabbing at her very soul and *pulling* even as Declan threw himself forward, only to be dashed aside under a pile of feral, yipping, snarling inhuman bodies.

“Rey!” Declan’s voice layered itself over the soaring notes of the player’s song. “Don’t listen to it, Rey! Listen to my voice! Hear me!”

She tried, she really did, but his song was so soothing, so inviting, and his eyes...

They were warm, like candy, and sweet—so very sweet. Her feet moved, taking an unconscious step forward, then another until she found herself moving in a throng of bodies.

Come, the song invited. *Follow. Join.*

Her body gave a slow twirl, her breath emerging in a soft sigh as the breeze scaled over her skin.

It was so peaceful, the music, the dancers. So...

Wrong.

Flashing eyes and too-sharp teeth had her sucking in a startled breath as the beauty around her seemed to fade as the first rays of dawn skimmed the horizon.

“Rey!” She heard someone shouting. Her vision seemed fuzzy, her hearing faded, but she heard her name and turned towards its source.

She could make out a figure—something in her mind telling her it was familiar—struggling against the throng of dancers. Even as she watched, another dancer broke from the back and threw herself at him, fingers morphing into claws, flowing garments into bat-like wings.

“No!” It was wrong—the song was peaceful, its message inviting—there shouldn’t be violence here.

“No!” She screamed again as another body threw itself into the fray.

“Don’t listen, Rey!” she heard that voice calling again. “Cover your ears and close your eyes and don’t listen!”

Twisted up inside and hemmed in from every angle, Rey listened to the voice, the only clear set of instructions she was able to follow.

The music rose, clashing inside her head in a raging crescendo—building up pressure until all she could do was scream and scream and scream –

And then nothing.

The music stopped so suddenly it was like a phantom.

“Rey.” The sound of his voice had her gasping, stumbling to the ground only his quick reflexes keeping her upright.

“Dec–Declan,” she breathed, staring up at him wide-eyed.

“It’s okay, Rey,” Declan gave her a bright happy smile, his hair glowing in the early morning light. “It’s okay—it’s over, we won.”

She blinked at him in confusion.

“We did?” Her gaze wandered from his face to their surroundings, and she drew in a startled breath.

The Carnivale was gone—there was nothing in the clearing except for the unconscious town folk and them.

“Where’d they go?” she asked, peering around in confusion. “How - ?”

“They lost.” Declan smiled grimly. “They’ve moved on to better hunting grounds.”

“And you?” Rey liked his arms—she liked having them around her, liked having his coolness to accompany her heat. But his eyes...

They were still the eyes of a predator, even though they stared at her with regret now.

“I go,” Declan replied. “I find them and I stop them.”

“Is that all you do? Don’t you get to have a life? Friends?”

Declan smiled sadly down at her, bending forward to lay the barest of kisses across her forehead. “This is the path I have chosen. Do not fret over me,” Declan murmured against her skin.

She breathed in his scent, the feel of his cool unearthly skin and sighed. “Will I ever see you again?”

“Dream of me,” was his reply and when she looked up...

He was gone.

END

Milano, Coming Home

by
George Moore

The rhythm of the train
ratcheted my fever,
for whatever reason I could not

see but through a blurred rain,
climbing the backbone of Europe
headed home by way of Paris

on the Orient Express,
a few last dollars and a few
last days, to the city of light.

But I stopped then, as train
and year crept into Milano
and lingered, I too ill to go on,

the fever breaking on a dream.
Children throwing confetti
intermingled with light rain

as I climbed down into the street,
but more, they wore costumes
of the 17th century,

the powdered wigs and parasols,
fine ladies and gentlemen
three feet tall.

Allegorical wagons roamed
the streets in masquerade scenes
from a Shakespeare play,

discoursing anything, eloquent
in Italian rhymes. Re-enactments
made my head swim, the cold

displacing centuries, in a fever
to be nowhere but here, now,
parading to Piazza del Duomo.

I slipped into my own
diminutive past, where I would
wake from this fever cured

of modernity, to live among
the miniatures of time,
dance their dances and believe

in meatless days, light as Lent,
and overhear their laughter,
caught up in their own

illusion, in a secret jump
of time, to parti-colored
piazzas, more than the world

will give them. It is theirs,
this Ambrosian rite, theirs
the holiday, and its patron saint:

they are the swarm of bees
settling on the infant's face,
leaving a drop of honey.

Mascaren

by

Ben A.Bell

Smack!

The old-fashioned phone slammed into its cradle.

“Who the hell is he to tell me what to do? They all try to tell me what to do, and I’m SICK OF IT!” Deanna shouted. Twisting her face into a grimace, she mimicked, “Take your pills, take your pills.” The yellow bottle of pills on the bureau stared at her in silent rebuke. It taunted her until she snatched it up and flung it against the wall. With a snake’s rattle, it burst open, spraying tablets across the bedspread.

No one knows what I need but me! She’d stopped taking the pills a week ago, after a bang-up fight with her mother about going to visit Alessandro. *As if the old drunkard cares—she just wants my money for herself and her booze.*

The rented room’s cracked mirror displayed three Deannas, so three disembodied hands were required to apply black eye-shadow and sharp strokes of eye-liner. She wished she had red lipstick to draw oozing lines of blood running from her lips—then she’d *really* look like the vampire-whore her mother always called her. Alessandro had liked it, said she was sexy, like a queen of the night. He understood how the black clothes, the heavy makeup, and the many piercings made her feel. He got her. Or so she’d thought. But really, he was just like the rest of them.

From the bedspread, the pills glared at her like tiny eyes. Their tacit reproach chafed at her. Grabbing her purse, she decided to go out in the streets and have a terrific time just to spite Alessandro, her mother, and those stupid white pills.

Deanna’s black heavy-soled boots clumped down the stairs of the rooming house. She punched into the cavalcade of humanity filling the streets during Carnival.

“Bastard!” she hissed. She’d spent so much money to come here—at *Alessandro’s invitation*—and now, he didn’t want to be with her, said she was acting strange, different from the year before when he’d been an exchange student. But he obviously just wanted to be with that *puta* that she heard giggling in the background of his phone call.

Everyone had told her not to go, but that made it irresistible. On the flight, she’d felt alone and insecure, but she thought Alessandro would make her feel better—alive—like she used to before the witch-doctors gave her potions meant to change her into a dull lump of nothingness. Or, in their words, normal. They were trying to cut out her soul, but she wasn’t going to let them.

Revelers, laughing and rowdy, jounced into her shoulders as she pressed through the crowd. She bared her teeth, squirmed into their midst, and danced with abandon. Problems could go to hell, the festival was hers to enjoy.

I AM Queen of the Night!



Brilliant festival lights added a livid glaze to his mask. Wind buffeted other celebrators, but none of his wild curls were disturbed by the currents. Through the eye holes of the apple-red devil's mask, he watched the herd pass before him. There were so many to choose from.

Sometimes he took men, sometimes women. Their weakness pulled him, like the suction of a baby looking for a nipple. He came to them, offering his teat, and his essence tunneled into them.

It was almost time. He could feel it coming.



The timeworn man kept to the fringes of the crowd. Creased clothes and wrinkled skin hung slack, tented in places by the points of his bones. Rheumy eyes surveyed the painted faces swirling around him. Ears, which could discern the sound of an acorn dropping to the forest floor, were assaulted by the whining arpeggios of accordions and trumpets. Laughter impaled him as a bronzed bohemian halted his passage, and then pointed to the masks hung on his bamboo lattice.

Smiling lips asked, How much? though the words were swept away and drowned in the crush of bodies. From under tangled, wiry eye-brows, the old man examined him. The boy shone with combustible youth, and the old man croaked out an amount which he knew would be far beyond the boy's means. Disappointment marred plump lips; the boy shrugged, turned away, and was swallowed up in moments by the milling masses.

The warmth of the Venice night helped ease his aching joints.

No, that wasn't right. He was in Rio. Or was it Brussels?

Well, it really didn't matter. He and his masks traveled wherever they were needed.



Carried along by the human current, Deanna lost her way. An acrobat with chains tattooed on his biceps skittered in for a quick grope. Breaking away, she collided with an oily-skinned girl wearing cockatoo feathers and little else. The girl's slick, tumescent curves intrigued Deanna. But as the girl's lips curled in a salacious smile, Deanna jerked her hands away. The girl cawed laughter and pushed past. Unbalanced, Deanna stumbled and fell. Knees struck her as she struggled to rise.

Mania waned, and her other self rose. Each grinning mask that passed her scraped away more of her self-confidence. Their wild roar flayed her raw. Mauled by the violence of the uncaring crowd that swarmed around her, she fought to get out. Before, they'd seemed exotic and attractive; now their alien monstrosity smothered her. She was alone in the middle of a stampede.

Why me? Even as she asked, she knew there was no answer. She was alone because nobody gave a damn, not her mother, not Alessandro, not her friends, and certainly not her father, whose memory haunted her at night.

A man in a lion mask grabbed her arm, whirled her close, and gyrated against her. Sour sweat invaded her nose. Someone careened into her from behind, tearing her loose from the dancer and shoving her into an amazon whose ostrich plumes waved with gaiety. The tall transvestite seized her arm and dragged her deeper into the mob.

The maelstrom around Deanna grew thicker, cloying her senses with their incomprehensible glee. The brilliant colors of their joy hurt her eyes, their raucous music singed her ears, and her heart, suddenly weak, palpitated in unsynched rhythm against their vigorous cries.

There was no air—she couldn't breathe—the fire of their riotous costumes used up all the oxygen. Walls of dancing demons prevented her escape; tears blurred her vision. The thunderous throng blundered into her, spinning her around. Indifferent elbows ejected her from their midst, pushing her to the outskirts of their community, the outskirts of their humanity.

Staggering free of them, Deanna hid in a shadowed alley, gagging on the stench of excrement and decayed tissue. Hysterical sobs stole her breath; she slid in something slimy underfoot and skidded into the stone wall. An icy river of desolation washed away all thoughts of help and hope.

Stuck to her boot, half of a rat stared up at her with dead, marbled eyes. Though the night was warm, she wrapped frigid arms around herself, relishing the jabs of her studded bracelets. The self-inflicted pain was a respite from the rupture of her soul.

This is where I belong. With the dead.



Predatory instincts reached out and sampled the fare. Among streams of brightly colored costumes, flower-festooned floats, and whirling dervishes, he felt the delicate tincture of misery. Almost obscured by the exhalations of the drunken denizens wading past, an aroma of pain wafted out from the warrens of this cesspool of a city.

Twisting in and out of anonymous strangers, he followed the fresh, salty tinge of despair. His devil mask floated away, revealing a doughy, nondescript face. The rabble unconsciously made way; his passage dampened their spirits until he brushed past, his appearance forgotten at once as they returned to their merriment—as if he had never been.

The scent was stronger to the west, he realized and grinned. The hunt was on.

Carnal delights assailed his questing thoughts. The baker's wife was enjoying a threesome while the baker slid pans of pastries into oven infernos, ready to cash in on tomorrow's hungry festival-goers. A town councilman ravished his voluptuous mistress, while her son hid in the closet, crying into her fur coats. A chicken, hung by its claws, coughed blood as its throat was slit in a forbidden ceremony. But none of these pleasures appeased him.

The breeze of bestiality increased as he went deeper into the slums, searching for the one he wanted, further into the labyrinth of souls.



Shuffling into the alley to take a leak, the old, unkempt man spied a girl, crouched against a wall. Her spiked black-hair bristled from her skull, ending in fiery red tips. It reminded him of one of his feathered masks.

Hauling his wares with him on their bamboo trellis, he stepped over garbage and half of a dead rat; his eyes feasted on her purple lipstick and clunky, silver-skull earrings.

“Do you want to buy a mask?”

Deanna shivered as the voice scratched her ears. “N-n-no,” she stammered. Silhouetted by the streetlights, the masks in his display made him look like a hydra, a beast with countless heads snaking out from his neck.

“I have one you will like.” He crept up to her, studying the rivulets of make-up which had run down her face. *Tormented eyes*, he thought with sympathy. “I have the perfect one for you.” He pointed up at an orange Sun god mask.

She hunched her shoulders, averting her head. Speaking required such an effort. She wished he’d just go away, and mumbled, “No, I don’t need a mask.”

Sucking his lips into his toothless mouth, he made a squishy pop and said, “Do you know I used to work in Venice? I was a mascaren and chief of the mask-makers guild.”

Her head skewed a bit, and she regarded him with one heavily-mascaraed eye.

He continued, “That was a long time ago. My masks are different now—they are better. Try one and see.”

Levering herself from the wall, Deanna gazed up at the masks. She moved a little toward the mouth of the alley, and he turned apace so the light fell across the paper-mache faces of his creations.

Emerald greens, saffron yellows, and ruby reds decorated his work. Feathers, glitter, and intricate swirls of gold and silver paint graced their surfaces. She reached out a finger and stroked a bit of rabbit-fur which adorned a pink fairy-face.

A wrinkled, skinny arm reached out and plucked the Sun god headdress off its perch. He held it out for her inspection. She studied the geometric flame design coursing around the edges. Prongs of fire radiated out from the top.

She put it on.



He lurched to a stop. The delicious reek of hopelessness that had been tickling his nose for over an hour had disappeared. He raised his face to the sky and opened his mouth, breathing in the night air and the myriad stories that flew on its currents. Gone. Someone was playing a game with him.

Growling, “No!” he leaped onto a second floor balcony.

A trick of the light. Too much wine, thought the few who imagined they’d seen this marvel.

Closer to the bleak sky, the tenuous thread of depression re-appeared, but it was weak and fading fast. He gathered its effervescence into his nostrils, then blew out his own elixir in an invisible stream. The game wasn’t over yet.



The mask kissed her skin with warmth. Deanna closed her eyes for a moment as vertigo swayed her. Pinwheels of lights churned behind her closed eyelids. Birdsong twittered into her ears. From pastel ripples, colors kaleidoscoped and solidified into a sun-drenched meadow above the sea. Far-off whitecaps bobbed in its azure surface. The warmth of the pastureland spread to her whole body, and she breathed in honey-pollen and apricots. An unknown strength infused her, and she knew that if she only stretched out her arms, she could fly over the waves of the endless ocean. Her lips curved into a half smile.

The old man’s long disused facial muscles tweaked the corner of his mouth upwards as he watched her reaction.

A buoyant freedom sluiced through her veins, and for a second, she felt beautiful. *Oh, if only Alessandro could see me now!*

Warped ridicule wafted into her mind, *And what would Alessandro think then? Without pause, the mocking voice went on, He’d think you were nothing. He’s realized how worthless you are. He doesn’t want you now. No one wants you now...*

The lovely meadow dimmed, a low droning buzz replaced the birdsong.

You know what you are. No man will want you and you know why. The scathing censure slithered around her mind, and settled on her heart.

A black curtain fell across the sunny sky. Deanna shook her head, and whispered, “No.” She knew what was coming.

The barb pieced her brain like an arrow, *You can’t have a beautiful mask like this one. That’s not who you really are. You’re unclean, dirty, because you ... liked ... it ...*

Her world cracked apart and crumbled to dust. The cold insults rang in her mind. It was true; she was unloved and unlovable.

She snatched the mask off, and shoved it at the startled man, but the reproaches continued to hound her. *You know what to do. You know which one’s for you. You know.*

Reddened eyes swung to the top-most mask. It was black and silver, its mouth was open in a silent wail. Its eyes and brows melted down its face in a sad lament.

That’s the mask you deserve. You deserve pain. You know why.

“I want that one,” she requested, pointing up at it.

“No, no. This is the one for you ...” he encouraged.

She shook her head, silver-skulls swinging from her ears. “I want that one.” She was adamant.

Lips set in a stubborn line, he said, “That one is too expensive for you.”

“I have money, I can pay you well for it.”

When the man didn’t move to get it, she stood on tip-toe, and used a finger to prod the bottom of it. Jarred loose, it fell into her hands.

She put it on.



There it was. The plaintive cry, the perpetual pain of a life begging to be snuffed out. It crashed over him like broken glass, peeling back his nerves to the quick. Shuddering with the intensity of his longing, he rose to the roof and flew over the pitiful dwellings in the dilapidated ghetto.

Mine, he thought with glee.



Statue-like, fists curled at her sides, Deanna fell down, down, down into the stifling void of depression. The mask hung like a shroud over her pallid face.

Why should I care? the elderly mind argued with itself. *Everyone must travel his own road. If they won’t listen, they won’t listen. What difference does it make to me?*

He pocketed the money she’d given him and tottered out of the alley into the street. The cacophony of the merrymaking gave him a headache. Mumbling to himself, he leaned on his bamboo lattice and stumbled into the crowd.



Drifting from the roof, he settled on cat’s feet behind her. She didn’t even seem to be breathing, locked in a trance of misery.

“Deanna? Do you know what carnival means?”

His voice raised prickles on her neck.

“It means abandonment of the flesh.”

Pivoting to face her destiny, Deanna was too tired to be afraid. He took a step forward, eclipsing the light from the street.

Drawing her into his gentle embrace, he said, “I have a message for you ...”

Her eyes widened as he opened his soul to her. His face changed to one she knew well.

Her father said, "I love you, Dee-dee. You're my darling angel."

A quiver of fear ran through her body, then flowed into his, transforming into a quiver of excitement. His flat black eyes became large, and she shrank, withered, and fell into them.

Years receded, and she shuddered as she felt his hands on her. She wanted to scream but couldn't. Too ashamed to scream, too ashamed to tell anyone. Or was she? She wanted yet didn't want it to end. The special attention. The gifts. He made her feel beautiful. He told her that he loved her more than anything else, and she believed him and told no one. She knew it was wrong, but ... but ...

The most brutal truth she could never bear skewered through her—it was true—part of her had liked it ... needed it ... craved it.

Self-hatred engulfed Deanna. Her mind fractured, and the beast with her father's face stuck greedy hands into the fissures. He leaned forward to take all that she was, and all that she would ever be, into himself.

A tiny noise behind him made him pause. A split second later, he was looking down at a bamboo spear protruding from his stomach. He giggled.

The spear dissolved into nothing, and he turned to face the wizened man. Only then did his smile falter.

The old man clutched a round white mask and slowly put it on. It had no eye holes, but it shone. Weakly at first, then brighter and brighter. Pure, serene radiance captivated the onlookers. The Carnival noise, the clanging din of the music, the shouts and the laughter, the sounds of the world; all of it just stopped. No poisonous whispers pricked at the edges of Deanna's mind. Then, the mask flashed and the alley flooded with a blinding light.

In one continuous exhale, the predator deflated into diaphanous spider webs which blew around and around, picked up in a sudden gust of wind with alley litter and the coarse hair of the dead animal. It whirled into a small cyclone, and then disappeared into the night sky.

Through the cloud of detritus, Deanna saw the ancient man surrounded by a fuzzy haze. A murmur echoed into her mind as the man straightened up and hobbled away.

If you ask for it, help is just around the corner.

The black carnival mask slipped from Deanna's face and fell to the ground, unnoticed. She stepped over it and ran into the street, following the ancient man. She touched his shoulder. Without a word, he pressed the white disk-mask into her hands, enclosing his hands around hers. He smiled a toothless grin, and said, "Good. First steps are always the hardest."

END

Equestrienne

by
John Hayes

It's morning at the Carnival of Halloween
Village streets are closed
the time is meant for children and simple men.
My children ride a unicorn,
around a dusty track.
A goblin leads their way.

Tonight, vampires will congregate
werewolves howl and rowdiness prevail.
For now workers struggle in the village square
to set the stage for circus acts
that will end at two.

While my children ride the carousal
Tarot readers promise me my dreams
I win a prize when the weight-man
misses by twenty pounds.

My children scream
as clowns tumble from a makeshift ring.
The ringmaster cracks a garish whip.
Bells affixed
twin mares canter into view
Rose Marie's proud toes grip
each shimmering back.

Tassels whirling.
colors flowing
she soars
through a ring of fire.

She savors my applause
tenders kisses in my direction
as she rides from view.

She will dismount
feed sugar to her mares.
If I could whinny
she'd feed me sugar too.

All the Fun of the Fair

by
Peter Caunt

Jimmy heard the low rumble of a transporter pass the house. He lifted up his homework to make a path to the window. It had been raining. The lawn was glistening, the sun starting to take away the worst of the morning. It was today that the fair was due to arrive for the local Carnival. He thought of all the rides sparkling with the dying sun and then exploding into multiple colors as the sunlight faded. He thought of the generators bursting into life and the lights tearing their way through the spreading dusk. He pressed his nose against the glass and watched the transporter carry the fragments of the rides over the hill. He stared into the distance until his breath on the glass obscured his view. By the evening, the rides would be up and running. After tea, Kenny would be round, eager for them to be there for the first night. Just like last year. Slowly, he wiped his hands on his jeans to remove the cold sweat.

“Kenny called round earlier.”

Jimmy looked up at his mother, then continued eating his cauliflower cheese.

“I said you were doing your homework, so he should call round later.”

Jimmy finished off the last portion and slumped in his chair.

“You did finish your homework, didn’t you?”

Jimmy nodded.

“Good. Then would you like some blueberry pie?”

His stomach said no, but his taste buds said yes. He heard a knock at the door and knew it was Kenny. Eating the pie would delay them getting to the Fair.

“A big piece.”

His mum gave him a stare.

His eyes fell. “Please.”

“That’s better. Now hurry up because that will be Kenny at the door; you don’t want to keep him waiting.”

He played with the dessert until his mother took it away.

“I’ll heat it up for you when you get back. Now go out and have some fun. And don’t forget to take a scarf and gloves, it could get cold later.”

Jimmy ran straight out of the back door and came face to face with Kenny.

“Hey, you can hear the music already.”

Jimmy stopped. He could hear the organ notes wheezing their way through the fading dusk. He found himself swaying gently with the music as the siren tones seeped into his mind. He blinked and Kenny was some way ahead.

“Come on, we don’t want to be late.” Kenny’s voice trailed into the distance.

Jimmy fastened up his jacket and raced after him.

They reached the brow of the hill and looked down on the mixture of delights below. Jimmy watched the roller-coaster soar into the sky and heard the screams of the occupants as it plummeted down. He could see the bumper cars racing in all directions. He could feel the impact of each collision.

“Come on,” Kenny was halfway down the hill.

He caught up as they ran past the generators, competing with the organ music to fill the air. They stopped at the skittle stall. Piles of tin cans begging to be knocked down.

“You look like two likely lads.”

What more could a young man want than to throw stones with the prospect of taking home a goldfish in a plastic bag? They both dug in their pockets.

“Bad luck, lads. Another go?” The showman juggled the wooden balls in an attempt to hold their interest.

“That last can was nailed on,” said Kenny as they walked away.

“You bet. I hit it full on and it didn’t even wobble.”

Kenny slid to a halt. “Look, the bumper cars.”

Jimmy could still feel the bruises from the previous year. “Okay, but only if I have first go at driving.”

Kenny screwed up his face. “Okay. But you’re such a wet blanket.”

They pummeled each others shoulders then ran forward.

True to his word, Kenny let Jimmy drive first, but when it was his turn, he deliberately ran into everything he could until they were thrown off. They walked away; Kenny holding his sides with laughter, but Jimmy holding his with pain.

“That was great, wasn’t it?”

Jimmy rubbed his ribs. “Yer great.”

Then he realized Kenny had stopped. He looked up and they were standing in front of the Ghost Train. He looked at Kenny’s face. It had lit up like it did every year. He continued to rub his ribs, but this time to remove the sweat from his palms.

“I know,” said Kenny, “You want to go on that stupid carousel.”

Jimmy continued to wipe his palms.

“Look, I’ll come with you if you come with me. Fair deal?”

He knew it was no use arguing. Kenny would go on about it and spoil the rest of the evening. He looked at Kenny and slowly nodded.

“Come along, boys. You look like two lads who like to have the pants scared off them.”

Kenny rushed forward and Jimmy followed on behind.

“Here’s a good train for you, nice and firm so that the ghoolies can’t get at you.”

Jimmy followed Kenny into the seat. The inside, like the outside, was showing signs of rust through the paint, but at least the seats were padded.

“Off we go, then.” The showman pushed the train forward until it went off at its own pace.

Jimmy felt the lurch as the train’s electric motor cut in, and they hurled towards the double wooden doors emblazoned with the words ‘Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here.’ He clutched the bar in front of them until his hands hurt. He saw the bright lights of the fairground out of the corner of his eye. Then they hit the doors, and all the lights disappeared. The train made a sharp turn to the right and a low moaning rang out. Jimmy shut his eyes tightly until they hurt as much as his hands. Cobwebs brushed his face as the moaning grew louder. Then a scream and the train lurched to the left. His stomach started to tense.

Jimmy tried to stop thinking about the Ghost Train. He thought about something he liked. After they were done here, they could go on the carousel. Kenny had promised. The train lurched again and they were surrounded by screeching banshees. Jimmy’s heart was pounding. Each year, Kenny subjected him to this. It wasn’t fair. He turned his head, determined to say something. He forced his eyes into a narrow slit so he could see Kenny. Then, with his mouth half open, he stopped. Kenny’s knuckles were white on the bar in front of him, and his eyes were completely closed.

As they came out, neither of them said a thing. Jimmy ran off to the carousel with Kenny trailing behind. For the first time, Jimmy really enjoyed the ride from the start. This time, there was no knot in his stomach that took the rest of the evening to ease.

On the way home, Kenny’s normal bravado had returned.

“Bet you was scared by that bit in the graveyard where the coffin opened.”

Jimmy remembered his sight of Kenny’s closed eyes in the train and looked straight at him. “No, but that bit where Dracula jumped at us through the open window was the best.”

Kenny paused. “Yer. That was a good bit as well.” Then he ran ahead.

Jimmy smiled and ran after his friend.

As the back door slammed, he heard his mother, “That you, Jimmy? Did you and Kenny have a good time at the Fair? Do you want that blueberry pie?”

Jimmy didn’t answer. But as he rushed upstairs, he thought, “Yes, this year I did have fun.”

END