

hypnagothic

#two



Appointment in Samarkand

(Maolsheachlann Ó Ceallaigh), p. 3

The True Foundation

(Sean Gois), p. 19

Out of Body

(Laeth), p. 27

The Philosopher and the Imp

(Tom Magee), p. 35

The dream about the house on top of the hill

(Júlia), p. 47

August, 2025

For more information and
other issues visit:

hypnagothic.art

Write to us at:

hypnagothic@proton.me



Appointment in Samarkand



Maolsheachlann Ó Ceallaigh

We've all had the experience of waking up from a nightmare. It's such a common experience that we might call it mundane. Except that it is, in itself, quite extraordinary and bizarre.

We wake up. That is to say, we make the sudden transition from one world to another, not in the blink of an eye but in the opening of two eyes. We know that we are back in the familiar world of our bedroom, our home, our neighbourhood. At any rate, wherever we are, we are back in the world of the normal and solid. The dread that had just been afflicting us was, after all, an illusion.

And yet, so often, the dread lingers on, as though we live for a moment on the borderland of nightmare and reality. Perhaps that peril we glimpsed in the shadows of our minds is really here, just out of sight, just about to pounce... Perhaps, for all the mountains of evidence we

have to the contrary, such a thing might actually happen...

At 4:23 on a Wednesday morning, in his flat on the Hessle Road in Hull, Billy Heron emerged from a nightmare.

In movies and TV shows, this moment is generally portrayed with the dreamer sitting upright, gasping, and staring into the distance; an appropriate visual metaphor.

Billy simply opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling, but his turmoil was no less for that.

The nightmare was identical to one Billy had experienced several times before. Again, it had been a dark alley, no different to all the dark alleys he had hurried past in three decades of city life. Again, he had become aware of a presence somewhere beside him, drawing ever closer. A presence that was utterly and implacably bent on his destruction.

And, once again, he was aware of *Samarkand*. Somehow he had the name Samarkand in his mind, although there was nothing in the slightest bit exotic or eastern about this nondescript alley.

Samarkand, he knew, was the place where death had come to him.

And always, he heard the same chant, in a high-pitched and horribly jaunty voice:

The blood is the life

The blood is the life

The bloody is the precious life.

Billy lay there, his heart racing, still convinced in his heart that his murderer was close at hand. His neighbours would find him drenched in blood, perhaps tomorrow, perhaps the next day...

With cruel leisure, reality reasserted itself. No. There was no killer. This was his bedroom, piled with books and magazines and still unpacked boxes. The front door was locked. He was not in Samarkand.

He went back to sleep, gratefully.

"This is a whole new departure for you. Aren't you excited?"

That's what his best friend Gillian had said to him on his last night in Dublin. He'd been complaining about leaving his home city for a place where he knew nobody.

But that was Gillian. She was as upbeat and chirpy as he was...well, everything that was the opposite of that.

"Not really", he'd said, looking around Nealon's as though it would be demolished overnight. "I'm not like you, Gillian. I don't make friends easily. I'm a grumpy, sarcastic git. You know I am."

Gillian smiled at him. He knew she wasn't going to deny it.

"Correction", she said. "You're a grumpy, sarcastic git in *Dublin*. *Hull* Billy can be different.

Hull Billy can be a fricking bouncy labrador. It's a blank slate, a new page, episode one. It's a Change of Scene."

Billy laughed appreciatively. *A Change of Scene* was the title of Billy's Film Studies PhD. The most in-depth analysis of movie scene transitions ever written. Or so he liked to think.

"Seriously", Gillian persisted. "Don't just throw this on the 'Good Advice for Other People' pile. Do it. *Do it*."

So he'd done it.

When he'd started his job as an assistant lecturer in the Film Studies department of the University of Hull, Billy had reinvented himself.

He no longer looked for an excuse to end conversations after five or ten minutes. He pushed himself to speak to strangers. He feigned an interest where he didn't feel it.

He even started dressing more smartly. Black heavy metal t-shirts, worn jeans, and battered runners gave way to stylish shirts, suit pants, and black leather shoes that he actually remembered to polish every morning. Well, most mornings.

He even got himself a tweed blazer, though he stopped short of elbow pads.

And he began to “let people in”, as Gillian had always urged him.

Once, when he was sitting in a greasy spoon and chatting to a guy who looked like a retired Hell’s Angel, he risked an observation on the way the winter light was falling through the window and gleaming on the green glazed tiles opposite.

The guy stared at him for a full five seconds, without expression, before finally saying: “Buddy, you have the soul of a poet. But if you want to see sunlight, you really have to go to Florence.” This was a man with a grinning skull tattooed on his massive bicep.

Following another piece of advice from Gillian, Billy tried to curb his workaholicism. For the four years that it took him to write *A Change of Scene*, he’d barely seen sunlight of any kind. He would frequently spend fourteen hours a day watching stacks of DVDs, flicking through the pages of piles of library books, all the time writing and rewriting and rewriting.

Some of it was ambition. Some of it was the sheer joy of the thing. If he wasn’t utterly drained and exhausted at the end of each night, he felt like he was goofing off.

Well, no more of that. He went to pubs and cafés in the evenings, joined the university’s Film Society, and even got involved in a local libertarian study group. “They all have goatees”, he’d told Gillian on the phone. “Even the girls.”

She laughed her customary belly-laugh. “Sounds like you’re thriving”, she said.

“I am”, he said, realizing only then that it was true.

Still, though, there were the nightmares.

Every time he passed a dark alleyway, Billy stopped— at a safe distance— and watched it, fascinated. They were strange things, alleyways. They only existed as places of transition. The only things that might ever *happen* in them were bad things.

He watched solitary figures nonchalantly walking through them— women, often enough. At night, in lonely parts of town. This fascinated him.

Now and again one of them would look up, catch sight of him watching them from afar, and quicken their pace. He’d feel flustered and walk in the opposite direction, just as quickly. But he couldn’t help himself looking.

None of them were *his* alleyway, though. None of them were Samarkand.

Somehow, he just knew that.

“So, Film Studies, what is that? Do you have to

know every movie ever made, or something like that?"

It was Isha asking him. Isha was the Indian girl who worked at the local all-night shop three streets from him. She was extremely pretty, very friendly, and spoke better English than most of the natives.

He'd taken to buying coffees there at unearthly hours— when the nightmare had woken him up, and he couldn't get back to sleep. He couldn't say how often it had come to him now. A half-a-dozen times, maybe.

"Well, you have to know a lot of movies", said Billy, "but it's more about analysing them."

Isha rested her chin on her fist and looked up at him with her big, brown eyes. She seemed curious about everything. "Analyse, like how?"

The sound of some rowdies drifted in from the street outside, shouting and laughing. Mercifully, they passed the shop, and their voices dwindled into the rumble of traffic that never seemed to stop at any hour of the day or night. In Dublin or in Hull.

"Well, for instance", said Billy, "my PhD was about scene changes. You know, when you're watching a movie and it shows a little girl playing on a swing on a summer's morning, and then the next moment she's a grown woman and she's walking past a graveyard on a dark night? That kind of thing."

"Well, so what?", asked Isha. She was an engineering student. She seemed genuinely baffled.

Billy laughed, feeling the tension of his nightmare slowly dissipate. "Isn't that a bit odd, though? I mean, that sort of thing doesn't happen in real life. Well, with one exception."

"And what's that?"

"Dreams. Dreams, and waking up from dreams. You know, people say the cinema is like dreaming. That's a very old theory. It's called the oneiric theory."

"Oneiric", said Isha, lingering over the word, staring out at the street outside. God, she was pretty. "Never heard that one before. So what made you write about...scene changes?"

Billy was a bit taken aback. Nobody had ever asked him that before, not even Gillian. And he'd always wanted to be asked.

"I think it was growing up in the eighties," he said, stirring his latté, even though it didn't need to be stirred again. "I mean, eighties babies like me grew up expecting nuclear war to break out at any moment."

"Dude, I'm from Kashmir", she said. "That never went away for us."

"Well, OK", he said, with a rueful smile. "So you know what I'm talking about. Anyway, it really used to bother me. That everything around me, even on a lovely summer's day, could change like

that"-- he snapped his finger-- "when the bombs fell. Cut to apocalypse."

He was beginning to spook himself now. He could feel goose-pimples on his flesh.

"Huh", said Isha, but she didn't seem bored. She seemed intrigued.

"And then there was AIDS. That was a new thing when I was a kid. There was no cure. We had it drummed into us constantly. I lived in fear of some maniac pricking me with an infected needle, and like that--" he clicked his fingers again-- "you had AIDS and nothing could save you. Everything changes in an instant."

"Who is that guy out there?" asked Isha, looking past him.

Billy turned around.

It took him a moment to see, but there was a man standing about twelve yards from the entrance of the shop. He was little more than a silhouette against the glow of the streetlight. All that Billy could tell was that he was tall, and he was standing absolutely still.

Watching them.

"He's been standing like that for about a minute now", said Isha. "What should we do?"

This was the moment to be manly, Billy realized-- with great reluctance. Slowly, he began to walk to the door.

Much to his relief, the figure retreated. By the time he'd got outside, the man had disappeared.

"It's later on. We're having drinks. You break those glasses of yours, and then, quite suddenly, the room goes dark. And then, Foley, you say something, something about the death of a man I've never heard of. And that's when my dream becomes a nightmare. A nightmare of horror."

The face of Mervyn Johns froze on the screen, in glorious black and white as Billy hit the pause button on *Dead of Night*. He turned to the thirty or so students in the screening room.

"Still makes me shiver every time", he said. "Just look at how brilliantly the director has transformed the atmosphere of the film. Everything changes in an instant. The feeling of unease has sharpened to a feeling of fear-- but it remains vague, on the edge of vision."

The class looked back at him, with their eternally impassive faces. They were nice kids. They didn't realize how much they resembled mannequins in class.

"Yes?", he asked. "No?"

One girl, Suzie, scrunched her nose. "I don't know", she said. "All that dreams vs. reality stuff seems a bit hokey to me. I have never, ever thought I was in a dream when I was awake."

"But", asked Billy, "you've thought you were awake when you were in a dream. No?"

Suzie didn't look convinced. "All that dream stuff doesn't scare me", she said. "Reality scares me."

Billy looked back at the frozen face on the screen, pretending to think. In truth, he didn't have to think. He'd thought all this to death already, in the years of writing his thesis.

"So you've never literally thought you were in a dream", he said, slowly, looking from face to face. "But what about reality itself?

"I mean, take the biggest questions. Take religion. Some people believe that the world was created by a being of infinite goodness and that everybody has an immortal soul. Some people think there's no such entity and that all this"--he gestured around the screening room-- "is just atoms colliding in space, and there's nothing waiting for us at the end of the ride."

Suzie and her class-mates stared at him silently, curious as to where this was going.

"And nobody knows", Billy went on. "There isn't even anything like a consensus. Every day we get up and have breakfast and make appointments and we don't even know what sort of basic reality we're living in. Isn't that dream-like in itself?"

There was a long silence as Billy's question hung on the air.

"I *do* know", said Suzie, staring at him with a mixture of timidity and defiance. "I know my Redeemer liveth."

Billy looked down and shuffled his papers, suddenly embarrassed. Professions of faith were rare on campus. "Well, I envy you, then", he said. "OK, let's take a look at the lighting in this scene."

"Where is Samarkand, anyway?"

Billy had decided to tell someone about the nightmare. Let people in, just like Gillian said.

It was his colleague Alastair. Alastair seemed to be the only member of the Film Studies faculty who actually liked him. The others were just about polite.

Billy wondered if it was the fact that his PhD had been something of a hit. He'd already accumulated more citations than some of his colleagues who'd been lecturing for ten or fifteen years.

Or maybe it was the *Nightmare on Elm Street: The Dream Child* poster above his desk office. Or the fact that he'd called *Battleship Potemkin* boring, in an unguarded moment.

They were sitting in the canteen, both of them eating morning porridge. It was a custom they'd fallen into over the last few weeks. Alastair was more interested in the dream than Billy had expected him to be.

“Samarkand”, said Billy slowly, “is in Uzbekistan. It’s a very ancient city and it used to be famous for silk and embroidery and all that jazz. Still is. That’s what Wikipedia tells me.”

Alastair looked at him quizzically. He looked like Woody Allen, but with dark hair and a bushy beard. He had the most mobile eyebrows Billy had ever seen.

“Well, you weren’t planning on going to Uzbekistan, were you?”

“Nope.”

“Even still, that can’t be it”, said Alastair, stroking his beard, meditatively. “I’m guessing the message is garbled. Summer kind? Some are kind? Sam R. Khan?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”, asked Billy. “You’re not taking this seriously, are you?”

“Oh come on, dude”, said Alastair, feigning surprise. “What about the Incredulity Index?”

Billy couldn’t help grinning. Almost as soon as they had discovered their mutual love of horror films, Billy and Alastair had come up with the idea of the Incredulity Index. It was the precise minute when all the main characters in a supernatural horror film accepted the impossible was actually happening. They were half-seriously thinking of collaborating on a paper on the subject.

“Well, I’m actually ahead of you, believe it or not”, Billy admitted. “I thought there might be a

Samarkand Lane or a Samarkand Street somewhere in this city. There isn’t. Or maybe an Uzbeki restaurant called Samarkand. There isn’t.”

“Most unhelpful”, said Alastair. “You know what this reminds me of?”

“No idea.”

Alastair screwed up his face and began to speak in deep, ponderous tones; “*Once upon a time, many years ago, a rich merchant in Baghdad sent his servant to the marketplace...*”

Billy beamed. He recognized it now. It was Boris Karloff in *Targets*, a favourite film with both of them

He took up the monologue where Alasdair had left off, hamming it up a notch more: “*The servant came back, trembling, and said, "Master, in the marketplace, I was jostled by a woman in the crowd, and I turned to look. I saw that it was Death. And she looked at me and made a threatening gesture. Please, Master, lend me your horse, so I may ride away from this city and escape my fate. I will ride to Samara, and Death will not find me there."*”

Looking around, Billy noticed that people at the nearby tables were starting to listen to them. Some of them were smiling. Dublin Billy would have felt self-conscious. Hull Billy relished it.

So did Alastair, evidently, as his Boris Karloff impression became even louder and more dramatic: “*Then the merchant went to the marketplace, and he saw Death, and he said to her,*

"Why did you make a threatening gesture to my servant when you saw him this morning?" And Death said, "I made no threatening gesture. That was a gesture of surprise. I was surprised to see him here in Baghdad..."

Billy couldn't let him have the punch-line, so they both finished together, almost shouting now: *"...when I have an appointment with him tonight...in Samara!"*

To his surprise, there was a smattering of applause from around the cafeteria, and someone shouted: "Wahey!" Alasdair bowed and waved.

Suddenly, Billy was feeling better. A *lot* better. Sitting here in the sunlit canteen, full of warm porridge and looking at Alasdair's playful smile, the fear that this nightmare might be something to actually worry about seemed preposterous.

"You know", said Alasdair, pointing his spoon at Billy, "in all these kinds of stories, running from your fate is just running right *into* it."

"Of course. We all know that."

"So maybe do the opposite, is what I'm saying. Maybe you should go down every dark alley in town."

"I don't want to do that", said Billy. "I'm bound to run into your mother."

Along with the Incredulity Index, Billy and Alasdair had evolved an agreement when it came to mother jokes; there were no holds barred, and they were not to be taken personally.

"Well, there is that", said Alasdair. "Hey, tell me again the words of the song."

"It's more a chant, really. *The blood is the life, the blood is the life, the blood is the precious life.*"

"The what's that?"

Billy turned around. Glenn Rogers, the department head was standing there, listening intently. Although he'd been the one to hire Billy, it was obviously a purely professional decision. Professor Rogers was an arthouse fanatic who hated all genre cinema. He seemed suspicious of anything with a coherent story, in fact.

"Oh... said Billy. "It's nothing, really. It's just a sort of...chant I've been hearing in my dreams."

"*The blood is the life?*", asked Rogers. "Isn't that Dracula?" He seemed pleased to have caught the reference, for all his disdain for genre fiction.

"Well, yes", said Billy. "But it's originally from the Book of Leviticus. In the Bible."

"Humph", said Rogers, looking irritated now. "I don't know, Billy. Between Frankie Kruger and weird dreams, maybe all these horror movies have broken your mind. Ha, ha."

He spun on his heel and walked away.

Thinking he could kill the power of the dream,

he told as many people about it as he could. He told Warren, a soft-spoken electrician who he'd met some weeks ago in the Admiral of the Humber, when they found themselves on the same pub quiz team.

Warren was like the uncle everybody wished they'd had. He seemed to be made for an armchair by the fire, a pipe, and sandals. Billy got the impression Warren was completely contented with his simple life.

"That's a very odd dream", said Warren. "I've heard of recurring dreams but never anything so...detailed."

"No, there are usually variations, aren't there? If you have a dream, say, that you're back at school, you might be in a different class, or with a different teacher. Or there might be a polar bear in the assembly hall. The details change. *This* is always the same."

Warren looked down into his cider ponderously. "Take My Breath Away", the song from *Top Gun*, was playing in the background. Billy always found it strangely creepy.

"It's probably some unresolved tension in your subconscious", said Warren. The words seem incongruous coming from Warren, but he spoke them as naturally as though he was discussing a football game. "An alley? Are you feeling trapped, maybe?"

"I've never felt more freedom than I've felt in the last two months", Billy replied. *Dublin* Billy

would never have said something like that to a comparative stranger.

"Well, nightmares aren't nice, but they can't hurt you," said Warren finally.

"I hope so", said Billy.

He had a creeping wish to sit here forever, in Warren's calming presence, on a slow Tuesday in the Admiral. "The thing is though..." He paused.

Warren waited for him to continue, wordlessly, his kindly eyes glinting like the gleam of the pub lights on his cider.

"I haven't told this to anyone else", said Billy. "But they're getting worse, somehow. I mean, the same stuff is happening, but the horror seems...closer."

"Well", said Warren, "perhaps the tension in your subconscious is reaching its climax. Maybe it's all going to blow over."

When Warren said it, it seemed so plausible.

The song had changed to "Don't Stop Thinking about Tomorrow" by Fleetwood Mac. Warren started talking about a new shop space he'd just finished wiring up.

Billy woke up, his heart hammering.

The comforting surroundings of the Admirable of the Humber and the university canteen were a million miles away. The hum of voices in the air was gone. He was alone, in darkness and in silence.

And the nightmare had come again. This time, it seemed more real than ever.

He was in Samarkand, and death was coming.

This time, however, there was no time for the horror to fade away.

Then there was a knock on the door.

Billy jumped, then sat there paralysed. In the silence of the night, the sound had echoed through his small bedsit.

It came again now, more insistent.

Although his animal instincts were telling him to stay absolutely still, he walked the few steps to the kitchen and took his big knife from the drawer.

Then, like walking against a gale-force wind, he walked to the front door and looked out the peephole.

It was one of the students who lived just above him. She was swaying on her feet, obviously the worse for wear.

"Forgot me key", she said. "Let me in, for God's sake. I need to pee."

"You're on the wrong floor", called Billy through the door, as softly as he could. "This is the third floor."

The girl looked surprised for a moment, then started to hoot with laughter as though this was the funniest thing that had ever happened "I'm sorry, mate. That's gold. That's gold, that is!"

She staggered away. Her raucous laughter had done a lot to dissipate his fear. He half-regretted not asking her in to use his bathroom. Even a drunk girl's company would be welcome right now.

Billy walked back to his bedroom, wondering if he had ever been as frightened as the moment he heard that knock for the first time.

Then he saw it.

His bedroom curtains were open. Across the street, on the street bench outside the hospital grounds, a man was sitting.

Looking up at him.

Or was he? He was a block away, and— once again— Billy could only make out his silhouette. He could only see that he was tall, and *seemed* to be looking up to his window.

It's not so strange, really, Billy tried to convince himself. He's sitting there, probably visiting a dying relative. My bedroom light goes on. He hears a commotion. Of course he's going to look up...

But his attempts to reassure himself didn't work. His heart was still hammering, and he felt cold all over.

The shadow-man rose slowly. He was indeed tall. He stood there for a moment, and then walked away, slowly. He disappeared into an alley-way between the hospital grounds and the supermarket.

"I'm so happy to hear things are going so well", said Gillian.

It was the next evening, and Billy was sitting on the very bench where he'd seen the shadow figure sitting. He made himself sit there. It had been three days since he'd phoned Gillian, which was probably the longest they'd not talked in five years.

"It really is", said Billy. "Turns out your advice wasn't as terrible as I assumed." He hadn't told Gillian about the nightmares. He didn't want to worry her.

"And what about the ladies?", asked Gillian. "I reckon I'm allowed to ask every three months or so. Is there some lucky hottie on the scene?"

"Well", said Billy. "I don't know...No, not really."

"And if there is, you're not telling me", said Gillian. "Got it. Hey, did you see Obama is coming to Ireland?"

"Yeah", said Billy. Barack Obama was very far from his mind.

"Hey, there is my *hero*!" Isha was grinning at him as he approached the counter with his latté.

It was only ten o'clock. Billy was determined he was going to get to bed before midnight. He was losing too much sleep.

"What are you talking about?", he asked.

"You're the guy who protects me from the bad men", said Isha, as though she found this wildly amusing.

Billy found himself wondering whether such big brown eyes were exceptional even in India. They seemed impossible not to notice.

"Oh, that", said Billy. "Hardly heroic, was it?"

"Don't do yourself down. You might have saved me from a terrible fate", said Isha, who seemed to be enjoying herself. "Hey, take a picture with me, would you?"

"Why?"

"My flatmate Sarah wants to see a picture of my gentleman caller."

Billy looked away and felt his cheeks flushing, embarrassed.

“Hey, hey”, said Isha, laughing. “I’m only teasing with you. But seriously, come round here. I promised Sarah I’d take your picture.”

Once again, Billy found himself wondering if girlfriends really told each other absolutely *everything*.

“Look, I’m not even going to put my arm around you”, said Isha, clearly enjoying his embarrassment. “But come a bit closer, so I can fit you in the picture.”

Billy stood closer, but just as Isha was about to take the picture, she said: “Hang on. You have to look *tough* in it. Like a guy who chases scary men away.”

“Come on”, said Billy, though he was far from displeased.

“I’m serious. You have to look tough.”

After a moment’s thought, Billy raised a fist in the air, gritted his teeth, and widened his eyes. He hoped nobody walked in at that moment.

Sarah snapped the picture, and a moment later was looking at. She squealed with laughter.

“Well, you don’t so much look tough as...*demented*.”

“Let me see”, said Billy, who couldn’t resist smiling.

He turned the phone towards him. She was absolutely right. He looked like a maniac.

“You have to delete that right away”, he said, laughing himself now. “Give it here.” He reached out his hand.

But Isha had turned her back to him, cradling the phone. “Too late. It’s sending. It’s sending. It’s sent.” She was now shaking with laughter.

“You have to tell her you told me to look tough”.

“Not a chance”, said Isha. “I’m going to tell her that was your idea. So how come you’re here so early tonight?”

Billy shrugged. “I’ve got to get to sleep sooner. I was dropping off at a staff meeting last night.”

“The nightmares?”, asked Isha. The mirth in her eyes had suddenly been replaced with sympathy. “The blood is the life, all that?”

“All that”, said Billy.

“So what am I going to do without my protector?”

“I think you’ll manage”, said Billy, smiling and trying not to flush again. “If anyone gives you any trouble, just show them that picture.”

That night, Billy took his roll of masking tape and covered the inside lock of his front door with strip after strip, pulling it as tight as he could.

He'd never been a sleep-walker. And Warren was probably right about unresolved tensions in his subconscious.

But he wasn't taking any chances. He doubted any sleep-walker could get through that much tape without waking up.

He had no intention of keeping his appointment in Samarkand.

Then an idea occurred to him for the first time.

He went into his bedroom, pulled one corner of his duvet away from the bed, then did the same with the fitted sheet. He raised the mattress and looked under it. He repeated the process with two more corners of the mattress, before he came to the label of the manufacturer.

The label said, "Bedlux, for the night of your dreams."

Not Samarkand.

He rearranged the sheets, and went to brush his teeth.

He smiled at himself in the mirror, wondering if a pretty girl like Isha could really find anything worth noticing in that smile. He thought it was nothing to write home about, himself. Well, girls didn't care about looks so much, did they?

Then he stared at the reflection of the room behind him, half-expecting to see a shadow moving in it. If this was a horror movie...

But there was no stirring of shadows. And when he pulled out the mirror to replace his toothbrush in the cabinet behind, there was no second reflection in it as he pulled it back.

Of course not.

It took about three-quarters of an hour for Billy to fall asleep. But he was successful in his aim. It was one minute to midnight as he drifted into dreams.

Inevitably, the dreams gave way to the nightmare.

He was back in the alleyway. He was back in Samarkand.

The whole city felt dead around him. Nothing was stirring. Even the rumble of traffic seemed far away and subdued.

But *he* was coming.

Billy was about halfway through the alleyway. He started to walk faster, although he felt an invisible force was fighting every step.

Then the shadow appeared before him. The shadow he had seen so often before.

The tall man.

Although they were close enough to touch, the shadow walked towards him with agonising slowness.

He had time to hear that taunting voice say:

“The blood is the life, the blood is the life, the blood is the precious life...”

There was a flash of light on metal...

Billy woke up. This time his heart wasn't just hammering. He felt like he was in the middle of a full-on panic attack, and struggling to breathe.

So this was how he died. Suffocated by terror. Unable to cry out. A massive heart attack, or something like that. Never knowing

A knock on the door in the night would be the last thing he heard. He felt sure of it.

But there was no knock.

And slowly, gradually, the panic attack subsided.

Billy lay on the bed, panting, surprised that he was still alive.

As the immediate panic subsided, he rose slowly to his feet and walked to the window. He felt he could hardly help himself.

He pulled the curtains open.

There was nobody sitting on the bench.

Three guys were ambling across the road, eating fast food of some kind, laughing drunkenly.

A taxi passed, the lights from it illuminating his bedroom.

He looked at his alarm clock. It was a quarter past three. The dead of night.

Slowly, he made his way back into bed, and fell into a deep sleep.

When his alarm went at 6:00, Billy felt a strange peace.

The words of Warren, wise Warren with his avuncular face, came to him again: *Maybe the tension in your subconscious is reaching its climax. Maybe it's all going to blow over.*

It had. Somehow Billy knew that it had. He *felt* it. He found himself, instinctively, thanking the God he eighty-five per cent didn't believe in.

What tangle in his subconscious had come loose, finally? Probably there was no way of knowing. It was doubtless in some unreachable dark part of his brain.

Maybe that was Samarkand.

Billy felt suddenly cheerful. Now that he felt sure the nightmares were gone, everything looked good. The winter dawn was beginning to fill the sky. Hull was his oyster. This unglamorous city

was where life was *really* kicking off for him. Who needed Manhattan?

Emerging from the bathroom, he smiled at the sight of the masking tape covering the door-lock. Well, there had been no sleepwalking, anyway. It seemed ridiculous now.

He was in plenty of time for work. It was a few hours yet until his canteen porridge with Alasdair. He was going to make French toast, and have a leisurely breakfast while listening to the radio.

He turned on the golden oldies station that he liked, and smiled. "Don't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow" by Fleetwood Mac was just beginning.

"If you wake up and don't want to smile" Lindsay Buckingham sang, "If it takes just a little while. Open your eyes, look at the day..."

"You'll see things in a different way", Billy half-sang along with the radio, opening the fridge and taking out the milk.

After the song, the 6:30 news came on, read by Jessica Bell. She had a sexy voice. Alasdair always imagined her with raven-black hair and full lips, dressed with a slight Goth aesthetic.

Usually, he could hear the smile in her voice. Not this morning. Today, her voice was more sombre.

"It's half-past-six and this is your Humberside Classics morning news. Tragedy this morning as a young woman was stabbed to death a little after three a.m.."

Billy had been whisking eggs. He stopped now, and looked at the radio, where it stood on the window ledge. It was a cheerful-looking, retro-styled radio, coloured bright red.

"The stabbing occurred in Crow Lane, near the newly-opened Samarkand rugs and carpets store. The victim is described as an Asian woman in her twenties. An eye-witness saw a tall man leaving the scene. Although it was too dark to see the figure clearly, the witness clearly heard him say these words: *The blood is the life, the blood is the life, the blood is the precious life.*"

The True Foundation



Sean Gois

ALL WAS DARK...

...when I first opened my eyes. Was it always this dark? I couldn't remember. Feeling around the long sheet covered bed, I removed the blanket. It was the only thing protecting my bare skin from the frigid air. I sat up, bare feet touching the cold concrete. Inches from my face was – *I assumed* – my hand, though I couldn't see it. I felt silly waving it in front of my face. Where was I? Who was I? Those seemed like pressing questions that needed answering. But, having no memory of the day before, or *any* day before, it was like trying to solve a puzzle with no pieces, and not even the box cover to see how it should look. And even if I had the box— all was dark.

I stood on my bare feet and stretched out my arms. The circumstances that led me to this point, I did not know, but I must have at least had a decent night's rest. I felt fresh, rested and ready to go (If I could just figure out where). I clapped my hands just to hear something. Anything to cut through the silence. The echoes

let me know I was in a small room. I reached out my hand, grasping for the cold wall that the bed was up against. It was scant three steps before my fingers found and flipped the light switch, filling the room with white light.

It might as well have been pitch black seeing how I couldn't make sense of the ocean of light drowning my pupils. A few minutes passed before I could keep my eyes open at a squint, seeing for the first time the shapes and colors that filled the room. The shapes were rectangles (walls) and the colors were mostly variations of grey and black (if you can call those colors).

The room must have been no more than fifteen feet in length by ten feet in width with the ceiling several feet above the top of my head. Looking in all directions I could find no way in or out. Was this it? Was this room all there was? No. It was a foolish thought and I quickly shooed it away. I shivered and looked down at my naked skin, covered in goose bumps.

"Think", I spoke aloud for the first time. "Think of... anything."

I struggled to recall any detail of who I was, where I was, or anything at all, when—

"Numbers", I thought suddenly. I remembered numbers. "Let's see..." I took a deep, concentrating breath. "There was One... and Two. What else... Three? Yes, Three!"

One by one, all the numbers came to me, filling me with joy. First I had nothing, but now I had numbers! For the first time I could remember, I

was smiling ear to ear. That's when the crooked cracks first spread across the ceiling. Rocks, pebbles and dirt were falling on and around me while the ceiling crumbled and I desperately shielded myself. By the time the ceiling had completely crumbled away, the room was blanketed in dirt and rocks. That's when the floor started rising, taking me up to —

THE LOCKER ROOM

This room was twice the size with more for the eyes to feast on. The walls were completely covered in red and white tiles. In the corner was a shower with a towel, and a single locker standing next to it. Against the wall was a sink with a cup next to the faucet, and behind me was the dust and rock covered bed. I approached the sink and reached for the 'COLD' handle (the only handle) opening the valve. For a moment I watched the water trickle out and down the drain before filling the cup and bringing it to my lips. I hadn't realized how dehydrated I was until the water rolled over my tongue and moments later was gone. I shut the valve and headed to the locker, opening it up to have a look. Hanging up was a white collared shirt, grey pants, underwear, socks and a pair of black leather shoes. I shut the door and moved towards the shower which, like the sink, possessed only one handle, this one with the word *LUKEWARM* written in a curly typeface.

Being several degrees warmer than anything I could remember, the lukewarm water running over me was the second happiest experience of

my life up to that point (just behind remembering numbers). I counted the square tiles on the shower floor until I was satisfied that the number was exactly two thousand three hundred and four, then towed off and put on the clothes. Nothing fit quite right but I was grateful to be warm. I was bent over tying my shoes when I first noticed the door. It looked the same as the tiled wall, only with a doorknob and a door-shaped outline. Desperate for some answers, I opened the door to find —

A LONG CORRIDOR

Brushed steel walls housed the long metal grated floor with rails on each side. Under the grated floor were at least twenty thin lights, side by side, running the down the length of the corridor, around the corner and out of sight. All but one of these lights were yellow, with the striking blue one standing out. The ceiling had caged lights hanging every six feet. I walked, slowly at first down the long passageway, until I turned the corner to find an even longer way.

My pace quickened until I reached a three-way fork. *Where do these go?*, I wondered. The left and right ways winded further while the middle way went on straight. Here the thin colored lights split off going this, that, and the other way. The lone blue light lead down the left corridor, and with nothing else to go off of, I went that way following it down corridors, up ramps and through several empty chambers. I pushed on and continued for what felt like most of my life. It was right when I began second guessing my

glowing blue guide when it lead me to a ladder leading up a shaft and into —

THE OFFICE

The water valve handles excluded, these were the first actual words I had seen. What did it mean? What kind of office? Not long did I ponder this as I was quickly approached by a real live woman. She wore a long grey skirt, a white buttoned blouse and a sweet, welcoming smile. So many questions bounced around my head that I wasn't sure what to start with.

"Good morning," I said. *Why did I say that? Is it even morning?* "Where am I?"

"The office of course!" she smiled, pointing to the sign hanging over a desk. "Right this way. Let's get you an ID, shall we?"

Something about her felt familiar and warm, so I followed her to the desk. She handed me a plain white, plastic badge with only a barcode and 'ID# 8210559' written in bold lettering. She clipped the badge to my shirt and a door opened as she gestured to it, inviting me to step through it.

"Who am I?" I asked.

"Not important," she answered, keeping her smile.

"Please," I said, with desperation in my voice. "What's happening? Where is this?"

"You're late, my dear!" She motioned back towards the door. "Hurry along now."

"Late for what?"

Not answering, she walked back behind the desk, sat down and started rifling through some papers. *Someone's got to have some answers*, I thought, so I headed through the door and into—

THE CONTROL ROOM

The size of the room was impressive; An at least five hundred foot diameter circle with a two hundred foot tall, domed ceiling. Everywhere I looked the room was filled with lights and screens, gears and machines, people in chairs and steel chambers in pairs. There were men working feverishly pushing buttons and pulling levers. Working alone and working together. It was magnificent to behold! Of what purpose any of it had was impossible to determine. Every machine, mechanical and digital, seemed connected in a beautiful symphony with a purpose too complex for one man to grasp. My eyes were wide with wonder when I noticed a man approaching me. He was tall and lean but obviously fit with strong forearms. As he neared I noticed his grim expression.

"You're late." He grimace flashed into a smile. "But it's your first day, so I think we can overlook it!"

"First day of what? Who are you and what is this place?"

"The Control Room, of course. This is where the magic happens! And my name—", he pointed to his ID badge "is Charles Foster!"

That's when I noticed everyone had names and photos on their ID badges. Everyone except for

me. Mine looked generic and flimsy. “Please, tell me what’s going on. I woke up here with no memory of who I am or why I’m here, and no one is being helpful. I’ve been led to this bizarre room full of busybodies and now you’re telling me I’m late? Late for what?!”

“For work, of course! And we really must be on our way.” He turned and beckoned me to follow. “We haven’t all day to waste!”

“Wait!” I shouted, turning a few heads my direction, including Mr. Charles Foster’s. “My name. Do you know it?” I knew if I could have just heard my name it might trigger more memories, and maybe I could start piecing this puzzle together. “Can you at least tell me my name?”

“Your name is not important.” He answered with a smile so genuine, it terrified me. *What is this place?*

After a long brisk walk across the massive Control Room, weaving through workers cranking pulleys, greasing wheels and operating advanced electronics, I was lead to a particular machine that looked to be a closed chamber constructed of a clear glass display. Numbers danced in rhythm around the glass chamber where two seats— one empty— could be seen in the middle. *My chair*, I somehow knew.

Charles Foster waved his hand and a seamless glass door opened. “Liam will help you get situated. Good luck!” And he was gone.

Hesitantly I stepped through the doorway of—

THE CHAMBER

I glanced at his ID badge: Liam Gibbons. Like Charles Foster he seemed fit and trim, though much shorter, and with a rounder face.

“Why does everyone have a name on their badge except me?” I was in no mood for pleasantries.

“You’re here!” He said, ignoring the question. “Good to see you, and welcome to Chamber 81!” “Have a seat!”

“Not until you tell me what the hell is going on here.” *Why is everyone so damn excited?*

“Of course, of course! Here in Chamber 81, it’s all about the numbers. Problems need solving and that’s what we’re here to do! Look—” He pointed to the domed screen which filled with eights, and only eights. “How can we add eight 8’s to get to a thousand? 8 times 8 is 64 so—”

“Easy.” I said with a smile of my own. “It’s a trick question. Eight hundred eighty eight plus eighty eight, plus eight plus eight plus eight.” As I said this the numbers appeared overhead:

$$888 + 88 + 8 + 8 + 8 = 1,000$$

The numbers glowed and popped to a strangely satisfying sound. “Good one, partner!” Liam said with a nod. “Glad to be working with you. Have a seat.”

“Do you know my name?” *If I can just hear my name, it’ll all come back to me.* I didn’t know if that was true, but it was all I could cling to.

“It’s not important. Have a seat.”

Reluctantly, I hopped on the seat and leaned back, looking at the next problem filling the screen. *Why was I suddenly so excited*, I wondered. *And why did I feel so at home?* Liam and I solved problem after problem for hours upon hours. With each solution came the satisfying glow and pop that made me want to solve the next one. We worked so well together it was as if we'd been doing it our whole lives. I didn't know what grand purpose this was serving but somehow I knew— or felt— that it was the right thing to do. Still, when the entirety of the Control Room shut down, I was instantly uneasy again. Who was I? Where was this place? And why wouldn't anyone tell me?"

After the long day of work, Liam led me across to the other side of the Control Room and into—

THE DINING HALL

It was at least as large as the Control Room. I couldn't remember ever seeing so many people eating together in one room. The ceilings were tall, a beautiful gold with magnificent scrolls and grand archways. Crystal chandeliers hung from them, filling the room with a warm, easy light. Long, dark, wooden tables were set in rows with endless feasts inviting everyone to indulge. Weak and weary, I followed Liam to one of the tables. In front of me was a roasted turkey so magnificent, it could feed a family for weeks. There were bottles of wine and plates of cheese, creamy soup with carrots and peas. And bowls of fruit at every seat, pumpkin pies and chocolate treats. It was the first time I realized how hungry

I was. My stomach growled like I hadn't eaten in forever. As much as I wanted to ask everyone around me 'Where am I?', 'Who am I?', 'What is this place?' and 'Why do I feel so oddly at home?'—I chose instead to feast on this glorious bounty that lay before me. It would be a shame to let pass something so joyous when there would be plenty of time for questions. And the more I ate, the more joyous I felt! After hours the room broke out in a merry chorus of song:

We work! We work! For our duration!

We work for glory and exaltation!

The other world, an aberration!

Together we build the True Foundation!

How I knew the words was as unclear as the rest of the day, but fervently I sang from the bottom of my heart, caring and less and less about the things I did not know. And yet still, when the merrymaking had ended the nagging questions returned, gnawing at my insides. And so there I was, fraught with anxiety as we filed away from our tables and toward—

THE HALL OF ELEVATORS

As far as I could tell, this hallway went on forever. Each wall was lined with open elevators, numbered and only large enough two or three people. I watched as people knowingly filed into their designated number. I stood frozen in the dimly lit hallway as the crowd thinned, and elevators closed taking people away. I had no idea what to do when Liam, sensing my

confusion, grabbed my hand from the waning herd and pulled me towards one of the many elevators that lined this great hallway. I followed him across the hall and into—

ELEVATOR 8I

The doors closed behind us and the metal chamber began moving. Though I couldn't see where it was headed, I felt it moving down and sideways, occasionally changing direction. My eyelids were growing heavier with each passing second.

"You seem like a good guy Liam," I began, "so why won't you tell me what's going on?"

"Of course I will! I'd be happy to tell you what I can." Liam smiled, looking as tired as I must have.

"Then tell me..." The elevator continued moving, creaking as it turned. "Where are we?"

"Elevator 8I. It's taking us to our locker rooms."

"I mean... big picture. Why are we here? And what is the Control Room for?"

"Hmm," Liam gave a thoughtful look down, "What's the Control Room for? Wow, what a question! One we could both spend the rest of our lives pondering. You're quite the deep thinker, aren't you? Not sure I can help you with those kind of deep philosophical questions. As for why we're here, that's easy! To solve the numbers! And it was a such a joy working with you today."

He doesn't know much more than I do, I realized. Yet he's more content. HE knows his name."

"What's my name. Can you tell me that?"

"I already told you." he said, yawning. "It's not important."

The elevator beeped and the door opened. "Well" Liam said, "This is my stop. Seeya tomorrow."

Exhausted with watery, tired eyes, I watched the doors close after Liam got off and into a locker room that looked almost exactly the same as mine. It was only another ten seconds before the elevator beeped and opened again. I stepped out and back in to—

THE LOCKER ROOM

I was elated to see clean, white cotton pajamas hanging in my locker. My bed was also clean—no sign of rocks or dirt. I showered, changed and sat onto my bed. Apparently reacting to my weight on the bed, the floor began to fall, the same way it had come up at the beginning of the day, and when the floor jolted to a stop, the ceiling slowly reformed over my head. And so I found myself back in the small room from which I came, no closer to any answers. The lights were on and I was ready for everything to be dark again. That's when I noticed the envelope hanging next to the light switch. It was marked:

BEGIN USING THIS TOMORROW

I opened it to see the back of a new ID badge. I turned it over and saw a photo of myself next to my name: Notham Portant.

I said it out loud. “My name is Notham Portant.”

I smiled, turned off the lights and went to bed.
Everything was alright. My name was Notham
Portant, and I had another big day ahead of me.

Out of Body



Laeth

The first time he left his body he was in elementary school. Before that he had spent his days in his grandmother's house. There was a garden and the neighborhood was safe, there were kids his age or thereabouts, there was a television and toys, there was a dog and a cat, there were parks and gardens and even an abandoned house to explore. His parents came after work to take him home, and there he would play with his toys and his coloring pencils, and then his mother would read him a story or two as he drifted off to sleep. There were no limits and no obligations. Never a dull moment. But then, as he turned six, he had to go to school.

At first it was yet another novel experience, exciting just because it was new. There were other kids in his grandmother's neighborhood, of course, but he had never been around so many, making so many friends, playing games in groups, chasing after girls. That was exciting. Even more exciting was learning things, adult things as he regarded them, letters and numbers and more. But soon the novelty began to wear off, as the teacher repeated the same lesson for the benefit

of those in the class that did not get it the first time around, and he always did. And so he found himself experiencing something that was new but not exciting, boredom.

He was stuck in the classroom and could not leave. He asked to go to the bathroom and spent a long time there just looking at the ceiling and the patterns on the floor until someone came to check if he was ok and brought him back to class. After a while he asked to go again but the teacher did not allow it. There was no escape. He felt himself drifting off. The sun was coming in through the window and he was watching the tiny specks of dust dancing gently in the lighted air against the blackness of the board, the monotone voice of the teacher lulled him into a state of deep relaxation, and he thought he was falling asleep, but then his head started to vibrate violently. Before he could be afraid, he was seeing himself sitting at his desk. He was floating above his own body.

He could see the whole class and the teacher too, and immediately got the idea of amusing himself by floating around the room. This got old very quickly. The next idea was to try and play pranks on his colleagues and the teacher. He tried to pull the teacher's earrings, pick up the chalk to draw something funny on the blackboard or throw some colleague's pencils off the desk, but none of it worked. Then he decided to finally try what he wanted to do in the first place, to leave the room and roam around, but he found this difficult, and could not go further than the hallway, there seemed to be a tether, and it did

not allow him to go very far away from his static body sitting at the desk. And then the teacher called on him to answer a question and he was brought back to his body. He answered the question without difficulty and then spent the rest of the class trying to repeat the experience, but he couldn't, perhaps because now he was alert, the experience had pushed away all previous boredom and relaxation. The bell rang and the class was dismissed. He ran to the playground to play with the other kids and didn't think of it again until the next day, when he began to be bored by another lesson he already knew. But perhaps because he was focused rather than relaxed, he couldn't do it again. The next few months the feeling of boredom returned many times, but each time he would remember the experience and thus was unable to replicate it, it wasn't a pure boredom anymore. And so eventually he forgot all about it.

In third grade something changed. There was a new girl in his class. From the first day he was interested in her in a way he hadn't been interested in anyone, or anything, until then. He could not take his eyes off her, though whenever she looked him in the eye, or talked to him, or ran past him, he was embarrassed, and blushed. So all throughout the third grade his boredom during classes was assuaged by the sight of her, sitting next to the window a couple of rows in front of him. Except for the times she would turn her head for a moment or two, he could only see her hair, and always wished he could see more. And yet that was enough, her light brown hair

and a glance of her pale neck would put him into a daze. It was one of those days, when she flicked her hair to the side and her neck came into view that it happened again, he felt his head vibrate with intensity and suddenly he was floating above himself, and wasted no time floating towards her. He was floating right in front of her, examining every detail of her face, and she had no idea he was there. The experience seemed to be over much too quickly, the bell rang and he was pulled back into his body again. Once again he tried to repeat it all throughout the year, but with no luck. Then towards the end of third grade she announced she was going to another school, in another part of the country. On the last day of school she said goodbye to all the colleagues, and even gave him a kiss on the cheek, and when she did he felt his head began to vibrate as if he was about to leave his body, but that time it didn't happen, and she was already saying goodbye to another kid.

The next time it happened he was ten years old, school had ended the week before but summer hadn't yet started. It was a weeknight. After dinner he played with his toys for a bit in his room but he felt he was getting too old for them. Then he decided to read a book, but none of the books held his attention for more than a couple of minutes. He played some videogames but this too did not excite him. He thought of taking out his art supplies but it would make too much of a mess and then he would have to put them all back, so instead he went to the living room, where his parents had fallen asleep on the couch

watching a soap opera. He was going to change the channel when a woman appeared on the screen, she was taking off her robe, revealing her shoulders and back, and then he felt something strange stirring in his loins, his legs felt a bit weak, so he fell back on the armchair at the corner of the room and, before he knew it, he was floating above his body. Meanwhile the scene had changed, the woman had disappeared before her whole body could be revealed, and so he was no longer interested in the screen and decided to roam. The chair his body was sitting on was right in front of the door, so he floated to the hallway and almost made it to his room, but just as he was about to enter it he felt a pull, it was the tether to his body, preventing him from going further. This time he kept trying, pushing himself and being pulled back, to limited success. He didn't know how long he tried, but the effort must have tired him, because the only thing he remembered after this was his father picking him up from the armchair and depositing him in his bed. Just like the other times, he could not replicate the experience despite the many times he found his parents sleeping on the couch, the television on, the armchair empty. Soon after he left for summer vacation with his cousins, as he always did, down south by the sea, and between the beaches and the new friends, he stopped worrying about the curious experience, though this time he did not forget it, he even asked other kids if they had experienced something similar, but they had not, and teased him for it, so after that he spoke to no one about it.

His parents had meanwhile run into some financial difficulties and the next year they sat him down and told him they could not afford to keep him in private school, so for fifth grade and on, he would go to public school. A couple of dark years followed, but not without out of body experiences, though these ones he would have preferred to avoid. Leaving the safety of a known and curated environment and the investment of teachers in his education and the familiarity of kids from backgrounds similar to his own, he was thrown into a chaotic world of thugs twice his size and half his intelligence, of mockery and shouting and theft and beatings delivered for no reason and at random times, and not knowing where to turn. Fifth grade was terrible, but he mostly kept to himself, and though he had his lunch money stolen more often than not, the violence was kept to a minimum. Sixth grade was much worse, but it did yield a few out of body experiences, the first of which came as he was being beaten to a pulp by thugs several years his seniors, brutes who barely spoke the language, and as the avalanche of dark fists come back for the fourth or fifth punch his head started to vibrate, though he barely noticed it this time, and only realized he was out of his body when the pain and the fear suddenly disappeared, and he saw his body lying on the floor, covered in blood, and the brutes on top of him. A few other beatings followed, and this time he was prepared, by the time the second punch came, he was already floating about and feeling nothing, and only when the beating ended, did he come back to his body. The pain of course was there waiting

for him, but at least the fear was gone. This became so common that, the school year not even halfway, his parents made the decision to get him into a new school for the next year, since the teachers were unable or unwilling to do anything to prevent the violence, or to punish the aggressors. But there was one last experience, and this one was different.

After one particularly harsh beating, he was more or less adopted by the leader of a rival gang. He seemed to admire the placidness with which he faced the thugs and so decided to protect him. From then on, he was never alone and there were no more beatings, and no one stole his lunch money anymore. This would have been good enough, but the leader of the gang had taken him under his wing, perhaps because they sort of looked alike, and so invited him to come to his house one afternoon after school. There were two girls already in the house, they were clearly sisters, and they went to another school. The older one walked across the room and kissed his friend, who then took her by the hand to another room, but not before saying to the younger sister, Take care of my little brother. She too was older than him, though perhaps only a year or so, yet that was enough to make an enormous difference, girls mature so much faster than boys. His first kiss was almost unremarkable as she quickly took his left hand and placed it under her shirt, and then took his right and placed it under her skirt while her other hand unbuttoned his trousers. He couldn't tell when exactly it happened, but he remembered watching it all from above, his

body this time did not cease to move. Soon after this episode the school year ended, and he never saw any of these people again. During the summer he tried to replicate the experience, but with no success, and so remained in his body throughout.

Seventh grade was a completely different story. Though it was a public school it was inhabited by a very different crowd. Almost all the kids came from upper middle class families, and he thought often that he was probably the poorest one among them. There were no thugs, there were no beatings and no theft, everyone in his class was the same age as himself and the older kids did not much care about him one way or the other. He felt at home, and safe, once again. Thus he experienced a freedom he never had before, and with it a confidence that other kids, and especially the girls, admired. He even got a couple of girlfriends, though he never got far with any of them, not as far as he would have wished. Still, it was a good year, not once was he prompted to leave his body, and yet he found himself triggering it at will. Whenever a class was too boring, he would concentrate his sight on a single point, and soon his head would vibrate and he would be out and about. He found that with practice he could extend the reach of his roaming. There was still a tether, a hard limit, but it could be progressively stretched, so that by the end of the year he could get out through the window and go as far as the gymnasium, where older girls would be doing a dance routine. The only problem was the return, it was extremely

unpleasant, he would be tired, and afterward have a massive headache for the rest of the day. Yet by now he was invested in the practice, and wanted to keep going, to expand his powers, to see if there was a limit, and by the end of the year both the tiredness and the headaches got better, almost negligible. And then the summer vacation offered the perfect opportunity to enhance his powers further.

Some friends from school would be spending a month at a summer camp, and though it was relatively expensive, he had finally got his grades up after the previous two miserable years, and so his parents agreed. Beyond the water sports, the appeal of the camp was primarily that nearby there was a girls' camp, and one of his friends said that his own brother had, some years before, made contact with them, so they would try the same. They were not successful, only once did they cross paths with the girls in the nearby town, but they were unable to arrange a meeting after dark. Still the camp afforded him the opportunity to test and expand his powers, and this had by now become an obsession, almost as strong as his obsession with the female sex. He would go to bed at night and leave his body, then he would try to roam through the forest to the cabins where the girls slept. It was quite far, but by the second week he was almost at the wooden wall that surrounded the girls' camp.

It was around this time, when his spirit was almost able to look beyond the wall, that he met another boy who could do the same as him, or rather, he met his spirit. The boy looked much

like him, same age and same build, it was almost uncanny how much they looked alike. They introduced themselves and as neither had met another who could leave the body they quickly became friends. They also noted the similarity, examining each other's bodies, or the parts they both could see. He had a birth mark on his belly, and the boy did not, but other than that, they really could have been twins. There was one other difference, the boy's eyes, there was no white part around a darker orb as is normal but all of it was an almond shaped blackness, and whenever he looked directly into them he felt extremely uneasy. The boy noticed the uneasiness and so asked what was wrong, and when he told him the boy replied quite naturally, So are yours, I assume it's something that happens when we leave the body, I was frightened too when I saw myself in the mirror. This was sufficient to put him at ease, as it mostly made him think of how it never occurred to him to look into a mirror while out of his body.

The boy was not in the camp, but instead lived in the nearby town, yet he too had taken as his hobby to spy on the girls. This raised immediately a question, How are you able to roam so far away from your body, the town is very far away. The boy's answer, however, was simple, he had cut his own tether. He didn't know this was a possibility, and furthermore, he never considered even inspecting his own spectre, so he'd never even seen his tether until that day, but now it was clear. Looking at the other boy he could see no tether, but looking at

himself he could see his own, like a smoky spider web beginning at the base of his spine and disappearing into the forest. Isn't it dangerous, he asked instinctively, and the other replied, As long as you know where your body is, you can always return, So how do I go about it, That's easy, next time before you leave your body make sure you have a pair of scissors in your hand, then you'll see that your spirit body too will have spirit scissors, and then you can use them to cut the tether. He was still afraid to do it, but so as not to appear cowardly, he said he would, and then they agreed to meet the next night, in the same place as always, except now they would both be free.

The next night he did as the boy had told him. He found a pair of scissors, left his body with them, and then finally got the courage to cut the tether. At first he didn't feel anything different, but when he started to roam towards the girls' camp he understood how bounded he had been, there was no more effort to stretch the tether, he could not just float but fly, and it was an incredible and amazing experience. With his new freedom he crossed the forest much faster than before and thus arrived earlier than the agreed time, and while he waited for the boy he spied on the girls, this time easily and comfortably with a full, unobstructed view. Perhaps it was because the girls had been drinking and were now dancing half naked around the fire that he didn't notice the time passing, but then as the girls finally went to sleep he realized he had lost track of time, and his friend hadn't come. He

waited a little more, but there was nothing else to see there, and it was clear now the boy wouldn't come that night. Perhaps he hadn't been able to leave his body, he knew that sometimes no matter how hard one tried, it didn't work. Perhaps he was sick. So he decided to return tomorrow to the same spot, for sure he would meet him then. So he went back to his cabin, not too disappointed, since he was now free, and he had even seen the girls up close, as he had wanted to all along.

He got in through the window and went towards his body lying inert on the bed. To return to it all he had to do was to float above it, and then slowly descend until body and spirit were once again united. Before he could do this, however, he noticed something curious. Though he had ditched the spirit scissors right after cutting his tether in the woods, he assumed the physical scissors would still be in his physical hand when he returned, but this was not the case. In fact, they were nowhere to be seen. It was true that, other than the clothes he was wearing, he had never taken anything with him, but still he was puzzled, so he went to the drawer from where he had taken the scissors, and to his surprise, but also his relief, there they were. He closed the drawer and then saw the mirror hung on the wall. He then remembered the earlier conversation with the boy, and decided to look at himself. And there they were, his eyes, his normal eyes, brown orbs surrounded by whiteness. He didn't have time to think about what it meant, for he could see in the mirror that

his own body was getting up from the bed and coming towards him. He turned around and saw his body standing in front of him, awake. He could only say, I don't understand, and then a familiar voice that was not his own said, Look through the mirror, and when he turned around to look there was his body beside him, with two black abysses where his eyes used to be, and a terrifying smile.

The Philosopher and the Imp



Tom Magee

Gold light came in through the philosopher's window, the day reaching in one last time, illuminating what it could, calling out to the dust turning in the air. The philosopher was in his chair, half asleep, half watching the world outside, his daughter playing with his wife. His desk, the texture of wood that only exists after being touched for a lifetime, held his papers more or less neatly stacked, those papers the later works that add little but are of comfort to those who have followed a great mind. Though summer, there was an odd chill, the fingers of a strange winter brushing the surfaces with its fingertips. A set of stairs reached down to the more lavish lower quarters, and a set up towards a rooftop long since forgotten.

A sound startled him out of thought.

Philosopher - Wait, who's there? It's been cold, please close the door down there, if you are a friend. Are you a friend?

Imp - Of course, your dearest.

Philosopher - Oh, genie, you had me scared! I am so glad you are here to share the evening light. Are you here for a while?

Imp - Yes. I was busy but I felt your voice calling. You did call, didn't you?

Philosopher - Yes, Yes. It's just that I was reflecting on, well, everything, and I wanted to thank you for all that you have done. There is a strange feeling in the air, a kind of urgency of... I am not sure of what. But let's not rush kinship in the door, forced into bloom. Let's let the glow of companionship grow in its time. Tea? I can go downstairs and make some.

Imp - Don't worry, I already made some. I put it on the table beside you.

Philosopher - So you have. It warms my heart, as does your company. Tea is the water of true conversation, water given life. Do you remember when we met? We had tea then as well, though not as fine as this.

Imp - I do remember, but I love stories. Please!

Philosopher - It had been a horrible night, rain to freeze tombstones. I had just received a letter, my father had passed away and my mother told me to stay away from the funeral. That woman taught cruelty.

Remember your first words to me?

I'll lie to you once,

I'll give you your dreams,

So take my right hand,

I'll give you your wishes

I barely listened at the time. This home was a hovel then, oh the changes you made, but of course you know, you don't need to hear it.

Imp - Please tell it all, again!

Philosopher - We'll get there but I need to readjust my mind. I am preoccupied, pondering tragedy and comedy again.

Imp - Oh, that sounds interesting! Please tell!

Philosopher - Well, this old friend of mine came to visit once a long time ago and had been going on about tragedy and comedy and the virtues of tragedy. I don't think he had had much experience with tragedy so I was a little put off from the start. He told me that tragedy was a way of navigating the world, it gave us truths to follow, and that comedy was unfair, its rewards went to those that did not deserve them. His contention was that tragedy was superior to comedy because in a tragedy those who face a sore end have a point in their stories where they have made a mistake. The fortunes of comedy fall randomly to whomever is in the right place at the right time.

But his world of virtuous tragedy is not virtuous to begin with; its failure is baked in. His view is one in which we are subject to the world without recourse but to obey. There is no ear for appeals in tragedy. His tragedy is a slavery to which comedy is the liberation. Comedy is the world as it should be, with fortune coming to all, given a long enough timeline. Comedy recognizes our

condition, half blind, half mad, and almost completely unaware of what is happening around us. Comedy eventually sorts everyone out to the good.

That bothered me, that delay of justice. I started arguing with myself. I started arguing with myself that this waiting for the timeline to bring good fortune was only a slightly more virtuous prison than the tragic prison of my friend. Unjust torture now is still unjust torture and slightly more virtuous than wrong is not virtuous at all. Justice must be a different kind of accounting. It was then that the seed for all of my work, with of course your help, came to bud and became ready to flower.

Imp - I like this part!

Philosopher - Yes, me too, dear friend. This was when you came into the story. I had been working on this, day after lonely day here in this place, back when it was merely a one floor hovel. Hunger, hunger, hunger, my constant condition. It was then I began to find the threads of my work, The Great Happiness, but just the threads. There must be a way to this 'should be' world, the just world without suffering, the whole cloth, as it were, must be there. If my mind, which exists in and of this world, can think of such a thing, it must be possible to manifest. If I was wrong, we were lost anyways. I had to find a way to the 'should be' or perish in the trying.

Imp - And you did! You did!

Philosopher - Yours is a pleasant interruption! Yes I did, but let's find our way there properly. I was in that darkest place, where I wasn't able to thread the needle, couldn't sew it all together. I knew there was some way to solve this problem of proper justice, some way to bring it to everyone, no strings attached, no necessity for tragedy. I could feel it like a missing tooth in my mouth.

There was that terrible storm, like was testing me, chastising me while I wrote. The roof of this house was barely enough to keep out the rain. Indeed, water was leaking from a few points in the ceiling. But I had enough wood for the fire and there must have been enough light for you to see. You knocked three times, I couldn't barely hear it for the wind. I opened the door and there you were, the picture of misery, and maybe yes, tragedy. Or at least almost tragedy. So skinny you were. And that's when you said it, sang it really,

I'll lie to you once,

I'll give you your dreams,

So take my right hand,

I'll give you your wishes

Such a strange little song, it doesn't even rhyme.

Imp - I tell you it does!

Philosopher - You always say that and I always explain. Maybe today, because I am in a different mood, I will agree that it rhymes. Yes, it rhymes.

Anyway, when you first sang that song, I thought nothing of it. If I had all I could wish, one little lie couldn't hurt. Everyone else lies without even the benefit of a warning. But back to the story. Raining, cold, miserable, wretched.

Imp - Come in, come in you said!

Philosopher - I did, yes indeed I did. I sat you down next to the fire and it was quite a while before you could speak. I wrapped you in the warmest, really the only, blanket I had and gave you some hot water with the most meager of tea leaves, they barely tinged the water. And then the color started to come back into your face. You smiled and told me you could help me. I didn't think about it, because I didn't believe it! Imagine that now! You looked even worse off than me!

Imp - I did and that's true!

Philosopher - Well, time has improved your looks considerably. At that time, you were a figure of wretchedness. It had been at that exact moment that I had been working on my now famous treatise on the possible beauty of wretchedness, a beauty from the wretchedness, a piece which I was struggling to write. If I hadn't recognized in you that special quality, I might have ignored you completely. But I saw a glimmer of my pages in the room that day.

Imp - Oh, all you told me that night!

Philosopher - If you hadn't hung on every word, I might not have. It was that very word, wretchedness, that I began explaining to you. It

all came tumbling out so fast, so beautiful. No other words would have sufficed but at the end I could remember nothing of how I put it all together. Finally I had my piece of whole cloth and I forgot it all immediately. After soaring in the sky my wings melted and down I crashed. I had grasped the key and lost it in the same motion.

That's when you told me you could remember everything I said, word for word. I didn't believe you but you began, right from where I started, to repeat perfectly the entire treatise. For that is what it became, apart from a few edits to make it palatable to the scholarly bent of the era, a treatise. And with the exception of some dour and small minds, it was greeted with applause by not only the thinking class, but by the great minds of poetry and politics. Sorry, I am again running ahead, that came later.

That night you helped me write down everything, my pen faster than possible, but that is not just a colorful description. I could see as you were dictating back to me my words that time wasn't the same while we were working. It was then I realized you were a genie.

Imp - You asked if that was one of your three wishes!

Philosopher - Yes, quite silly of me! You of course informed me that you weren't limited by numbers in what you could do for me. It was at that moment you moved your hand over the table and there appeared a dinner the likes of which I had only read about. Wine and meat,

things I hadn't seen since I had left my father's home. And a candle just like the one beside me now. My mouth agape, I truly couldn't believe it, until, of course, I did. There was something happening in the world, in the web of things moving to lift me. I had struck a chord on the threads of possibility, and music echoed back to me in kind.

Imp - You let me in, I had to repay you.

Philosopher - I am not equipped as I am in my old age to get everything in order in terms of importance or timeline, but let me try. It was the next day that I took my manuscript to my old teacher. His beguiled eyes revealed the magnitude of the story I would soon live through. There were offers for positions, patrons lining up to court me, admiration from my peers, and parties. So many parties, where they tried to spin me around. I kept my head but of course I was particularly spun when I met my now wife, Evelyn. As you know, I could stay above all of it, knowing I didn't need any of it, except for Evelyn. Forgive me friend, but she is the one thing beyond your help to procure. I give it to some small value in myself that I was able to grasp her. And of course my sweet Clara, gift beyond gifts.

Everything else, I acknowledge with great thanks your help in materializing. This home itself, let's admit, it has become much more grand than the word grand. This is now an estate, grown out of your gifts a piece at a time. Keeping this hovel as a part of its great tower, we planned together

and you conjured out of the air all the walls and rafters, depths and heights of this great place. To avoid suspicion, you worked your magic at night, first erecting the great wall around us, behind which it was easy enough to add this and that wing, realize this and that garden. But this hovel is the heart still of all that came after and we have kept it in the center.

You can look out that window down to the courtyard and see what the fruits of a true heart are. Today, as the sun was going down, I was watching Clara playing with Evelyn, challenging the beauty of the sun itself. I dare say, the darkness swallows up the sun's light while my Clara and Evelyn are still shine even in the darkest pitch. I have got the better of the world there, you would quite agree.

Imp - You have, you have!

Philosopher - Let's bring it back to the work though, the true jewel of all that we have accomplished. I was able to write. And write and write and write. And how glorious those days and nights were. With just a seed, and you sitting there to listen, it all came together as I spoke. I became free to move through words, sentences, paragraphs, books, like a great fish cutting through the ocean. You freed me up to let my imagination make shape out of the formless and bring together what had been so vague in my mind. We were spinning maps, connecting missing townships of dreams with metropolises of thought. It all came out of the air and onto the page, no mistakes, no faltering. Like crystals the

ideas mounted upon each other, reaching up and up to the summit.

Imp - The Great Happiness!

Philosopher - Yes, yes, the Great Happiness. I regret the name, it lacks art, but then how can I regret it? It was what came out, my masterpiece. It was the form hiding in the air, clothed now in text. The path through tragedy into comedy and into what is now reality, plain for everyone to not only see, but to live, words brought into material functional being. Its simplicity at its core being so clear was testament to what it was, what it is, of how to be.

Imp - Everyone can do it!

Philosopher - In fact, everyone was a part of it already. It required nothing but a change of thought, but that change of thought brought about what action was required. The book was the catalyst that set the pattern into motion. It started with the small groups that read it, but quickly ran through the culture. There wasn't anything that couldn't express it, art, music, sport, drama. After that it grew into politics, business, agriculture, and so on. But most of all it penetrated homes and into hearts. I brought out the true generosity possible from the wreckage of the past. It was the end of war and suffering; the final nail in tragedy. What started as a category of miracle here, became the commonplace reality. We redefined miracle.

There were some misguided hold outs, there still may be somewhere I don't know, but we were

able to bathe the world in the philosophy. There is now nothing substantial that hasn't been improved. I can watch from this window now and let it grow on its own, the new life coursing through the world.

Imp - What a wonderful story, I never tire of it! I could have never imagined such a thing. Tell me more about the wretchedness, once more please!

Philosopher - Of course. It came to me watching you shivering there, your perseverance in the face of tragedy. I thought, wait now, why should I even think of it as tragedy. I didn't know you at all, had no special view into your life to see that your condition had resulted from some mistake. I began to assume you had made no mistake, because even if I were wrong, there would have been someone in your condition who had not deserved it; it was inevitable. So even if you were a guilty tragic figure with some mistake in the past, I would regard you as an innocent. I would regard all wretchedness as a sign of innocence, a sign against the punishment you were levied. This regard became a reality, erasing all guilt. The injustice of your plight being resisted by your existence was the door into recreating innocence into the world. Your shivering against the cold was a seed from which could grow magnificence proper. The resistance within wretchedness held the key to magnificence.

Imp - I am all chills!

Philosopher - I shiver as well! We just had to turn the world around on this axis and all would come out correct. Tragedy would get its punishment.

You see the tragic figure knows they are doing wrong, but they don't know how far in the wrong they are. They understand their transgressions, and they do transgress, at the same time that the prison door slams down. What I mean to say, is they learn the extent of their crime too late. That is the tragic flaw of tragedy, what keeps it from virtue.

The glorious comedy, the redemption of plain comedy, love brought down out from the heavens to every point on the earth. We could teach heaven, finally, what was happening down here. Heaven sat at our feet, learned the truth about injustice, and we raised up together with it. This echoing song, the restoring melody, recreated existence, sounded everywhere. From then on, all was comedy, all the wretched got their freedom, all was turned to right. Ah!

But the dark is not waiting for the end of our conversation and working the memory like this is a joy but even joy has requirements. This joy of mine requires tea. Let me go get some more. You have served me so well in so many ways, let me serve you now. Just wait a moment while I fetch it.

The philosopher got up slowly and shuffled through the chilly room. The imp smiled at him as the philosopher made his way down the stairs. The imp's expression did not change but was left frozen in its smile even after the philosopher was

out of sight. The last stretch of warmth from the sun was now exhausted as the cold lights of the stars tried to hold up the room. The shuffling sounds downstairs swished around the floor.

Then, there was a scream from below with the crash of what must have been a tea pot and two tea cups. A very struck philosopher, out of breath and tossed, appeared from the stairs to meet the imp's smile.

Philosopher - Dear friend, help me! She, she said, 'who are you? Out out out!' She said that to me! Shouted it! My Evelyn, my dear Evelyn! I tried to speak and she screamed even more! She ran and locked the door behind her! What madness? She didn't recognize me! What madness has her? Tell me old friend! Help me one last time!

Imp - She didn't recognize you.

Philosopher - What?

Imp - She didn't recognize you.

At the top of the stairs the philosopher could not let go of the rail. He slunk down along the upright of the stair's bannister. From there he crawled over to his seat by the window and slumped himself into it. The imp hopped off of his stool, walked over, and lit the large candle by the window. The philosopher's eyes tracked the imp like a mouse tracking a cat. The imp then took from the philosopher's desk a small brass mirror and gave it to him, face down. The imp happily sat himself back down on his stool and waited for the philosopher to speak.

Philosopher - She didn't recognize me. Why didn't she recognize me?

Imp - You look different since you last met.

Philosopher - I met her this morning, what kind of change could have taken place since this morning?

Imp - That is not the last time you met her.

Philosopher - What?

Imp - That is not the last time you met her.

Philosopher - You make as much sense as you rhyme. Speak plain.

Imp - That is not the last time you met her. The last time you met her was years ago. Shortly after your Clara was born, just after the first time she opened her eyes and could recognize you. Yes, yes, that was the last time, I am sure of it.

Philosopher - I don't like this joke you have cooked up, for it must be you who cooked it up. What did you offer to Evelyn though to play in this cruel game?

Imp - No game. And that wasn't Evelyn. That was Clara. Evelyn is long dead. Clara though was truly frightened of you. It isn't surprising really. She thinks you are dead.

The light of the candle played in the silence.

Imp - How to explain this. I have been you. I took your face and body and went into the world. I changed my appearance and became you. I lived everything you asked for. Everything you

remember, it happened, more or less the way you have described it. In reality it was a bit brighter some ways, but a bit darker in other ways. I lived out your stories. I can see I will have to explain this a bit more slowly.

In the beginning, you told me what you wanted to happen and we made it come true. You really did go out into the world and spread your message, with a bit of help from me. You saw directly the building of this place, the meeting of Evelyn, and the birth of Clara. You saw the beginning of your work taking root in the world.

But at some point, I took over. I came back here to hear you tell me what should happen, and then I made it happen, more or less. You waited in a kind of sleep until I could come back and wake you up. I took what you told me should happen and saw to it that it was put in place. Watching those things happen, I was able to see their essence and give them back to you like dreams. I functioned as a great servant to you, making your will come to life and bringing back to you the rewards.

What you see when you look out that window, those are things that happened long ago. You are much much older now, older than you should have been, older than most anyone has ever been, actually truly older than anyone has ever been. You look good for your age though. There are younger people who look much worse. You should be grateful.

The philosopher looked down at the mirror in his hand, its face still towards the ground. He

lifted it like a great weight, face out so that the imp could see himself smiling. Like doors on impossibly old hinges, he turned the mirror around to see himself. The mirror dropped and his face was a grave.

Philosopher - How?

Imp - You invited me in.

Philosopher - Just letting you into my home, that was my crime? That is a crime?

Imp - Not that, that was pretty basic hospitality. You invited me into your life. Thank you.

Philosopher - But why? Why throw me on this rack? Why not just give yourself your own life without wearing mine?

Imp - I cannot think of what is good, I can only think of what is bad. It's in my creation. I am fated to think only wrong. But I wanted to taste the good, to find out. I needed you to tell me what to do to be good.

At first, I thought that I would take your ideas and give them to both you and I. I could live your life on the other side of the world while you lived the same life here. But that did not sound right to me. What is the value of something if it is also happening somewhere else? Is it not a mockery for the same love to live in two places? Is it not a kind of cheating of love? Love must be unique, unrepeatable. It must be held away from imitation.

It would have been wrong for us both to live your life, but one of us must, and the way you

described it to me was entrapping. It is really you who have trapped me. I could see how this is what must be. I took on the burden while letting you breathe in the perfume. You *have* had your life, but even better. You have had the story of your life, without needing to fear of the barbs of the world. More or less.

Philosopher - Less, less, much less! More of less than anything else! I have had only that part of my life that was wretched and all joy is locked on the other side of a infinitely thick window. I can see all that I can't taste.

Imp - You did taste it, you did. You should be happy. All the things you wanted to happen, have happened. Your name has become famous and you have made the world happy. This estate truly does exist. Your wife and daughter are truly happy and in love. It's just that I lived the bulk of it.

Philosopher - I tasted lie after lie. What's worse is that the taste of goodness is now itself bad. Memory digs me deeper and worse off than ever. The height of the glory is now the depths of my misery.

And your heart isn't it in any of it! Look at you! You haven't felt any of it! How could you? Evil cannot taste the good, good is your bad.

Imp - True, it doesn't move me much, one way or another. But it all happened, more or less.

Philosopher - Less, less, less! You've mocked my entire endeavor, all of my struggle! I am the one left behind! I am the tragedy! A moment of

tragedy spoils all. From the pit, all above is a mockery.

Imp - There was no other way. I will tell you this and you will see that it's true. That my evil is really to your good. That night I came to you, that was your last night to live. Already your eyes agree with me, even if your mind still resists. I saw what was going to happen, you were going to take your own life that very night. Yes. You were on the edge of the cliff. I am your saving wind.

Philosopher - Who is to blame for your damned creation then, your evil? You rogue, ah, I have no words of weight for you! You owe me an explanation, you owe justice itself an explanation!

Imp - I don't know what created me, and why should I care? A plant doesn't grow to become a seed, but the other way around. I have been and that is enough for me. If it is not enough for you, perhaps you shouldn't ask the question. You get to choose your questions, don't you know? You get to choose your reveries, your dreams, your hopes. Me, I can only choose towards what isn't. You get to make what is. You are a much better creation, this I know. And I have expanded you out into the world. From death into vast life.

The philosopher went silent and there was a long space in that flickering light. He tried to see in the imp's face and story some kind of crack or fissure, some point from which he could reverse his fate. The imp sat there, smiling as he had always done since the beginning.

Philosopher - But wait now, wait. Look at your face. This is a face I know, almost as well as I know my own. And I am forgetting our history.

You said you would lie once. I put that thought to the side so long ago it had become invisible. For this deception you claim to have pulled, this would require a great many lie. Yes, yes.

This, this play tonight, this is that lie isn't it? I can see that yes, this is true. It doesn't line up any other way. I never knew you could be so clever, never pinned guile to you!

That mirror, let me look at it again. Look! I see that smile, my old friend's smile and I know that you have played your one trick on me as you promised so long ago. Hand me that mirror. Yes, thank you.

Now that I look again, all horror flows out from my heart. Look there, the age that had soaked into my face is all gone. Youth and health, full of chance. Time is once again given to me.

Oh, truly wonderful! My anger is now love! You have played a trick on me but one that makes me realize how much you have given me. Your one lie has also been to my good, friend. You have given me the happiness of my life twice. The understanding of a wasted life has added glory onto the life that I have led. This last test is one I have passed, the fire that has proven the metal, my mettle. Thank you, dear friend, thank you!

But I am so weary after this wrestling. Perhaps you will let me sleep just a little and I will head down to Evelyn and Clara. Tomorrow is another

day and it is summer after all. We picnic tomorrow, down by the stream. Please join us, you and I should bask in the joy of the day.

His eyes closed slowly. The imp sat there smiling, waiting for the philosopher's hand to drop the mirror. The stars twinkled too far away to intervene. The imp padded across to the candle and pinched out its flame. In the pitch, there was silence, except for two sets of breath, one shallow and shaky the other hoary and sharp. The dark expanded out past the window now and formed into one body, all darkness finally being related. The walls disappeared and the shadow passed over the land like a river through a broken levy, a webway of shadows pulsing through every dark place. Through this roadway an infinite hunger sounded, the 'not' hungering for the 'is'. And then the soft voice of the imp began to sing a song

I'll lie to you once

I enter your house,

And never will I

Falter

I'll give you your dreams,

You know not what they mean,

As they stay as they are

As nothing

So take my right hand

While my left takes your land,

Your hopes, your pride, and

Your daughter

I'll give you your wishes

And I'll forgo the dishes

As I rip into old flesh

Devouring

In the dark there was a wide cold smile, a tear in its eye. The dark inhaled. And then, the gnashing of teeth and wailing.



The dream about the house on top of the hill



Júlia

I had this dream a few years ago. It was a long dream, most of it wasn't important, as is the case with most dreams, but it left me with a lasting sense of dread. There was a white house on top of a hill, it was surrounded by dark and tall green pine trees. It was night-time, or maybe dawn. There were no clouds in the sky, the moon made everything blue and still. The house stood far away in the distance, looking down on me. It was an old house, it had just the ground floor, a couple of small square windows and a big roof with orange tiles. On the hill, there were long shallow pools arranged in steps leading up to the house. The pools were covered in tiny jade tiles. The first pool had clear water and I was standing barefoot in it. As I got closer to the house—

"You're fucking with me."

Said the guy sitting beside me. He had been passively listening to my stories all night. It's rare to find someone who will uninterruptedly listen to everything I say. Like me, he was spending the

night at this inn and we talked by the bar. I had noticed his expression change as I recalled my dream, I assumed it was the alcohol taking hold. He was an older gentleman, shorter than me, with calloused hands that he kept rubbing, as if to make sure his fingers were still attached. He was now staring at me with repulsion, making him look younger and stupider.

"I had the same dream."

I had planned to go to Marco de Canaveses to visit a friend. I got on the train, one of those old ones, that don't show you the name of the stops. And so I got off on the wrong stop, two too early, Vila Meã. This station had an old, nostalgic building, well kept. The light inside invited me in. I went into the ticket booth to ask about the next train.

"That was the last one today, miss."

It was late October, but the air inside the building was hot and suffocating. I could hear the electricity buzz on the train tracks outside.

"Is there a place nearby I can stay tonight?"

"There's an inn just outside the tunnel."

The clerk got out a map from under his desk and showed me the directions. I didn't protest, even if I was most definitely about to put the name of the place on my phone and follow GPS instruction. It seemed easy enough, and I'm particularly good with directions.

I thanked the clerk and headed out my way. I walked with the train tracks keeping me

company to my right. Finally, I saw the tunnel. It was broad and short and gloomy, made me feel disappointed. A car could go through, but not a van, and certainly not a truck. There was a narrow walkway with a grey railing, a few fluorescent lights did a poor job at lighting up the way. I could faintly see the other side. I carried my bag on my left hand, which was now hurting, and I regretted my distaste for carry-ons with wheels. They're unfashionable.

The inn was, in fact, just outside the tunnel. Too big for its own good, the lights in the windows were mostly off. I booked a room at the front desk and called my friend; I tell her about my mishap. She offers to come pick me up, I say I'm at some inn, I know it's a long way here. I'll see her tomorrow morning. We hang up. I go kill time by the bar.

"You must be fucking with me."

"Excuse me?"

"With the tadpoles."

"What?" I heard him the first time.

"With the tadpoles in the shallow ponds. They were all splashing about, dying and made a roaring sound, didn't they?"

"How do you know that?"

"Lady, I don't know if you're a con artist..."

I could see sweat stains forming on his button up shirt. He downed the last of his drink and inched closer to me. He spoke in a hushed voice.

"But I'm here to go to that place. That house from the dream."

My mouth soured, it always does when I feel nervous. He looked me in the eyes without blinking, his skin was red. Up close it looked like it had been stretched thin and I could see his veins, his muscles. He smelled like alcohol. I felt like I had to believe him.

"Can I go with you?"

"Yes. Let's go right now."

"Right now?"

"You'll drive."

"I came by train."

"You'll drive my car, lady."

His car was an old white Fiat Uno, surprisingly pristine, like he had time traveled with it. The paint job was intact and somehow shined in this moonless night. I'm not the best driver, I followed the guy's directions. He seemed quite sharp for someone who had spent the night drinking.

"I'm glad you're here." He spoke these words clearly, but it felt as if he didn't mean to say them aloud. I didn't respond, I couldn't say anything, my mouth was still sour.

"I was looking to buy some land."

He paused, his eyes still glued on the road.

"That's how I found this place. I saw the white house and I just knew it."

“That makes sense.”

It didn't. But I felt like I had to say something this time. We drove through the mountain for what felt like an eternity, thick walls of trees adorned both sides of the road. The Fiat's headlights were the only thing shining in the night. No other car passed us the entire way.

“Turn here.”

He pointed to a dirt road to our right. I turned the car, there was a dirt road up the mountain that went straight up. I felt nervous about how dirty his car was getting from the dust. Maybe I should offer to pay for his car cleaning, I think to myself. I don't.

I know we were both thinking about the dream. The green pine trees. The blue moon. The still air. The white house. The house with its orange tiles. With its small windows. The tadpoles. The dying disgusting tadpoles that hit my bare legs as I stood in the pool looking back at the house who was watching me the whole time why was it watching me why was I barefoot? The tadpoles splashed and made such a deafening noise I couldn't hear myself over it.

“Stop the car.”

I stopped the car. I dutifully followed his orders, even if I was the sober one. I felt like he had control over the situation and so I surrendered. We kept darting looks at each other, like one was going to confess they were lying. None of us said anything of the sort. None of us said another word the rest of the night.

The moon was high in the sky, stalking us. It felt as if this was all her fault, she was the one that had cast this dream upon us. There's a gate, it's covered with rust and moss and it's easy to pry open with a large stick. I see the house and it looks back at me. I think I stopped breathing and blinking at that point. I see the tiled pools, they're filled with overgrown vegetation. I walk up to the first pool, take off my shoes and roll up my pants. The man stops to observe me from uphill, he had rushed there. Maybe in his dream he wasn't in the water. I traverse from one pool to the other, each pool has more water than the previous one. I get to the last pool and I crouch down to inspect the water for tadpoles. A frog jumps on me. I scream and slip and hit my head on the tile.

I get on the first train in the morning. My head hurts.

