

... love or sleep or shadow or light
... ine e

The Occasional
Writings of
Gregory Edward Flood

A DJINN, LOTTA FAIRIES & SUNDRY GDS

KOIOS BOOKS



Prince of Dreams
Adonisstas
Glenak B95

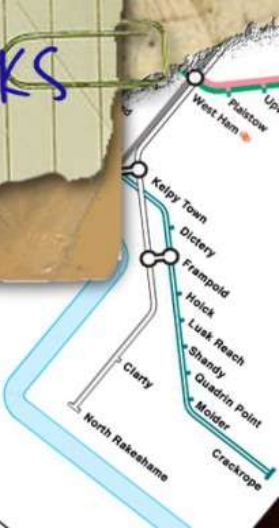


Table of Contents

[A Djinn, Lotta Fairies and Sundry Gods](#)

[About the Author](#)

[The Djinn's Tale](#)

[White Smyth's Tale](#)

[If the Immortals Spoke as Mortals Do](#)

[Sample Chapters](#)

[Seven God Limit](#)

[1. The Servants of God](#)

[The Last of the Dire Dwellers](#)

[Chapter 1: Not a Good Place for Humans](#)

[God: A User's Manual](#)

[A Grouch's Guide to Enlightenment](#)

[Introduction](#)

A Djinn, Lotta Fairies and Sundry Gods

Gregory Edward Flood

© 2016

[Koios Books](#) [Gregory's YouTube Channel](#)

Gregory's [Blog](#)

About the Author

Gregory Edward Flood is the author of *Seven God Limit* and *The Last of the Dire Dwellers*, both available from Koios Books. He has gone through three literary agents, all of whom died on him. He's afraid to get another one because he doesn't want to be responsible.

But during his had-an-agent days his work was passed around to all the major publishing houses. Their reactions all pretty much went like this: "Great new writer. Wonderful, strong prose style, gorgeous sense of place, fascinating, unusual characters, cutting edge fantasy concepts and, uh..we can't publish this." One editor held on to one of his books for a year-and-a-half before letting go of it ("but we might still want it for our paperback line.") Gregory pretty much gave up after the last agent. But then the eBook revolution started and he decided that, since all those high-end New York professionals said his work was *so damn good*, he'd try going the digital route.

As you can see, he had much greater success this time.

You can find Gregory on Facebook and [LinkedIn](#) and you can find his novels and other work at www.koiosbooks.com.

The Djinn's Tale

Aref Sedeghi, a merchant of Hashtpur, in the province of Gilan, on the shore of the Caspian Sea, had a wife who weighed 600 pounds.

Oh, this was not to say that she had always weighed 600 pounds. This was not to say that she had weighed 600 pounds on their wedding day.

Aref was not a merchant of the conventional kind. His activities were winked at by the authorities but disapproved of officially. Aref was a purveyor of merchandise from what was then the Soviet Union. From a destination within Azerbaidzhan he received shipments at the tiny airport in Hashtpur: televisions, stereo equipment, computers, microwave ovens, toasters, blenders, coffee pots, and other household electronics. From there these goods were flown to the capital city of Tehran where they were sold at exorbitant prices on the black market.

Aref Sedeghi was a smuggler.

This was not to his discredit. In a time and place where the best of things were not available to any but the privileged few, Aref was a man who wanted the best of everything. And in a country where certain luxuries were prohibited, what else could he do but import them covertly from the outside?

To the people of his town Aref was not a criminal but a hero. And yet, his actions were officially unlawful and, however much the local police chief might admire him—in fact, they were business partners—he was required to disguise his wealth. And so, Aref lived as did the desert sheiks of old, presenting a public facade of poverty and reserving his displays of wealth to the sequestered interior of his home.

This was not to say that no one knew he was rich. Oh, quite the contrary. But his circumspection rescued his friend the police chief from any embarrassment.

So, when it came time for Aref to marry, he wanted the best of brides.

To his mind there was no question as to the identity of his intended. Her name was Rualla, the daughter of a former mayor of the town, though much fallen in her station after her father's death. She was now being raised by her greatuncle, an aged imam, a man whose piety and holy austerity were not feigned. He kept Rualla in plain simplicity

at his somber residence at the end of town. They lived near the house of Aref, though the great contrast between their's and Aref's financial position was known to them.

Aref made the mistake of thinking that marriage to the lovely Rualla would be merely a financial transaction. So, when he came to ask for the girl's hand in marriage, he was astonished to have his enormous cash offer summarily turned down by the angry old man. Sputtering with indignation, Aref demanded that Rualla be asked for her opinion in the matter. This was a most unusual request, and Aref would never have asked it had he not been desperate to obtain the beautiful damosel.

Knowing what would happen, the old imam called for his grandniece. She came dutifully, with downcast eyes. Even wrapped in the black obscurity of the domino—an antiquated style of dress that the women of Iran had abandoned but her uncle required of her at home—her beauty filled the room, and Aref's cupidity intensified.

But she would have none of him. Aref's swagger and elegance did nothing to endear him to her. And so, speaking only to the old man, she said it was her wish to remain where she was. All this she said with her usual sweetness of tone and mildness of demeanor. But she could not be persuaded to change her mind.

Aref stormed out of their house, and swore loudly that they had not seen the last of him. The wise old imam was left with a terrible sense of foreboding.

Months passed, and Aref's rage smoldered. Then, one dry, clear day he achieved the means to his heart's desire.

He and his partner the police chief, whose name was Mohsen, were watching a new shipment coming into the tiny Hashtpur airstrip. The deep-bellied quadriplane coasted down from the cloudless sky against the gold and green background of the mountain range which guarded the region to the west and south. The wind was hot and smelled of the sea.

On the side of the airport not girded by mountains, the land fell away in cultivated tiers of tobacco. As the two smugglers walked across the tarmac to congratulate their pilots and inspect their cargo, they heard cries of protest and anger from the direction of the tobacco farm.

Suddenly alert, they ran to the edge of the slope and witnessed a murder.

Outside a small maintenance hut of corrugated metal, two men grappled over a parcel. One was frail and elderly, dressed in rags, the other was larger and more powerful with a brutish and menacing demeanor. The hut stood by the highway that cut through the farm and had apparently been chosen by the two as a rendezvous point.

Before the horrified eyes of Aref and Mohsen, the larger man drew a dagger from his boot and stabbed the smaller man, who fell dead. As the murderer fled with the package

clutched in his bloodstained hands, Mohsen drew his revolver—he was in his police uniform—and dropped the fleeing ruffian with one shot.

The pair crashed through the rows of short, broad leaved plants, Mohsen running to the man who had been shot, Aref to the man who had been stabbed. Both were dead.

Aref and Mohsen walked toward each other along the deserted highway. Aref saw that Mohsen carried the fatal parcel under his arm.

“We will take it down to police headquarters,” said Mohsen. It is evidence.

Aref was not fooled. He and the police chief had been rivals since they were boys. Mohsen was not of Persian descent like Aref, but was of Kurdish extraction, and the hostility between their two races informed their friendship. And Aref knew that Mohsen knew that whatever the package contained was worth a murder.

As for that, the contents of the package were easily discernible by its shape: the package contained a large bottle, fully one meter from stopper to base. What the bottle contained must have been something of great value. And so, after some goodnatured bickering—the proximity of new wealth had erased the two dead men from memory—the two smugglers agreed to unwrap the bottle on the spot.

I do not need to describe their process of discovery, for you already know what the bottle contained: another of my kind, a djinn. In this case the inhabitant was one Muharq, an emir of the sea djinn whose people had ruled the many bodies of water in that part of the world before their incarceration eons ago.

It was Mohsen who unwrapped the magical bottle, and when he saw the tiny djinn sitting dejectedly in his prison of glass, he, that is, Mohsen, hurled the bottle to the ground with a cry of superstitious dread. The bottle did not break, to be sure, and poor Muharq was bounced around within it as it tumbled down the slope.

Aref was a citybred man of some education and was not so easily frightened as his business partner. (Would that he had been!) He chased the bottle down the slope, half sliding, half tumbling, until he and it came to a stop in a clump of tobacco plants.

Mohsen shouted warnings, but Aref had already made his decision, indeed had decided instantaneously upon first seeing the little djinn in his bottle prison and realizing the nature of the opportunity that lay before him. Without hesitation, he twisted the stopper from the bottle and thereby shattered the Seal of Solomon.

Nothing happened.

Muharq pulled himself painfully to his tiny feet and put his clothing back into order after the tumble down the slope and straightened his hair, which was, in fact, seaweed. He looked up at Aref, his round eyes filled with melancholy.

Aref placed the bottle on the ground and stood back. Muharq only looked up silently, his spare body motionless.

Blinking in confusion, Aref said, "Come forth, genie."

Muharq came forth. He flew up the neck of the bottle and lighted on the soft, moist earth.

Nothing happened.

Aref frowned. None of this was as he had expected it to be.

"You are my slave," he roared.

Muharq bowed silently.

Nothing happened.

"What is your name, slave?" Aref said.

"Muharq," said Muharq. But he was so small that his voice was inaudible to the anxious human.

"Speak so that I may hear you." Aref shouted.

Muharq sighed. He took a series of deep breaths, expending his flat chest and delicate ribs to their fullest capacity, and exhaling weakly. With each deep inhalation he grew in stature, until he was the same height as Aref.

"Muharq, master," he said, quite audibly this time.

"Very good! Am I correct in assuming that you are the slave of whoever frees you?"

"So it has been decreed," Muharq said gloomily. "It is within my power to fulfill any desire, master."

Aref laughed wickedly and rubbed his hands together, his head filled with visions of wealth, power, and sensual satisfactions. "Very good, Muharq! We have much to do, you and I."

"It is within my power to fulfill any desire, Master," said Muharq, "but know this: magic carries with it the justice of the world."

Aref narrowed his eyes. "Explain."

Muharq shrugged. "I meant merely what I said, Master."

"And what," said Aref, "did you mean by 'the justice of the world?'"

"Magic is not a product of this realm," Muharq replied. "Its energies are drawn from...elsewhere. It is not part of human life, and where it intrudes, the natural patterns of life are destroyed."

"Of course, stupid genie! That is what makes it magic."

"I do not mean to offend, Master. But I tell you now that despite your most careful wording of requests, and my best intentions, my magic will carry to you equal harm with the good. This is the justice of the world."

Aref abused the djinn in Farsi. Then he said, "And that is justice? That the glories of your magicks should be enjoyed only by shadow creatures like yourselves who dwell in the abandoned spaces of human life? Entities without ambition? Without desire?"

Aref was assuming a great deal, to be sure, for in truth he had no direct knowledge of the djinn race and its character.

Muharq shook his head sadly. "I can deny you nothing, Master. The spell that bound me to the bottle, and which now binds me to you, prohibits it. Indeed, so powerful is the enchantment that it seems to me as if I serve you of my own free will."

"Then you will do as you are told! And you will indulge in no sly attempts to pervert my requests."

Muharq opened his palms. "I have no desire to do you harm, Master. But in this world the bitter cannot be parted from the sweet, the fruit from the ripening. Nor can the sensual sweet be parted from the spiritual sweet."

"Enough, genie." Aref said angrily. The djinn's strange words jumbled about in his head, seeking a foothold. "Your kind forever seeks to spread confusion and pain! You will not unman me! Now, take me home! No! Wait." He paused and thought over his request carefully, for the djinn's warning troubled him. "Take me to the following address." And very carefully he described his abode to his new servant, specifying the street, the day, the time, the month, and year. He made sure there was no room left for misinterpretation.

"There is no need for such caution, Master," Muharq said. "Your home is known to me, for I can see it on the surface of your mind." And with that he reached out and took Aref's arm.

Mohsen watched this interchange from a safe distance. When Muharq's hand came to rest upon his new master's arm, the two of them vanished in a blink, leaving behind only the discarded bottle and the shattered wax seal.

Mohsen shrieked in horror and, a good Moslem by his own estimation, fell to his knees and pressed his forehead to the dirt.

Aref and Muharq spent the rest of the day in a frenzy of magicks. Muharq conjured up all the abundance that Aref's long-nurtured greed could invent. He filled the basement storage rooms with riches of every imagining and all the spectacular technological devices known to the world; Muharq was not so knowledgeable about electronics and solid state circuitry, but his expansive djinn mentality wove itself into the fabric of these modern curiosities and quickly comprehended their nature.

As the mounds of riches grew, Aref calculated gleefully the wealth he could accrue selling this magically created merchandise throughout the Middle East. Imagine a retail operation that required no purchasing of inventory!

But then upon further reflection it occurred to him that no such sales would be necessary. What use had he of money when his djinn slave could create unlimited wealth with only a word and a gesture?

Now, another man might have answered that question: “Why, as a service to the world, of course! Just think of how I can now feed and clothe the poor and homeless! My djinn can save countless lives, create peace for my country, and all countries.” But Aref Sedeghi was not of such a turn of mind.

And besides, Aref was a man whose sense of self-importance came from his skills as a merchant and entrepreneur. Now that his possession of a djinn had rendered all business activities irrelevant, he felt quite dislocated from life though he could not bring himself to admit this—and whatever connection he felt to his fellow man was crumbling along with his previous identity. Cut loose from their moorings of his material life, Aref's thoughts turned in upon themselves and he sought out the darker longings that lingered unsatisfied in the corners of his mind.

And, of course, he thought of Rualla.

He phrased his next request to the djinn very carefully. He remembered Muharq's warning about the 'justice of the world,' and he was careful not to bring upon himself any unintended experiences as a result of incautious wording.

“It is my wish that the beautiful Rualla fall in love with me as I am, and continue to love me no matter what use I make of my free will. She is to love me spontaneously and with her own nature.”

Muharq sadly shook his head. “What you ask, Master, is beyond the capacities even of magic. She cannot be spellbound and spontaneous at the same time. Surely you can see that the enchantment would compromise her free will utterly.”

“Do not seek to thwart me, genie.” he shouted. “I will have her, and you will make it so! You will find away.”

Muharq sighed, and bowed.

That night, Rualla was beset by sinister dreams.

In her small room in her greatuncle's home, amidst her pillows and draperies, she turned and moaned on her bed. She dreamed that a strange being with seaweed hair and round, liquid eyes descended from the darkness above her and squatted upon her belly. The sadfaced visitor, like some creature from some magical realm beneath the waves, stared miserably into her eyes, for her eyes were open in this dream. It reached down to

her, not with its hands but with its gaze, and intruded into the privacy of her mind. It foraged through her innermost thoughts, picking up one here or there, examining them like shells found on a beach, while poor Rualla cried out in horror at this invasion.

Then the thing began its work.

Deep within the dark chambers of Rualla's consciousness he shifted about the contents that he found there. He pushed some items onto back shelves or into deep closets and he drew forth into the light of day old desires, and habits of thought that had never had much power over Rualla's character. He brought forward memories of Rualla's stern father, mingled them with a long-forgotten romantic interest in a domineering old tutor, and attached these to her desire for physical love; and this last desire he amplified to an intensity just short of madness. Her love of gentleness in others, especially men, was cast into a pit from which it could exert little influence over her new appetites. The black shining pelt of a childhood pet took on the shade and texture of Aref's hair. Her love of simplicity and plain dealings was molded into a new desire to have all her decisions made for her and a distaste for personal responsibility.

In sort, the djinn took the contents of Rualla's mind just as he found them and, without the addition of any new thing, he rearranged the components so as to make Aref Sedeghi the perfect and inevitable fulfillment of her most compelling subconscious desires.

His work completed, Muharq withdrew from the sleeping girl's mentality and, with one last, sad look at her troubled loneliness, took flight.

Rualla, exhausted physically and mentally by the cruel enchantment, fell into a profound slumber.

Aref's wedding to Rualla was a large and gaudy affair with Aref's friends—who were not actually friends but business associates—thronging the small home. Rualla's only relative, the imam, did not attend.

On the night of Rualla's ensorcelment, Aref had been awakened by her frantic pounding on his front door. In anguished cries that were overheard by many of the neighbors, she begged to be let in. Smiling in triumph, Aref opened his door to her and, overwhelmed by the onslaught of her desire, had his way with her in the foyer of his home. Aref had become the paradigm of all Rualla's romantic fantasies, and she all but forced him into a proposal of marriage before even he had thought it possible.

Thirty days into their marriage, the trouble began.

Muharq lavished material wealth upon the newlyweds. Every gift Aref could imagine for Rualla was given to her. But the gentle damsel, despite the magical alteration of her

character, had little interest in such baubles, for she still possessed the simplicity of dress and manner that her holy uncle had instilled in her.

This soon began to rankle in her husband's mind. By this time his now unnecessary business empire had begun to deteriorate and he had grown noticeably fatter from his intake of Muharq's magical cuisine. So, his attention was increasingly focused upon the cluttered rooms of his home and the bride with whom he shared them.

"She keeps to her room," Aref growled to his djinn.

"And her garden," said Muharq.

"Surrounded by untold riches she restricts herself to a bare room and a pauper's diet."

"Her room is simple and lovely," the djinn said, "not bare. She is content."

Well, I am not." Aref roared." She must partake of my abundance! She is an affront to me! She disdains what I hold dear."

Muharq said nothing, for he sensed some new disaster in the making. Aref tapped the ends of his fingers together." I must word the request very carefully, must I not, tricky genie?"

"I make no attempt to trick you, Master."

Aref laughed harshly." I am pleased to hear it, thing of darkness. Then know my desire: it is time for my bride to experience the pleasure of wealth. It is my command that Rualla shall enjoy this prosperity just as I enjoy it."

Muharq sighed, and bowed." So shall it be, Master. She shall enjoy this as you enjoy it."

And so Rualla suffered another night of fearful dreams.

For a time, Aref was delighted by the transformation of his wife.

Upon the following sunrise she awoke and called for Muharq. She commanded him to conjure up a morning repast of an elegance uncharacteristic of her. She then allowed herself to be magically attired in silk gowns and heavy jewels. And by the stroke of noon she and Aref were disporting themselves in the mountains of treasure that filled the house, laughing with greedy glee and making love in piles of gold coins.

It was at this time also that Rualla began to eat.

And eat.

And eat.

For Muharq had been constrained to make Rualla enjoy his magical creations in the same way Aref enjoyed them. And so the djinn had peered deeply into his master's mind and seen there the pattern of fear and lovelessness that inspired Aref's desperate need

for material security. The djinn then recreated that pattern in the mind of Rualla. And so Aref's long-suppressed passion for food became a part of her as well.

But whereas Aref had an eye for surfaces, Rualla did not, for her nature had always been one of honesty and openness. Aref's appetite was tempered by his vanity regarding his appearance and his concern for the good opinions of other men. But Rualla's matching rapacity was an artificial imposition upon her personality and so did not bring with it the mental defenses that tempered and sublimated Aref's cravings.

The change in her became obvious to all who looked at her, for her lissome figure soon became submerged beneath ever deepening layers of fat. The neighborhood buzzed with gossip about this strange transformation, and dark rumors began to circulate about Aref and his supposed mistreatment of his bride—though even the most fantastic of these theories could not approach the truth.

Why did Aref not stop her? Why did he not order Muharq to undo the enchantment, or to at least magically restore Rualla's appearance? It is difficult to know.

Perhaps shame is what stopped him.

It is one thing to deny the existence of one's blackest traits within the privacy of one's own thoughts; but to see those same traits transferred to another, to see someone good and loving transformed into a grotesque reflection of one's self, was more than poor Aref could countenance.

And so Rualla ran wild, eating and expanding and all but exhausting Muharq with her demands for more and more. Aref's humiliation before his neighbors and former associates became so intense that he finally confined her to the house.

But soon he could not bear even the sight of her in private and so he ordered Muharq to confine her in the basement and to feed her only enough food to sustain health and life.

The djinn created a deep pit, a dungeon large enough to accommodate mountains of treasures, but too deep from which to escape. And when the work was done, and the destroyed, monstrously obese Rualla was consigned to her luxurious prison, Aref sat by the side of the pit and wept.

That night, Muharq waited upon Aref on the terrace of their house, which overlooked the flat roofs and tawny streets of the town.

Aref had changed. Whereas his wife had ballooned to hideous proportions, he had become gaunt. His own appetites, reflected back to him in the person of Rualla, now repelled him. He ate only enough to hold together his attenuated frame. He stared out at the lights of Hashtpur and wracked his brain.

“What do I ask for, genie?” he said. “Tell me. How do I use your magic in a way that creates only good, only happiness?”

Muharq shook his head. “Master, to ask for magic that does good without harm is to seek to avoid the justice of the world.”

Aref rubbed his eyes wearily. “The justice of the world. How I wish I could understand what that is.”

“Please be careful what you say, Master.”

And suddenly Aref thought he saw the solution to his misery rise to the surface of his consciousness.

“That is it, genie! That is the wish! The wish that should have been the first wish.”

“Master?”

“Genie, you will give me wisdom.”

Muharq sighed, and bowed.

Meanwhile, things had not gone well for Mohsen. His role in the partnership had always been a merely protective one. Being the law’s representative, he had been able to keep the law away. But now, bereft of Aref’s business acumen, the financial empire they had shared had begun to fall apart.

Faced with encroaching financial ruin, Mohsen had complained bitterly to Aref, and had begged him to return. But Aref had accused him of being merely jealous of Aref’s acquisition of a magical slave, and harsh words had passed between them.

From that point on, Mohsen was regularly visited by Muharq, who bore gifts from Aref. Apparently this was some indirect attempt at reconciliation. Mohsen was a superstitious peasant and did not appreciate these visitations from what he considered to be a creature of darkness. But he feared Muharq’s powers and so spoke politely to the djinn and accepted the bizarre, spectacular gifts. And besides, Muharq was the only accurate source of information about Aref and Rualla.

That night, Muharq presented Mohsen with another magical gift. It was some jewel encrusted, gilded grandiosity of no importance to my story.

“Aref does not look well,” Mohsen said to the djinn.

“Indeed no,” Muharq sighed. “My master suffers from the justice of the world.”

“It is rumored that he hasn’t got long to live. That he is thin and ill.”

Muharq made no reply.

“And you, genie? How long will you live?”

“Sir? What do you mean?”

“You are immortal, are you not?”

“Yes, friend of my master.”

“And Aref? He, too, is now immortal?”

“No, not he. Not even a djinn’s magic can release a human from that final debt.”

“And when he dies, you are free?”

“No, not free. No, never. My services pass on to the one who inherits my master’s estate.”

This was as Mohsen had suspected. And the information was significant to him, for before Rualla had become bound to Aref, Mohsen was to be the inheritor of Aref’s estate, and was still so mentioned in Aref’s will.

“It strange he does not build a palace of his own.”

“His needs are few, Mohsen.”

“Take me to him,” said Mohsen.

And Muharq brought Mohsen to the house of Aref. They trudged through piles of gold and jewels and pearls until they reached the door to a basement that had not been there before in Mohsen’s memory of the building. And they went down.

Finally they came to the bottom of the last set of stairs, and before them they beheld the massive square pit into which Rualla had been exiled.

Mohsen’s eyes bugged out, first at the gilded, jewel-encrusted squalor of the place and then at the condition of its resident. Rualla had expanded to elephantine proportions. Muharq had dressed her hair, festooned her with jewels and draped her unspeakable corpulence in Persian silks, but this made the overall effect of her appearance even more horrible.

Rualla shrieked at Mohsen, imploring him to intercede for her with her cruel jailer, who gave her all the necessities of life except food. She yowled that she had eaten only bread and fruit, and that all of two hours ago.

Mohsen could see that she was mad with hunger, or to put it more accurately, with lust for food. She screamed epithets at Aref and threatened to smother him with her own colossal bulk should he ever draw near her again.

Mohsen looked over at Aref, who stood by the pit, his eyes averted from the horrible spectacle of his demented wife.

It is difficult to know now why Aref did not struggle with Mohsen, nor cry out for help even though there was no one to hear him. It is especially strange that he did not cry out to Muharq, who would have harkened his master’s call had he slept in a cave at the bottom of the ocean. Perhaps Aref’s own shame prevented him. Perhaps some desire for punishment and absolution. Perhaps he had learned too much about himself and so had lost the zest for life.

Mohsen stepped forward and pushed Aref into the pit.

Rualla howled with savage anticipation as Aref landed clumsily on a pile of silk carpets and cloth-of-gold. She reared up unsteadily on her overburdened legs and lumbered towards him, her once dainty hands bent into talons.

“Defend yourself,” Mohsen said calmly. He threw a pistol down to him.

As Rualla approached, Aref scrambled for the gun. He stood and, with shaking hand, brought Rualla’s heart into line with the sight.

Quite mad with hunger and rage, she did not stop.

Filled with gratitude to his friend Mohsen, who had forced him to do the thing that he, Aref, had dreamed of so many times, he fired.

Rualla fell dead.

Aref turned with the gun dangling at his side. He looked up tearfully at Mohsen.

“How can I thank you, my friend?” he said.

Mohsen shot him in the head.

“Wife-killer,” the policeman said.

And so, as the bullet penetrated his skull and passed into the soft tissues of his brain, Aref learned the wisdom of the world, which is the product of experience.

As for the further career of Muharq, as the slave of Mohsen, that is a tale for another night.

White Smyth's Tale

This story is a deleted section from a novel that will make its debut in 2017. There's nothing second-rate about it; the novel just went in a different direction. Of the characters, our narrator Strephon Larkinstreet, Anhedonia, White Smyth, Dolven and Wolken made the final cut though under other names. Glev remains Glev. Kavieng is still a night club owner in the novel, but an entirely different person. Larkinstreet is 1/8 shelleycoat, 1/8 kornbock and 1/8 Chinese storm dragon with a smidgen of vodianoy on his mortal mother's side. Do your own math.

This is White Smyth's last tale. I guess that makes it important. It's the last thing I can tell you about White Smyth, and then my story goes on without him. If you don't want to read this part, you can skip over it, but I think you should read it.

Kavieng's was jumping. Ensnared in the dark cluster of box-shaped warehouse buildings on the city's near north side, it glowed and sparkled below us like a mortal carnival.

White Smyth set us down at the front door. Humans walked past, oblivious to our presence, humans with worn jeans and dilated eyes darting beneath shocks of hair dyed coal black. Kavieng's was not in a nice part of humantown.

The whole building was slenched. It belonged to some mortal landlord, but Kavieng had simply appropriated it with Masque. Once the magick settled into place, even the owner would forget about his property until Kavieng was done with it. It was customary for any fairy who had usurped real estate in this way to compensate the landlord with a miracle or two. Or the guy's children or grandchildren or great-grandchildren, depending on how long the fairies held on to the place.

The doorman was Kavieng himself.

"Mr. Larkinstreet," he said in his sighing, night dweller's voice. "And this would be the extraordinary White Smyth."

Of course, Kavieng already knew all about him; he was showing off. His club was the central data bank for fairy gossip pretty much nationwide. He knew everything about everyone in Faerie. And he never forgot a name. And besides, White Smyth was semi-famous. Kavieng looked at him more like he wanted to eat him than make love to him.

“Your advance notices did not exaggerate, Taleteller,” he said. The overhead light shone on his dark, wavy hair, seamless skin and full lips. His tuxedo shimmered like fine silk. “Enter, honored guests.”

“Hey, thanks, bud,” I said. Gods, I really hated that chilly, ooh-aren’t-we-chic-creatures-of-the-night thing that Kavieng and a lot of his darkness-dwelling patrons were into.

We passed into the dark foyer. The coat check man was also Kavieng.

“Nothing to declare,” I said cheerily. He watched White Smyth from below fine, feathery eyebrows as we passed.

“Ah, Mr. Larkinstreet,” said the maitre d’, who was also Kavieng, “Your party is expecting you.”

He led us to our table.

The location of your table was a relative thing at Kavieng’s. If you were a person of no particular distinction, your table would seem to be right by the main entrance; but no sooner did the host seat you than you discovered yourself in another spot, far removed from the maitre d’s stand. In our case, he walked us all the way across the room. He wanted everybody to see White Smyth.

It’s hard to tell you what the place looked like. It looked like everything. At Kavieng’s each table got whatever decor they wanted. As we followed him I caught glimpses of royal baroque banquets, medieval revels, art deco supper parties, beach parties, punk parties, and fairy motifs you wouldn’t recognize if I told you. Fairy musicks of every available form and style and key mixed discordantly as we passed through the multitude of overlapping reality bubbles.

I held White Smyth’s hand firmly. It was easy for newcomers to get lost in that place. There were a few cases of people getting real lost, but let’s not go there now. The trick was to keep your attention focused on Kavieng as he ushered you to your table. And you needed to watch real carefully, or you might accidentally start following one of the other Kaviengs as they zoomed by with trays of food and drink.

I guess you’ve figured out that everyone who worked at Kavieng’s was Kavieng.

His father was Sansfoy, a happy little paramindo from Milan. Sansfoy had been chef royal and, later, major domo to the Appenine fairy court before he set out for the New

World. He was the founder of Sansfoy's, a very upscale fairy restaurant on Michigan Avenue. Everybody was crazy about old Sansfoy.

Then he fell in love with a wanda akaine, a kind of vampire-fairy from Papua New Guinea. Well, that was the end of him, of course. But she managed to give him a child before she did him in, the child being Kavieng, who inherited his father's culinary talent along with his mother's abilities to create illusions, bend space and exist in several places at the same time.

We entered what appeared to be the grand dining salon of a turn-of-the-century cruise ship, and I remembered that it had been Anhedonia's turn to chose an environment. The place was festooned with black crepe and mourning cloth, and the long dining table had a shape that was, well, oddly hexagonal. Candles were the only source of light and a thick fog roiled outside the portholes.

Anhedonia sat at the head of the table supping on a platter of rare hothouse flowers, arranged by one of Kavieng's artists. She would place one long, blood-red fingernail on each blossom in turn and it would crumble into black powder as its life force channeled into her. (Anhedonia was only half vordylak, so she had no taste for people.)

Needless to say, the funereal surroundings had no effect at all on the mood of the group. Party time was party time. The whole Circle had emigrated to Kavieng's and they seemed to be tightly packed around the immense dining table, but I knew that when White Smyth and I looked for a seat, with Kavieng's solicitous assistance, there'd be room.

They'd gone ahead and ordered without us. The sideboard was piled high with typical fairy eclecticism. Fairy banquets aren't quite like their human counterparts; fairies are easily distracted and very inventive at entertaining themselves, so everybody doesn't stay in their seats and eat for two hours. If your food gets cold, a few fairy gestures will warm it up again.

Also, everyone gets served different food, even in a private home. From a human perspective this might seem like bad manners, but the complexity of American fairies' racial backgrounds—me being a good example—made it necessary. There were no menus at Kavieng's. You just ordered what you ordered and you got it.

White Smyth, Shaddock and I could all eat normal mortal food; White Smyth and I had to—he had almost as much human in him as I do. Wolken, on the other hand, was 100% fairy, a descendant of Greek and Roman wind entities, an assortment of weather elementals from different countries, and the grandson on his father's side of an Icelandic geyser troll. His dinner consisted of a sequence of bottles, served one at a time. Each contained a different concoction whose aroma Wolken inhaled. He feasted on

smells. One of his favorite stunts was to go into a mortal restaurant, order heavily, smell the food until he was full, then hand the untouched meal back to the waiter and tell him how good it was. And if that doesn't sound too nutritious, one day I'll show you some of the bodybuilding magazines with Wolken on the cover. He used a mortal nom de flex which anyone into the sport would recognize.

His second cousin Dolven, also part troll, was served a tray of gemstones and a lighted candle. She held the jewels up to the flame and dined on the light they projected.

The only major relationships in a fairy's life are with the members of his Circle. A fairy Circle isn't just a bunch of pals who hang out together. The group is founded on and held together by a fundamental compatibility of magicks and character traits. Most Circles cohere for centuries. It's the principal social unit of Faerie.

There were two places open to Anhedonia's right, across from Marmalet and Aileron.

"Hello," White Smyth called to them over the din.

"Larkinstreet!" Wolken shouted, as if announcing an act at the circus. He whomped me on the back with one superbly muscled hand, almost forcing my head into the table.

"So," Mu Meson said, "you have escaped from the belly of the beast."

Wolken raised his mug on high. "To Larkinstreet! Dragonmaster!"

He went mostly unheard amidst all the racket and the stupendous organ music Kavieng had piped in at Anhedonia's request, but a few of the revellers raised their glasses in ragged unison. At all our gatherings Wolken carried this big Viking beer stein sort of thing that he pounded on the table all the time. Hail fellow, and well met. Given that he never ate or drank, this was nothing but macho affectation, but Wolken was like that.

He asked me how things went with Granddad in the museum. The story was a little more action-packed than they'd expected [You'll have to read the novel to find out about that], so by the time I was finished, everyone at the table had quieted down completely so they could listen to me. Story-telling, as you might expect, is an honored practice in Faerie.

"Another human?" said Anhedonia. "You taste in lovers bewilders, Lark."

"Well, nothing to be done," White Smyth said.

I frowned. "What do you mean, 'nothing to be done?'"

"Certainly you can't argue with him about it. He's a dragon lord, for gods' sakes."

The others weren't pleased by his remarks, and they muttered to each other.

Kavieng appeared with my dinner, and with White Smyth's. I got my usual burritos with scorching Szechuan barbecue sauce, but for White Smyth, Kavieng had created a special treat: he had taken different flavors of Necco-wafer-colored ice cream and carved

them into the shapes of fabulous beasts—a French vanilla Pegasus, a Swiss almond Manticore, a run raisin Cameleopard, a Chimera made of strawberry, blueberry, and lime sorbets, and a chocolate griffin. They were served rampant on a seacoast of crushed ice sand and blue agar gelatine waves.

After I was done eating, I looked over at White Smyth. He was still eyeing me with grave suspicion.

“Well, what,?” I snapped.

He paused in thought. “Larkinstreet, have I ever told you the story of Gorlois, Defender of the Trees?”

“No, never,” I said sulkily. I could feel a lesson coming on, just like when Twice-Great-Granddad would start to ask me cryptic questions out of nowhere.

“Well, I was visiting my cousin Glev at his ... ”

Suddenly, Kavieng was there again. “Please forgive me for interrupting,” he purred, “but am I to understand that you are about to grace us with a narrative?”

White Smyth blinked. “Oh, er...”

“ATTENTION, PLEASE!” Kavieng said. His voice was suddenly amplified, or rather multiplied, as it came out of dozens of Kavieng mouths simultaneously throughout the club, all speaking as one. Our fin de siecle dining room shuddered as a powerful wind whirled around it, dissolving the walls into gold and scarlet gas and carrying them away. Our illusion collapsed, we found ourselves seated around a bare, Formica table in a colossal warehouse filled with dozens of other such tables surrounded by fairies of every breed and stripe.

In a far corner, on a raised dais of crystal and white metal, stood Kavieng, the original, primary Kavieng. The substances that composed his platform were the conduits for his metalocality power. He stepped forward, and the shimmering quartz and silver faded to dull gray. All the auxiliary Kaviengs vanished; trays crashed to the floor, water pitchers tumbled onto tabletops.

“Gentlebeings!” he said to the bewildered crowd. “White Smyth, son of Gelid and Una speaks to us!”

The applause was deafening. White Smyth muttered eloquent fairy curses under his breath. He smiled tightly and stood up. His family was chock full of brilliant fairy taletellers, as were many of the winter clans. His own talents were widely regarded as tremendous.

When the tumult died down, he said to Kavieng, “I thank you, Maestro, for the honor, but...” He gestured helplessly at the enormous crowd.

“Ah, of course,” Kavieng said. “Not quite the intimate setting you require. If you will permit me.” He stepped back to the center of his pedestal and it again shimmered into activity.

And there was White Smyth all over.

At the head of each table stood a White Smyth replica. It was the first time any of us had seen Kavieng use his powers to metalocate someone else. Who knew?

The audience went ‘Ah!’ and applauded again. White Smyth sighed and sat down at our table, and all the other White Smyths sat down, too.

When silence was established, he proceeded to do what fairies do best after partying and making love:

He told a fairy tale:

Michael died four years ago this week. So, I guess that’s why he’s on my mind.

Poor minnow.

The human thing and the fairy thing. They just don’t go, do they, my cousins?

Oh, but let me begin this tale in the proper way...

Once upon a time in a land called Colorado some humans decided to erect a hydroelectric plant in a wilderness area. They first built a fence around the selected site because when humans need to use a thing they first make sure that no one else can use it. It was a chain-link fence furbished with signs that said KEEP OUT and GOVERNMENT PROPERTY.

The day came when the land was to be cleared for construction. A crowd of mortals convened before the chain link gates, waving placards and shouting. They weren’t the elegant humans that our kind mostly prefers. These people were rougher, more emotional, with hair all in disarray, like mine, and battered sneakers and jeans. The men wore beards, or were smooth-faced with eyeglasses. The women looked very beautiful (in a grubby human sort of way) in headcloths and Indian beadwork jackets. It was late autumn, so scarves and leggings and down vests were in evidence everywhere. It was the first day of the year that had been cold enough for me to safely visit that place.

Covered trucks arrived filled with stern-faced men in identical fatigues and mirrored sunglasses, with matching sets of equipment, each of which included a power saw. The crowd booed and growled as the convoy passed through into the boundaries within the fence.

Sprinkled throughout the shifting mob of humans were many fairies. Mythical activity in the area had been intense over the past twenty-four hours. The trolls had

been frantically clearing out their warrens, and the river tritons dismantling their riverside pleasure tents. With frenzied haste, the life forces of the woodland fairies whose trees were to be chopped down were transferred into seedlings for replanting; the poor, dear tree-ladies (and -men) were all lying in state at the fairy Healer in Colorado Springs where they would remain for several years until their new saplings had grown strong enough to hold them. (Incredible that in the Old World the dryads simply died along with their trees! Barbaric!)

I sat and watched the protest from a nearby boulder with my cousin Glev, the river lord whose waters would be powering the electric plant. Glev was an easy-going sort of river lord, fat as Herod and inclined to live and let live provided his own pleasures went undisturbed. He had accepted the human intrusion into his realm with sighing resignation.

“The way of the world,” he murmured in his genderless voice, more to himself than to me, “the way of the world.”

On a neighboring boulder a camera crew from a local TV station fussed with their equipment, conferring and pointing. What a scoop they’d have had if Glev’s Masque had wavered!

“There’s someone staring at us, Glev.”

“Oh? And why shouldn’t he stare at us?” Glev was vain about his bloated, blimp-like obesity, as if it were all gleaming muscles.

“He’s over by that tree. With a sketch pad.”

“Why does he sit sketching?” said Glev, not deigning to look where I’d pointed. “Why isn’t he down protesting with the other fairies? Not one of my constituents, I gather.”

“He’s human.”

Glev started up. “What! Where?”

“Lie back. Act as if nothing’s happened.”

“Is my Masque in place?” He looked nervously at the news team.

“Yes, yes ”

“Ah. So. He has the Sight.” He relaxed again and stretched out.

The human was curled up under an old cypress with his sketching tablet on his knees. An array of colored pencils poked out of the front pocket of his denim jacket.

He was thin as a finger, with thick hair so black it had no sheen. It seemed to take in light and release none. His face was laid out in vertical and horizontal lines with a grave, straight-across mouth. His clothes were a jumble of cheap and expensive, an Armani pullover sweater with bottom-of-the-line corduroy slacks; designer socks and K-Mart

sneakers. It was easy to see what his mother had given him and what he had bought himself.

His eyes were hidden behind capacious sunglasses. He kept his head pointed slightly away from us, as if he were observing the crowd below, but I knew he was really examining Glev and me with sidelong stares. Still, it was an effective subterfuge. He didn't seem to be looking our way. I reasoned that he'd had a lot of practice.

Glance up.

Sketch.

Pretend to admire a stray leaf.

Sketch.

Pretend to look at the sun.

Sketch.

He was good. Sneaky.

"Investigate, Cousin," said Glev.

"Try to look natural, dear," I said.

"Who? Moi?"

While the human's head was bent over his sketch pad, I slipped down the back of the boulder and slybooted in a wide arc through the undergrowth. In a moment, and without noise, I was behind him.

He didn't notice me. I stared over his shoulder and looked at what he'd drawn: Glev, the boulder, me.

"You're very good," I said.

He froze momentarily, then went back to his work, as if he'd heard nothing.

Very smooth.

"Not many artists can manage my hair color," I went on. "And you can see great detail at a distance as well." He began to hum tunelessly, as if lost in concentration. "Of course, your eyes are special, aren't they?"

He continued to feign ignorance. I noticed that his hand had started to shake.

"However, you're putting too much green in my bomber jacket." I reached around and yanked the pencil out of his hand.

"Oh, butterfingers," he muttered. He looked around him, patted the grass with his hands. "Where did I drop it?"

"That's very clever. You're very good. But the jig is up, as they say."

He stopped fumbling. He turned his head towards me, keeping his eyes averted.

"Is that right?" His voice was flat and hollow. The force of his words dissolved somewhere in the dark of his throat. It was the voice of a boy who'd never learned to

speak out, who never shouted; a boy who kept his pencils and sketch pad with him at all times, even on dates.

“My name is White Smyth.”

He didn't move.

“And you are?”

“Michael.”

“Stand up, Michael. Let's have a look at you.”

Slowly, he rose and turned to face me, head down.

His body was nothing to write poems about: lank and square-hipped, with joints that seemed thicker than the limbs they connected. His clothes hung on him as if on a drying rack. His hands, however, were worth a verse or two. I thought how I would like to be touched by them.

“Are you going to look at me?” I asked him.

He thought for a moment, still staring downward. “There's an old story,” he said. “From Ireland.”

“I'm part Irish.”

“Uh-huh.” His tongue darted nervously across his lips. “About a man who could see things. He lost one eye in an accident, and the remaining eye developed Glam-sight.”

“Not very scientific. But a good premise for a story.”

“He used to watch the King of the Leprechauns moving invisibly around the town square on market day. One day the king realized he was being watched. He spit in the man's eye, and the man went blind.”

“I see. A draconian solution, wouldn't you say, Michael?”

“Uh, what?”

“Well,” I said, “that sounds like something old King Brian would do. My great-grandmother is a half-sister of his and she tells me stories. But really, Michael, this is America.” I put one finger under his chin and raised his head. “We have laws against that kind of thing.”

I gently pulled off his sunglasses and tossed them in the grass. I watched his pale green eyes fill up with the sight of me. I wonder if the thrill ever wears off, of being seen by a mortal? We fairies take each other's looks for granted. It's fun to dazzle on occasion.

“Are you real?” he said.

“Last time I checked.”

His eyes surveyed me once again.

I held out my hand. “May I see?”

He looked down at his sketch pad, which by some animal reflex, he'd tucked under his arm. Reluctantly he handed it to me.

I flipped it to the front and went through it page by page. He was very talented: I expect drawing was the only thing at which he'd ever dared to excel, so all his caring and creativity had been channeled into it. All the drawings were of fairies: a golden man with antlers propositioning a mortal woman in a crowded bar; two satyrs dancing in a shopping mall, one wearing a t-shirt that said "Keep on Truckin'"; a woman with crystal wings flying next to a ski-lift occupied by muffled humans; two fairy lovers on a rocky seashore, their fishtails intertwined; fairies of every stripe and shape, sitting on car hoods and on the roofs of suburban homes, fairies on a subway platform, fairies capering invisibly on stage amongst mortal actors. (The humans were performing, I think, *Death of a Salesman*.)

His style was scrupulously detailed, and he had the talent for capturing the essence of each subject, the one posture or facial expression that revealed the whole identity.

"Very beautiful," I said. "There's magic in your eyes, no doubt about that." I returned the pad to him. "How long have you been Sighted?"

"Uh, been what?"

"Sighted. You have the Sight. That's why you can see such things."

He fingered his sketchbook nervously. "Since I was eleven or so."

"Ah. Puberty."

"I guess."

From the plain below came the grrrhnnnn of power saws cutting into wood. The crowd roared angrily. A mournful fairy wind moaned through the leaves above us. The clearing of the trees had begun.

"Bastards!" said Michael.

"The mortal devaluing of Nature in favor of machinery. We don't understand it, Michael."

He glared at me, his fear dissolved by anger. "Why don't you do something! Stop them!" His rectilinear face was suddenly flushed and pleated with rage.

"Stop them?"

"You're magic, aren't you? You have powers! Blind them! Turn them into pigs! Strike them down with lightning!"

"Oh, I would if I could, old friend. Well, perhaps not lightning. But we have Laws. And one of them forbids interfering with human society. And another prohibits killing humans. Except for nourishment, of course."

A ripple of apprehension passed below his anger. "Nourishment?"

“Oh, well, that was just a clause the Founders...certain special-interest groups.” I fluttered my hands foolishly. Was this mortal boy actually making me self-conscious? “Never mind.”

The camera crew ambled down the incline with their equipment towards the roiling crowd of protesters. The pretty blond woman spoke into her microphone with mannered intensity. Glev sat on his boulder, head in hands.

“Come,” I said. “Meet my cousin Glev.”

Why did I pull him into it? For the usual fairy reason: he amused me. And if I needed to rationalize it, he was already halfway in anyway. What harm?

Glev invited us over to his place.

He was very gracious to Michael. He presented his hand to be shaken (or kissed, I wasn't sure) and called him “My dear boy.” I could see that look in his eyes, so I stuck close to the lad. We struck out through the woods with Glev in the lead. His ovoid bulk crushed down a path for us in the undergrowth. His huge buttocks and thundering thighs seemed densely massive yet buoyant, like pontoons.

He spoke to me on Frequency, so that Michael wouldn't hear. “What are we going to do with him, White Smyth?”

“Do? I don't know. Feed him lunch, I suppose. Why do anything with him?”

Glev's flutey voice turned grave and sorrowful. “We've made contact with a Sighted human. We're supposed to report him.”

“Well, then, we'll report him. He's not a danger, Glev.”

“To himself, perhaps.”

“What?”

“He has the Sight, after all...”

“You're gazooly!” I said. I turned and found Michael staring absent-mindedly at the area around my chest. I smiled. “See anything you like?”

He blushed and looked away. He asked me about the camera crew. “They couldn't see you, apparently?”

“No, we were in Masque.”

“Fairy Glamour! They look at us and see birds and rocks and things! Right?”

I laughed. “Glamour! Oh, no! Michael, that's like gas lighting and outdoor toilets! Glamour!” He frowned, and I quickly explained myself. “Magic advances. We stopped using Glamour back in your horse-and-buggy days. We have Masque now. It was invented by Cyrus O'Cyrus, one of our great fairy geniuses, the fairy Einstein.”

He nodded. “I get it. They see you, but they don't notice you.”

We were approaching Glev's river, the sound of it like a crowd mumbling in the trees. It was a big river, perhaps half a mile wide. "You're very quick, Michael."

"I see the truth in things," he said, something no fairy would ever claim for themselves.

The banks of the river were empty, stripped of all fairy habitations. River tritons, male and female, lay about in the reeds and on the rocks, basking. They saluted lazily when Glev appeared, not bothering to rise from where they were.

"O'Cyrus," I said, to continue our conversation, "is now trying to find a Masque that can block the Sight."

A tremor of alarm crossed his face. "Will he succeed?"

"Most certainly. But not soon. Dr. O'Cyrus is very tenacious."

"Bring him below, White Smyth, will you?"

"Yes, Glev."

Glev vanished into the water, submerging like a bathysphere. The tritons began to slide below the surface, one by one, like lazy crocodiles.

"Bring me below?" Michael said.

"Below, yes. It's perfectly safe." I waded knee deep into the tumbling water,

He stayed where he was on the shore. Probably visions of man-drowning mermaids were going through his head.

"Come," I said. "Take my hand."

He stared and said nothing, his features all at right angles.

"Well, now, old friend, I'd have killed you already if I'd wanted to, wouldn't I?"

"I don't know," he said. "Would you?"

He walked to the river's edge. He set aside his pad and knapsack and squatted down to unlace his sneakers.

"No, that's all right," I said. "Just come as you are."

He looked up at me blankly.

He stood and pulled his knapsack over his shoulder. He took my hand.

I smiled. "Thank you, Michael." He smiled back weakly. "Now, come!"

We jumped and descended. The waters closed over our heads as we glided down feet first.

Glev's people kept their river admirably free of silt, so the view was fine with the noonday sun shining clear down to the bottom. The whole of the riverbed was paved in blue and yellow mosaic tiles for two miles on either side of us. This floor showed up quite clearly in aerial photographs, though Masque kept the humans from noticing it, even in pictures. The shimmering sculptures, furniture and weighted knick-knacks of

the tritons were on display as far as we could see. Although the air above had been sufficiently chilled for me to venture that far south, I found the river to be uncomfortably warm, like an overheated room.

I realized that Michael was holding his breath. His face was contorted with the strain.

“Breathe, old friend,” I said. I slammed him on the back.

His eyes bulged with panic as his air supply shot out of his mouth in a jet of bubbles. His body clenched as he sucked in river water, and he began to scramble towards the surface.

“Relax, Michael,” I said, or gargled, rather.

He did.

“I’m breathing,” he said through the water.

“Yes?”

“Breathing water.”

“Is there something else down here to breathe?”

Our eyes met and we laughed. It was the first laughter I’d seen from him, and it had a pained look to it, as if he were exercising muscles that had been in long disuse. We swam along and I let him marvel at Glev’s holdings. There was lots of fairy artwork that dated back years and decades and centuries. There was human work, too, bronze sculptures and magically protected paintings. He identified some of them as “lost” or “missing” works though they obviously weren’t either.

“Are you an art student, Michael?”

He shook his head. “Chemistry.”

“Chemistry! How...out of character.”

“It has its uses.”

We came to where the river bed dipped down into a vast excavated basin that Glev used for his banqueting hall. We swam down, passing over the heads of the banqueters, and settled into two chairs to Glev’s right, which he had held for us. The tritons had had a rough twenty-four hours, and they were partying it away.

We ate, we drank (a real trick underwater,) we sang, we danced (lots of fun underwater,) we told tales. Michael became quite drunk on chalybeat and delighted the others by asking tactless questions. He was fascinated by the mythical biology around him: some like me with webbed hands and feet, some with fish tails, some with snakes for hair or seaweed, green tritons, blue tritons, coral red tritons.

The day passed and the sun set.

At the height of the festivities they carried out a surprise for Glev, a cheer-up present. It was a big mirror, maybe six feet wide, definitely an antique, with thick gilded

ornamentation and a carving at its crown of Psyche beholding Eros. The shark-finned triton who'd acquired it for the river explained that it was a flarting mirror, one gifted with the power to reflect back a person's fondest private image of himself.

You can imagine what a skirmish there was over who'd get to go first. Everybody jostled himself in front of the mirror, one by one, with interesting results. The party got even livelier and even louder. Nobody was much embarrassed by the mirror's revelations: fairies have no shame, right, Larkinstreet?

Finally it was Glev's turn. He coyly floated up out of his chair, to great applause, and glided into the mirror's range.

The magical image that appeared was...well, of Glev. It reflected back an exact image of him, as if it were an ordinary looking glass. We all realized in unison what this meant: Glev was entirely pleased with himself as he was, and was incapable of harboring a secret image of some paradigm fantasy-Glev. He was, in his own estimation, already perfect.

A great roar of approval rose up from the revellers, Michael and I included, and much toasting and praising ensued. The party gave off one last blaze of light before it began to peter out.

Finally, as the moon found its way directly over our heads, the orb almost undistorted by the clear water, the partyers began to pair off and swim away with sleepy undulating movements of their bodies. They wafted off, chuckling softly and whispering, until only Glev, Michael, and I were left in the feast hall. A pair of silver-skinned twin boys with translucent fins and sad purple eyes silently swam about the huge basin and magically activated the pan-globes, which lit up our surroundings with a soft fairy light.

Michael was stretched out in his high-backed chair and grinned stupidly, contented as a walrus. Glev contemplated him with a faint smile.

"Michael, my dear," he crooned. "I notice you never tried out my little toy."

"Your what?"

"The mirror, child."

Michael shrugged and fumbled absently with the base of a candlestick.

"I don't think I like your mirror," he muttered. "I'm a private person."

"Well, this is private," Glev said. He gestured at the empty hall. (The twin boys didn't apparently count.) "Would you like to try now?"

A server with a porpoise's hindquarters swam down from above. "Begging your pardon," he said in his chattering cetacean voice.

"Yes, Breeteeq?"

“The young human gentleman left these at the river’s edge.” He had Michael’s sketch pad and knapsack.

“Oh, no!” Michael cried. He shot up out of his seat. “My drawings! They’re ruined! Oh no!”

He floated up and snatched them out of Breeteeq’s hands.

“Oh, not at all, sir,” said the triton. “I protected them before bringing them under.” He was a little miffed, understandably.

Michael paged through his drawings which were perfectly intact. He examined them carefully, one by one, as if he expected some to be missing.

He was hovering in front of the mirror, his back to it.

“Great Tethys!” Glev exclaimed.

“Michael,” I said. “My goodness.”

He looked at us, then followed our line of sight to the mirror. Breeteeq saw it too and swam out of the way.

The mirror reflected back a golden warrior, seven feet tall, with white-gold hair and a face like something off Easter Island. The armor—impractically skimpy and revealing—was minutely embossed with martial tableaux and the helmet sported shoots of gold extending up into impossible lattices of shining metal. Oiled muscles bulged surreally. The sword at his belt was unusably long and thick.

Michael regarded himself in the glass. The image’s stone blue eyes, beneath the helmet’s brow, glittered with flecks of gold.

“Gorlois!” he whispered.

“Er, what old friend?”

“Gorlois the Defender,” Michael repeated, his voice growing more resonant. “The Knight of the Trees.”

I floated up behind him. “And? “

“It’s my role,” he said evenly.

“Role?”

“My gaming role.”

“Aha,” said Glev, “I know the one. Pistols and Dragons.”

To be sure, I thought. Fantasy role gaming. Wouldn’t he just? In that moment, I found the category under which Michael could be put. Fantasy Nerd, was the term the humans used. Someone who would argue for hours about the meaning of a line from Star Trek: the Next Generation and who would cast himself as a mighty medieval warrior in endlessly protracted adventure games.

Poor lonely minnow.

Michael swam closer to the mirror, his magicked reflection imitating him with lots of extra flexing and bulging.

“Gorlois defends the realm of Arboria,” he said—declaimed, rather. “All growing things are within his stewardship. He has great power, but unleashes it at peril to his own life.”

“Oh, Great Ocean,” Glev whispered to me; Michael was absorbed in his reflection. He flexed his puny arm and watched the mirror image bulge impossibly. “‘At peril of his own life.’ Even Old World Faerie isn’t that primitive.”

“It’s not real, is it?” Michael said, staring down at his own hands.

Glev swam forward. “Would you like it to be real, Michael?”

Michael gave him a blank look, a kind of non-reaction.

“Then let it be so. For now.” Glev placed one webbed hand against the glass, the other on Michael’s shoulder.

“Glev, no.”

But I was too late. “Gorlois” stood before us, on both sides of the glass.

“Wow!” Michael shouted. His voice now boomed an octave lower. He clenched and unclenched his fists and watched the muscles on his arms ripple under the skin.

“Glev, enough.”

Glev stretched and yawned. An ascending stream of bubbles escaped his mouth. “Ah, I’m exhausted, dear White Smyth. Let Ebbleg here show you to your guest quarters.” One of the sad-faced boys swam up.

I pulled Glev aside. “You can’t leave him that way.”

He glanced over his shoulder at Michael, who was still transfixed. “It’s just a bit of Glamour, dear. Old-fashioned magic. His Sight can see right through it, whenever he chooses. As can yours.” He smiled at some secret joke. “Whenever you choose. Your usual quarters are ready for you.”

Our rooms, my rooms actually, were a suite of chambers burrowed into the wall of the river bank. The rooms were spherical—up and down having little authority there as concept—and paved with more mosaic patterning. Little Ebbleg shepherded a panlight ahead of us and left it hanging on the “ceiling” of the innermost chamber.

We had been unable to tear Michael away from the mirror until Ebbleg assured him that the withdrawal suite had more mirrors in it. And it did. They were suspended at various points about the rooms with no visible means of support. Michael tested his sword in front of one of them, waving it back and forth through the water, watching sparks of energy trail behind it. The long exposure to what was for me the warm river waters had exhausted me.

I sat on the sleeping pallet and waited. "Michael, old friend..."

"Gorlois!" he boomed. "Knight of the Trees! Defender of Arboria!"

"Yes, of course, Gorlois, do come to bed. You'll be better in the morning."

"Better?" he roared. He turned and regarded me lustfully.

Oh gods.

"Better than this?" He lunged at me, wobbling rather comically in the dense currents; his struggles to move in smooth, powerful strokes reminded me that it was still little Michael under that bulging illusion.

I hastily put a sleep spell over him. Sex with Michael was never to be part of the evening's festivities. His eyes closed at once and he drifted peacefully towards the tiled floor. I caught him up, an easy thing to do underwater, and laid him out on the pallet. I then lifted the spell, so that his slumber would be normal and his awakening comfortable.

Ensorcelled humans can be so tiresome: poor little sheep in Rambo's clothing.

I couldn't wait for morning to come so I could get him out of there.

Sometime after I had drifted off, I thought I had a dream. In it, Michael, in the armor of Gorlois, whispered in my ear as I lay sleeping:

"You don't know who I am, do you, White Smyth?"

I found the question faintly alarming, for no reason. "Uh, who you are?" I mumbled, "No, I suppose I don't, really. Nor you me." I felt sleep reclaiming me. "Do you know who you are, Michael?"

"I do now," he said.

I awoke in the night and he was gone.

I shot out of bed, blundering into the wall in the split-second it took me to clear my head. (One wakes up much faster underwater. No need to splash water on your face, after all. I mean, there it is.)

I swam out into the broad plaza of the riverbed. The moon had moved out of sight, and the long, paved expanse of Glev's domain was lighted with pan-globes.

Glev was in the distance, involved in some kind of water ballet with the melancholy twins. It looked distinctly like a fish's mating dance.

"Glev, where is he!" I snarled, swimming up to him. The boys broke off in alarm and sought cover behind a bronze urn.

"Why, whoever do you mean?" he said. He floated lazily over my head.

"Glev!"

"Oh, be still. You'll wake the whole shoal. He's gone up."

"What! Why!"

He shrugged and smiled. "He said he had urgent business to attend to."

"Oh! Was he still Glamoured?"

He shrugged again. "I used moonlight in it. It will dissolve when the sun comes up."

"When did he go!"

"A few minutes ago."

I began to swim to the surface. "I'll stay with him until dawn."

"You won't find him."

I turned and looked down at him through the current.

"What did you do, Glev?"

He clasped his hands over his belly, flexed his feet.

"Glev! You didn't!"

He waggled his eyebrows.

"You did! You distimed him! You fool!"

It was the oldest fairy trick in the book: let a mortal into a fairy revel, and then send him home—one hundred years in the future.

"How far!"

He made a little moue. "Oh, stop,. It was the perfect ending to his adventure. He'll have something to talk about all his life. Besides, I don't have to report him, this way. Or at least I've put it off for a while."

"How far!"

"Two years. Just enough to make it interesting."

"Glev, mortals are delicate! You can drive them insane with tricks like that!" I swam upwards again.

"White Smyth," he cried, his voice receding behind me. "The boy's got the sight! He's mad already! Or soon will be!"

As I went up I smelled Glev's spell and followed it. I burst through to the surface, wrapping time around me as I went, and landed on solid ground two years up the line.

"Michael!" I cried as my feet hit the bank. His illusory armor gleamed amidst the trees.

"Michael!"

He kept walking.

I sighed.

"Gorlois!"

He turned and waved, one mighty hand on his mighty hip. His knapsack and drawing pallet dangled incongruously from his shoulder.

I caught up with him easily.

“Hail, White Smyth!” he boomed.

“Oh, stop that, Michael.”

I used my fairy vision to pierce the illusion. Poor, ill-proportioned Michael stood before me again, though I knew he still maintained the Glamour in his own mind. “You’ve got to come back with me. Quickly.”

“Go back? Never!” He was his flat-toned self again, but he retained the bold swagger of Gorlois. The effect was bizarre.

“Michael, Glev has tricked you. This is the future.”

“I know.” He pointed. “Look up there. It’s finished.”

Sprawling across the torrent of the river was the blank concrete face of the hydroelectric plant, completed and busy. Figures moved back and forth behind the tall lighted windows. .

“We must go back at once, Michael, or we’ll be stuck here.”

“I want to be stuck here, White Smyth.” He smiled sadly. “I have things to do.”

“Michael, I know this seems like just a few moments to you, but years have passed. You’ll have been dropped from college by now. Your mother will think you’re dead.” (I was fairly certain that most humans had mothers.)

“Thank you, White Smyth, for showing me my path. Good-bye.”

“Michael..”

“Look for me tomorrow, will you?”

“Michael, I’m going back. Tomorrow is two years away for me.”

“I know. The newspaper stand by the Capitol Building. Look for me.”

“You’ll be there?”

“I’ll be there. You’ll remember, won’t you?”

For no reason that I knew of, tears came to my eyes. “Of course, I’ll remember.”

He kissed me lightly on the cheek and strode off into the dark.

Naturally, I didn’t remember.

Fairy fidelity.

I ran back to the river and dived in, plunged down the years, scolded Glev, and left bristling.

Fairy life reasserted itself. I resolutely remembered my promise to Michael for a full year. Then I would recall it every few days, and then every few weeks, and then months.

One night, at a party for Dr. Borborygmous the old fairy historian, I ceased to exist for six minutes.

It made the party.

When I popped back into being, old Borborygmous scowled beneath his long blue beard and asked me if I'd done any time jumping in my life. At once remembering Michael, I said yes. Borborygmous said that my earlier self had just intruded upon the present time, pushing me into non-being until the incident of bilocality was ended. And he offered me several methods to keep that from happening in the future.

I realized what night it must be.

I commandeered a relative of Aileron's, a white, winged man-horse, and he flew me through the dark to Denver. We landed outside the Capitol Building below gray morning skies. He bowed, refused my proffered remuneration, and took off.

Humans were already on the streets, heading for work. I hoped I hadn't missed Michael. After all, we'd never specified exactly when we would meet.

I ran to the newspaper stand. Displayed across the front of it were copies of the morning's Denver Post. The headline read:

COSTUMED MAN BOMBS POWER PLANT

The story said that a powerfully-built man in golden armor had attacked the North Platte River hydroelectric plant at 3:00 AM the previous morning. Frightening the guards with what was described as a "flaming sword," the man broke through to the inner complex.

A massive explosion ripped through the top floor of the main building and started a blaze that had wiped out most of the installation. In the ruins were found the remains of a young man later identified by his dental records. The connection between the young man and the costumed attacker was unknown, but the deceased, a former chemistry major at a local university who had disappeared years before, had undoubtedly set off the explosion using substances carried in a satchel or knapsack, fragments of which were found near the body

What had you planned, Michael, in your sad little mind? What was your illusion of choice? To set fire to the tents of the tree-killers? When you found yourself in the future and saw the finished plant, off-balance from a night of wonders, disguised by magic, did a greater illusion overtake you, a chance for Gorlois to truly defend something?

It went on...

Found in the sentry box was the boy's strange suicide note in the form of a sketch pad filled with drawings of mythical creatures in modern settings. On the last page below an unfinished drawing of a

naked fat man reclining with a handsome fairy prince, were these words:

I am the last to know. Soon Osiris will take the Sight from me and I will be see no more. This is my final act.

—Gorlois the Defender

Carefully inscribed on the front cover, in neat square print, was the boy's real name.

My tears dropped down onto the page and bounced to the ground, the frozen tears of the winter-folk.

The humans could not see me. They bought their papers, bustled by in their suits with their briefcases, laughed, sighed, checked their watches. I fell to my knees against the grimy metal newsstand. My melting tears stained my hands, and the humans stepped over me, walked around me, oblivious, indifferent to my sadness.

The fairy thing and the mortal thing.

They just don't go.

* * *

White Smyth wiped a glittering tear from his impassive face and leaned back.

Marmalet ran her long spidery fingers through her vermilion hair. "But what does it mean?" she said.

White Smyth rolled his eyes and smiled at me. "Larkinstreet, please tell her what it means."

"It doesn't mean anything, Marmalet," I said. "It's just a fairy tale."

"Oh, Lark," White Smyth sighed. "You can be so spectacularly dense."

Now, what he meant by *that*, I didn't know.

**If the Immortals Spoke
as Mortals Do**

A Half-Act Play

Dramatis Personae

Cassandra the Prophetess

The Furies

Alekto

Tisiphone

Megaera

Apollo, God of Light and a Lot of Other Stuff

Athena, Goddess Wisdom

Hermes, Conductor of the Dead

Offstage voices: An Angry Man, Agamemnon, The Conductor.

Author's Note

Best performed drunk.

The scene is the courtyard in front of the foreboding castle of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. Upstage are the regulation every-Greek-tragedy-you've-ever-seen ominous double doors leading into the castle. Enter Cassandra, looking less than regal in her tattered robes, dusty sandals and crown of withered laurel leaves. A cigarette hangs pugnaciously from the corner of her mouth. She is a chain smoker, as we will see. She stops center, hands on hips, and peruses her surroundings.

Cassandra

So, this is Argos, huh? Boy, what a nothing joint this turned out to be. Geez, and I thought Troy was in the middle of nowhere. This must be the armpit of the Universe. No.

(She points to the castle)

No. He's the armpit of the Universe. Agamemnon. Kind of a big deal. When he docked his boat just now his old lady was down there like a bat outta Hell. Horny-lookin old thing. Where the hell is everybody? He's been gone for ten years, you'd at least think they'd want to know who won the fuckin' war.

(shouts)

Anybody home!

(Pause)

Hey! Lets get some pagan revelries goin' here!

Angry Voice

Shutup out there! People are trying to sleep!

Cassandra

Who said that!

Angry Voice

I did!

Cassandra

Yeah, well, this is Cassandra you're talkin' to, asshole!

Angry Voice

Who?

Cassandra

Cassandra!

(pause)

Angry Voice

Cassandra who?

Cassandra

(for the thousandth time)

Cassandra the Prophetess, Princess of Troy, who was beloved of the god Apollo and given the gift of prophecy by him, but she spurned him and so he put a curse on her so that now nobody believes anything I say, that Cassandra!

Angry Voice

You're Cassandra the Prophetess?

Cassandra

Yeah!

Angry Voice

(pause)

I don't believe it!

Cassandra

Every time.

(shouts)

Go to sleep, clown! Its past your bedtime!

Angry Voice

Tell me about it!

Cassandra

(Cassandra turns her attention to her surroundings) All this place need is some apples in a tub and a couple of Jack O'Lanterns and we can have Halloween.

(Enter, screaming and howling, the Furies, Alecto with her torch, Tisiphone with her whip and Megaera with her sickle. They are in curlers and frowsy housecoats and are a dark, bilious green in color. Cassandra screams and flattens against a column.) Cassandra

I got a biiig mouth!

Alecto

Tremble, mortal!

Tisiphone

Thine acts of blood...

Megaera

Must now come to account

(pause)

Cassandra

Jesus Christ!

The Furies

Who?

Cassandra

Whatever. What are you done up for, the spring cotillion?

Alecto

We are Alecto!

Tisiphone

Tisiphone!

Megaera

And Megaera!

Cassandra

So, you're what? A singing group?

Alecto

We are the Furies!

Cassandra

The Furies!

(They howl and scream)

Okay, okay, you're the Furies. Geez.

Angry Voice

Shutup out there!

(The Furies glare ominously and move slowly towards the voice)

Cassandra

Uh, I wouldn't do that if I were you, Buddy! Calm down, girls.

Angry Voice

So who are you!

Cassandra

Cassandra the Prophetess!

Angry Voice

(Pause)

I don't believe it!

Cassandra

I'm really starting to hate him.

Alecto

You want us to waste him for you, Dearie?

Cassandra

No, no, that's okay. Now look, what are you guys doing here and in the middle of the night?

Alecto

They sent us over to torment Orestes for the murder of his mother, Clytemnestra!

(They howl and scream)

Cassandra

Well, Orestes ain't here!

(The Furies are confused)

Megaera

This is the Orestaia, isn't it?

Cassandra

Yeah, but this is the Agamemnon, you guys don't show up until the Eumenides.

Tisiphone

Goddammit, I told you we'd be early!

Alecto

(sighs)

Well, come one, girls, let's go home.

Cassandra

No, look, stick around, you can be the chorus.

Tisiphone

Why should we be the chorus? Where are the elders of Argos?

Cassandra

They're asleep. It's three o'clock in the morning, for Chrissake.

Tisiphone

(Pause)

Well...

Megaera

What do we have to do?

Cassandra

It's easy. You just have to groan a lot and dance at the important places.

Megaera

Well, okay, well give it a try.

Alecto

Say, who are you anyway?

Cassandra

I'm Cassandra the Prophetess.

Alecto

You're Cassandra the Prophetess?

Cassandra

Yeah.

Alecto

I don't...

Cassandra

Don't say it, bitch.

Tisiphone

Oh, she's the one with the curse so that nobody believes anything she says.

Cassandra

Yeah. Nobody laughs at my jokes, either.

Megaera

Tough break, dearie.

Alecto

Nobody laughs at your jokes?

Cassandra

Nope.

Alecto

I don't believe it.

Cassandra

(Sighs)

Okay, I'll prove it to you. I'm gonna tell you a joke. You won't laugh.

Tisiphone

Oh, Sweetie, well laugh for you! Right, girls?

(The sisters agree)

Cassandra

Well, okay. This guy in Athens walks into a tailor shop and holds up these two togas with big tears in them. The tailor looks up and says, You rip a-dese? And the guy says, You, menna dese?

(Pause. Cassandra is waiting for the laugh. The Furies are waiting for the punch-line) Forget it! Forget it!

Megaera

I hope you weren't planning on a career in politics, dear.

Cassandra

What would I run for? Queen?

Megaera

That's true.

Cassandra

Besides, to be a politician, you gotta be able to lie and make people believe it. I tell the truth and nobody believes it.

Tisiphone

Oh, I don't believe that.

Cassandra

Ah, shut up.

Megaera

Wheres your boyfriend Oedipus?

Cassandra

Agamemnon. Oedipus is the guy with the limp who answered the riddle of the Sphinx monster, married his mother and poked out his eyes. Agamemnon is the limp guy who poked his mother, married a monster and doesn't know the answer to anything.

Megaera

I always get them mixed up.

Cassandra

(Looking skyward)

What?

Megaera

I said I always get...

Cassandra

Sh, sh, sh.

(Continues to stare upwards)

Megaera

Whats she doing?

(Pause)

Alecto

I don't know.

(Pause)

Tisiphone

Maybe she's making a wish.

(Alecto and Megaera stare at Tisiphone; she shrugs)

Cassandra

You don't say?

(Pause)

You don't say?

(Pause)

You don't say. Hmph.

The Furies

Who was it?

Cassandra

He didn't say.

Alecto

What did you just do?

Cassandra

I just got a telegram from the boys upstairs.

Tisiphone

Whats a telegram?

Cassandra

Its like a prophecy, only faster.

Megaera

What did it say?

Cassandra

Well...hey, why should I tell you? You won't believe me!

Alecto

Oh, don't be paranoid, dear.

Cassandra

You won't!

Tisiphone

What did they say?

Cassandra

Okay. Clytemnestra, she's in there right now with Agamemnon?

Megaera

Yeah?

Cassandra

She's gonna kill him!

Alecto

Clytemnestra is gonna kill Agamemnon?

Cassandra

Yup.

The Furies

I don't believe it.

(Suddenly, a bell is heard clanging and the rumble of an approaching train. Lights from the trains windows move across the stage, maybe a hiss of steam. The train screeches to a halt. The Furies are terrified.)

Conductor's Voice

Argos! All passengers for Argos!

Tisiphone

Whats that!

Cassandra

What does it look like!

Megaera

Incredible!

Cassandra

Yeah. I didnt know the A-train stopped at Argos.

Alecto

There are people coming out of it!

Cassandra

Well. I wondered how long it would take those assholes to show up.

Tisiphone

Who's the guy in the gold lammé?

Cassandra

Well, it aint Brad Pitt.

The Furies

Who?

Cassandra

Forget it.

Conductor's Voice

All aboard for Thebes! Thebes is next!

(The train departs noisily. Enter Apollo, Athena and Hermes. They look like Apollo, Athena and Hermes.)

Apollo

So, this is Argos. Boy, what a nothing joint this turned out to be.

(Sees Cassandra)

Cassandra! Baby!

Cassandra

Fuck off, Tinsel-Toga.

Apollo

What kind of way is that to talk?

Cassandra

I should be glad to see you? Girls, this is Apollo, the god of light. Better known as the Golden Rat. These are the Furies.

Apollo

Uh, hi.

Alecto

Hello.

Tisiphone

Its an honor.

Megaera

I've admired your work.

Cassandra

(looking skyward)

What now?

(pause)

Are you shitting me?

(pause)

Figures. Jeez.

Tisiphone

What was that?

Cassandra

Second telegram.

Apollo

What's up, doll?

Cassandra

End the road, "doll. "

Apollo

What now?

Cassandra

First Agamemnon, then me.

Alecto

You poor darling.

Cassandra

Yeah, well, that's mythology for ya.

Apollo

Who authorized that!

Athena

Don't look at me. Its not my department.

Hermes

Name on the order reads A-P-L-L-O.

Apollo

What!

Cassandra

That'll teach you to read what you're signing.

Apollo

Cassandra, I...

Cassandra

Forget it! Everybody has a bad day once in a while.

Hermes

You're Cassandra the Prophetess?

Cassandra

Yeah.

Hermes

(Pause)

Hard to believe.

Apollo

Is that why you're here? As conductor of the dead?

Hermes

Yeah, and could you sort of step on it? Apollo goes on duty in a minute and I've got an appointment in Samarra.

Cassandra

Oh, I'll just run right in there, sure, it'll only take a second.

Hermes

Crusty little thing, aren't you?

Cassandra

Yeah.

Hermes

(To Apollo)

Bet she goes down for a drachma.

Cassandra

Hey!

Athena

Hermie, come look! Agamemnon's getting into the bath tub.

(All except Cassandra cluster together to watch Agamemnon's murder.) She's got the sword behind her back.

Hermes

He's reaching for the soap!

Agamemnons Voice

Ohhhh, Shiiiiit!

*(They cheer. Pause. They wait expectantly. Pause. They frown.) Athena
That's it?*

Cassandra

You were expecting a brass band?

Athena

That's all? That they call classical tragedy? Boy, wait'll I tell Dionysus.

Hermes

(Sadly)

It's always like that.

Apollo

(To Hermes)

You watch that kind of thing all day?

Hermes

Its a job.

Athena

Well. Come on, lets catch the train back.

Apollo

What a waste.

Athena

Lets go to that little town in Italy. Something about two brothers having a fight.
Romo and Remo, something.

(Exit)

Alecto

Hey, Sweetie, is this one of the important parts were supposed to dance at?

Cassandra

About as important as any, Sister.

Alecto

Hit it, girls!

(Humming, they begin to dance about. Or maybe a tap dance number. They commendeer Hermes)

Hermes

(To Cassandra)

Look, will you get in there? Some of us have a busy day!

Cassandra

Go on in, I'm comin'.

Hermes

(As he and the Furies dance into the palace)

Oh, Mary, I'll have to carry both those stiffs myself!

Alecto

Who's Mary?

Hermes

Never mind.

(Exeunt Hermes and the Furies)

Apollo

Sorry about the mix-up, Doll.

Cassandra

Hey, you're the Sun God, you've got a lot to think about.

Apollo

No hard feelings?

Cassandra

I knew the job was dangerous when I took it.

Apollo

Nothing I can do for you?

Cassandra

Nah. Take it easy, huh?

(Hermes returns)

Hermes

Come on, woman!

Cassandra

I'm comin', I'm comin'!

(Exit Hermes)

Angry Voice

Shutup out there!

Cassandra

Shutup yourself!

Angry Voice

Who said that!

Cassandra

I did!

Angry Voice

Who're you!

Cassandra

Cassandra!

Angry Voice

Cassandra who!

Cassandra

Cassandra the Prophetess!

(Pause)

Angry Voice

You're Cassandra the Prophetess!

Cassandra

Yeah!

(Pause)

Angry Voice

Wow!

(Cassandra is surprised and pleased; she looks at Apollo)

Cassandra

Thanks, honey. I appreciate it.

Apollo

Da nada. It was the least I could do. Knock-em dead, kid.

(Exit Apollo)

Cassandra

Funny you should put it that way.

Angry Voice

What?!

Cassandra

I said funny you should put it that way!

Angry Voice

What are you talking about?

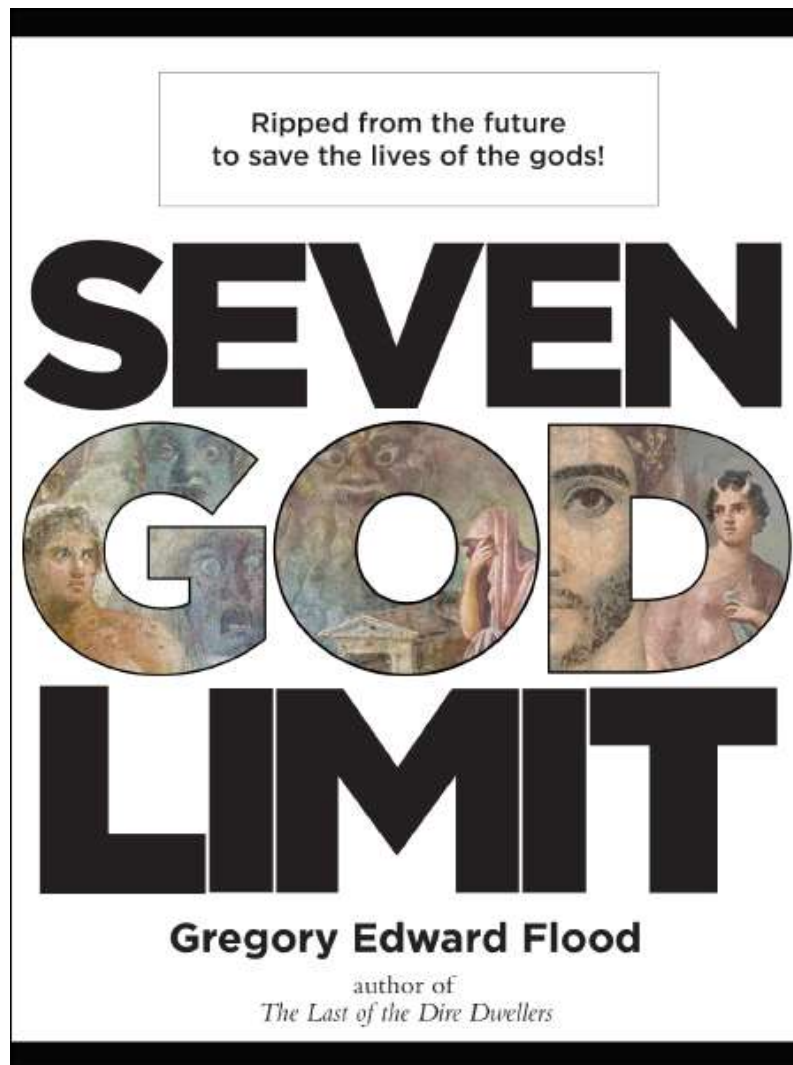
Cassandra

Never mind. You wouldn't believe me if I told you.

(She tosses her lit cigarette butt center stage. She turns and walk slowly into the palace as the lights fade to black.)

**Sample Chapters
of Books by Our Gregory**

Dueling gods. Rival emperors. Riots. Doomed love. Madness. Betrayal. Sex. Death. And an emotional roller coaster ride of epic proportions. It's another damn day in the Roman Empire.



Click [Here](#) to Check It Out
Or read the sample chapter

Part 1

Decline and



1. The Servants of God

My friend Raff and I were killed in the Year of our Lord 1982, a year which by my reckoning will come 1,470 years after this writing, or rather a year that now will never come at all, or at least when it comes won't be numbered 1982 and won't be the year of anyone's lord.

We spent our last hours in a place that had nothing to do with either of us, in the temple of a god who started out as a mortal, a temple abandoned for seventeen centuries. It stood in a protecting curve of sandstone and shale at the foot of the Lebanon Mountains, which are in Lebanon, ancient Phoenicia. I had recovered it inch by inch from the tired, timeworn earth, shovelful by shovelful, starting from the tops of the tawny marble columns and working down.

Roman archaeology was my field, but the Middle East was not my turf, despite the abundance of Roman ruins in Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria. I always chose resort areas in which to do my researches: a series of mosaic floors in the South of France, a temple of Jupiter in Madrid, the colonnades and warehouses of the Roman towns along the beaches of North Africa. I loved my work, but not enough to drink stale water out of canteens and defecate into holes in the ground. I'd had enough of that during my student years.

So, I had been disinclined to leave Rome where I taught at the American Academy and head up a dig in Lebanon, where the servants of the One True God were shedding each other's blood indiscriminately. But sly old Dr. Burkhalter plied me with Greek brandy and pastries so sweet they made my teeth roll up like window shades, and I acquiesced. And it was a potentially important find, and site management was what I did best, and my teaching sinecure did involve far more traveling and digging than it did classroom lectures.

The change of scene also served to extricate me from the final complexities of a relationship with one of my students that had reached its end with only one of us, me,

knowing that it had. She was the coal-eyed, carnivorous daughter of a Spanish industrialist and she could take any unpleasant truth that confronted her and lock it in a box in her head marked DISREGARD. The fact that I had flatly ceased to desire her had never registered.

Her unswerving insistence that I would come back to her bewildered me, for in truth it had not been such a wonderful affair and I was sure she hadn't enjoyed it any more than I had. The tenacity of her commitment came not so much from any abiding devotion to me as it did from an unwillingness to be dumped. I felt relief as my plane took off from Fiumicino and the emotional ties by which she sought to bind me stretched with the growing distance between us and finally snapped. The moment at which they were broken, whatever that certain number of kilometers was, I sagged into my chair as if released finally from a body cast and I summoned the flight attendant to bring me a gin and tonic, the first of many gins and tonics.

The temple stood off the main road leading up into the mountains from the Lebanese city of Sur, old Tyre, which lay some five miles to the west on the Mediterranean coast. The main road, which was of asphalt over gravel, had been a main road for thousands of years, since the contours of the mountains limited any road builder's options to that one path; in laying down the foundations of the modern highway, an old Roman road had been found ten meters below the surface.

Our temple had been happened upon by a municipal road crew, this one financed by a coalition of local towns. In clearing away an ancient thicket of bramble and acacia, a bulldozer's blade had clanged against an elegant capital carved of fine travertine in the Corinthian Composite style favored throughout Rome's centuries of empire.

The road crew, like my own digging crew, was composed mostly of Shiite Muslims, poor, badly-educated country folk whose pious distaste for pagan artifacts was amplified by their superstitious dread of ruins and the ghosts that haunted such places. They dutifully, and very correctly, reported their find to their superiors in Sur who in turn reported it to the Roman antiquities Division of the National Archaeological Museum who in turn notified the proper authorities in Beirut.

Normally such a site would have remained underground for years while the baroque bureaucracy of the Lebanese government—really a volatile amalgam of warring factions purporting to be a single entity—fought over the disposition of every pick and spade. But the excessive elegance of the one exposed capital indicated a site of quite possibly dazzling richness, offering the Beirut autocrats a kind of positive photo opportunity that their poor, destroyed city could certainly have used.

And so, the dig was hastily organized and, considering the fiscal condition of the country, well-financed. The leader of the dig was Yusuf Higazzi, an archaeologist of some note. The excavation went along nicely under his administration for the first few weeks, until he was killed in a barroom brawl in Sur.

Higazzi was a Maronite, which was a sort of exotic, Middle Eastern version of a Roman Catholic. While relaxing over coffee at the end of his work week, he was drawn into an argument with a Sunni Muslim representative of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, for whom Sur was a major stronghold. Apparently the other people in the restaurant chose up sides (no one knows exactly what happened) and Higazzi was killed—stabbed, actually—in the ensuing battle.

This left the site without a boss. Several candidates were considered, but the death of the previous administrator, a Maronite, at the hands of a Sunni brought a religious element into the candidacy process, and in Beirut, as everyone in the world knows, religion ruins everything. The selection process became hopelessly stalled as the different factions fell out along religious lines. The project seemed doomed to remain only half completed.

Then, some cool-headed individual suggested bringing in a neutral party—which is to say a non-Lebanese atheist foreigner—to head up the site. And there I was.

I had three months to live.

It was a productive three months. My crew were mostly mountain folk, provincial in their thinking and superstitious. They were pleased to be making money within the wrecked Lebanese economy, but the old temple, which seemed to slowly rise on its own power out of the dry, brown earth, obviously made them uneasy. They resumed work on the site with sullen resignation bordering on mutiny. But as time passed, and no gibbering demons burst through the ground to drag them down to *jahannam*, they began to relax and their fear of djinns and *shayatiyn* subsided.

They all spoke only Arabic, a language I know well enough to ask the location of the men's room. But my foreman, a thin, hard-boned boy in his early twenties named Abubaker, spoke excellent French, and so I passed my orders on through him in that language.

On the last day of my life, Abubaker poked his head into my trailer. I was sitting at the tiny desk next to the tiny kitchen sink going over the pieces of pottery and bits of iron tools that had been unearthed as we had made our way down to the temple floor. Abubaker pulled open the oblong steel door and leaned in, his head appearing just above the threshold because the trailer was propped up on blocks.

“Eh, boss,” he said, stone-faced, “*Voiture.*” And he was gone.

Voiture means “car”: someone was driving up the highway towards us. I felt a faint sensation of queasy fear. This was not a time or place wherein surprise visitors were a happy event. The country was falling apart from the internecine fighting between religious factions: the Christians vs. the Muslims and factions within the factions vs. each other: Sunnis, Shiites, Druzes, Maronites, Tiger Militiamen, Phalangists, PLO guerrillas. And to the South, the menace of the Israelis—whom the Arabs regarded as alien interlopers in the region—grew stronger and more frightening every day, as Israel acquired more and more elegant, deadly American military hardware.

I put on my sunglasses and went out into the bright summer afternoon.

It was June 6, 1982.

I hopped down to the ground, my knees caterwauling from the early arthritis that afflicts all middle-aged archaeologists. I walked out to the roadway. Standing in the center of the asphalt, I had a clear view of the plain of rocks and scrub grass that fell away from the base of the mountains. A car, some kind of jeep (one of my greatest failures as a man was that I couldn't identify vehicles by make and model, though I could name all the architectural elements in a Roman basilica), was speeding up the decaying highway, spewing yellow dust from its back tires. I sighed with relief when I saw that there was only one person in it.

Abubaker stood fifty feet behind me at the entrance to the site. “*Ce n'est pas rien, eh, boss?*”

“*Na'am,*” I said, “*Pas de probleme.*”

We stared apprehensively into each other's eyes. He turned and walked back around the stone outcropping. I heard him shout commands in Arabic and the short, hissing sound of shovels entering the dirt followed moments later. The crew had been standing out of sight in silence, waiting to see if they needed to flee into the safety of the mountains.

I watched the jeep grow larger as it approached us. “*Pas de probleme,*” I said under my breath.

I walked back to my trailer, an unconscious wish for a safe haven, I suppose, and squinted. The vehicle pulled up right in front, engine rattling and brakes squealing (the summer dust and sand destroyed any automobile in a matter of weeks). The driver stood up and leaned over the encrusted windshield. His red hair stuck out in all directions and his carefully groomed red beard was full of grit. As he pulled off his tinted goggles, his face broke into a colossal grin of almost preternatural whiteness, dazzling even in the glare of the Lebanese sun.

“Well, lad,” he said with an opulent Irish brogue, “can you tell me the way to Barcelona?”

“Raff!” I shouted, my heart pounding with relief. He jumped down to the ground and we threw our arms around each other.

“But, sir,” I laughed, “this is Barcelona!”

Raff!

We looked each other over without letting go of each other, an uncharacteristic kind of physical contact for me. I generally avoided affectionate displays with other men. It was especially ironic that Raff was the only man with whom I could be comfortable that way, since he was cheerfully and defiantly homosexual, a fact which would have kept me at two arm’s length with anyone else. *Can you tell me the way to Barcelona?* was a private joke between us, it being the line he used to try and pick me up the night we first met—in Barcelona.

That day, in his pressed denim jacket, Ralph Lauren corduroy slacks and designer sneakers—a casual look ruined by too much artifice—he seemed thinner than I remembered him, not so tireless, carefree but with watchful eyes.

He stepped back and surveyed my battered mobile home. “Well, now. A Lebanese Winnebago.” His accent made it seem hopelessly ridiculous. *When-ee-BAY-goo.*

“I made it a requirement for my participation,” I said, regarding the great hulk appraisingly, as if I’d built it with my own hands. “I wasn’t spending my summer in a sleeping bag.”

“Hot and cold running water?”

“Only cold. They bring it in from Sur every week for the reservoir.”

“And your boys sleep in the open air, I suppose?”

“Of course.”

“Oh, they must think the world of you. B’Wana Mackland in your portable house.”

I shrugged. “I really don’t think living in a tent would make them like me any the more. Nothing would.”

“Well, these are dark days for them, and worse ahead,” he said less pleasantly. “It’s hard to be friendly with bullets whizzing past your ears and your stomach growling.” He spoke as if he were thinking suddenly of something else. In the brief pause after his statement, I noticed the distant sound of jet engines and wondered if he might be listening to them.

I frowned. “Are you not just here for a visit?”

“Oh, time enough to tell you my business,” he said, smiling again. “Come on, now, show me your heathen ruins.”

“Uh, okay.” We put our arms around each other’s shoulders and walked towards the site.

“I’ll be damned,” he said, pointing at the tops of the columns visible above the stone barrier. “Look at them!”

“Tip of the iceberg.”

“Roman Corinthian, is it?”

“A Semitic version.”

“So, late empire?”

I smiled. “So we believe.” I was always pleased and surprised by Raff’s historical acumen, though I’d had eleven years to get used to it. His two hobbies were classical history and good-looking young Arabs.

“How is your work going?” I asked him.

“Oh, the usual laugh riot, Mackie. Might as well negotiate a truce between a deer and an oncoming car. We’re not up there arguing about law and government and economic policy, you know. We’re talking about which faction is responsible for which drive-by shooting and who bombed whose offices first. Fookin’ gangsters.”

A cool mountain breeze shifted the powdered earth across the asphalt, telling me that the heat of the afternoon was passing into night. “You’d think it would be a fairly simple matter to get people to agree to stop shooting each other.”

“Ah, that’s because you’ve no religious sense, Mackland. You never have. This isn’t about politics, it’s about Allah and Jesus and...” He stopped in his tracks. “Holy Mother o’ God!”

We had come around the stone outcropping and were standing where the whole site could be seen at once. And, however unimportant the find might prove to be archaeologically, even I had to admit that the old temple was an impressive thing to behold.

First off, it was big. The cleft in the mountainside in which it stood was 30, 000 square feet, the size perhaps of a supermarket if you included the parking lot. The columns were eighteen feet high, which meant—calculating the formula for Corinthian architectural dimensions as best I could—that the roof, when there had been a roof, peaked at about forty feet.

No trace of the roof had been found. It was my assumption that it had fallen down in the remote past, probably as the result of an earthquake in this geologically very active region, and the pieces had been carted off by country people for use in their homes and public buildings. It had been supported by fifty-six truly splendid columns of tawny travertine marble. Of the columns, thirty three were still standing. The capitals, as I said

before, were particularly beautiful, with the branches of the cedar tree carved into the traditional Roman design.

The altar itself, made of what had been polished sandstone, was carved with a series of bas-reliefs that told the story of the god. In the waning afternoon sunlight, in the shadow of the mountain, with the slender Arab boys digging in the parched, hard earth, the place evoked a feeling of terrible sadness and fallen dignity.

“My god! It’s spectacular!”

“Well...” I said, about to qualify his description. But he was off, bounding into the middle of the dig with a heavy footed carelessness that would have made any other archaeologist tear his own hair out. The young Arab crewmen stopped digging for a moment, stared at him blankly, and then went back to work. *Crazy Westerner.*

“It’s fantastic, Mackie!” He gazed around him, his head full of imagined pagan rites and ghosts in togas and sandals. “Who’s the god? Whose is it?”

I came up behind him and put my hand on his shoulder. “Rafferty,” I said. “It’s merely okay.”

He looked at me goggled eyed. “You’re not serious! It’s wonderful! Aren’t you excited to be part of this!”

I shrugged. “It’s not exactly Tut’s tomb.”

“Not Tut’s tomb,” he said, hands on hips.

“Eh, boss!” Abubaker shouted from across the way. He was standing with two of the other boys, looking down into a shallow hole they had dug. “*Ta’ala! Shuf!*”

I shook my head. “*Parlais Français, Abu!*”

“He says ‘Come look,’ Raff said, and he ran over ahead of me.

I joined them. “*Que tu vois?*”

“*Voila.*” Abubaker pointed at the stone head of a god with olive vines entwined in his marble curls that poked up out of the dirt.

“What is it, Mack?”

“Looks to be part of the frieze. Some of the roof must still be here.”

Raff turned to the boys and translated what I’d said into Arabic.

“Sorry,” I said, remembering my manners. “This is Abubaker Sharifi, my foreman. Abubaker, *permettez moi de vous presentez mon ami Raff.*”

Abubaker turned his head to one side. “Rahf?”

Raff extended his hand. “Eamon De Valera Rafferty,” he said in a tone of voice I’d come to recognize too well. Abubaker smiled and they shook hands, exchanging a secretive look. Abubaker turned and said something to the other two young men and they giggled. Raff started to converse with them in Arabic, but I grabbed him by the arm.

“Raff, let me show you something over here.”

They made their goodbyes as I dragged him across the site to the altar. He turned and let himself be led.

“Ah, Arab boys,” he sighed.

“Raff, not with my employees, okay?”

“Oh, just a little friendly banter, ye right wing fascist.”

“How do they spot you, anyway? No, don’t tell me about it, don’t tell me about it.”

Raff’s legion of young Arab tricks was the scandal of the Diplomatic Corps.

The statue, about eleven feet tall, now stood where it had stood in ancient times. The head, which had broken off centuries ago, sat on the altar. I positioned him in front of the god’s severed stone noggin. “Now, look.”

He looked. “Yes? This is the god of the temple?”

“Don’t you know him? That’s a very famous face. Look here.” We squatted down in front of the gallery of stone pictures that girdled the base of the altar. “What do you see?”

“Hm. Well, here’s the harvest. And here’s the descent into the underworld. And this guy’s got a tree in his band, so he’s a vegetation god, like Osiris or Attis.”

“Right. But not just vegetation. This is a god who overcame mortality, who offers hope of eternal life.” I pointed at the image of a bearded man in Roman armor. He stood protectively over the image of a younger man, beardless, with thick curly hair.

“Hey!” Raff said. “Now, that’s the Emperor Hadrian!” He looked up at the statue’s head. “Antinous! It’s a temple of Antinous!”

“Actually,” I said, “Antinous and Adonis.”

“Well, they should get on fine! I’ll be damned.” He stood and looked around at the few remaining columns, the encircling ramparts of stone. In the distance, I could again hear the sound of airplanes. And this time I was sure he was listening to them.

“We didn’t find the altar and statue until a few days ago.”

“Antinous and Adonis,” he said. “Why Adonis? I didn’t think he was a god.”

“Oh, in Phoenicia he was. A very important fertility god. Hadrian often promoted the cult of Antinous by pairing him up with a long-established deity.”

Antinous had been the homosexual lover of the Emperor Hadrian, hence Raff’s special interest in him. Probably the most famous gay love affair in history, it ended when Antinous drowned in the Nile, possibly a suicide. Hadrian—who went into mourning for the rest of his life—declared Antinous to be a god. Temples to him had been found all around the Mediterranean.

“Antinous was a legitimate god in his own right, you know,” Raff said, obviously miffed at my suggestion that Antinous had ridden the coattails of more reputable deities. He stared down at the battered stone head. “He was a god of growth and healing. He was a god of immortality who lead the spirits of the dead to the Underworld. He was a savior of those in distress.”

“Yes, Raff. No disrespect to your patron saint.”

“That’s being the ultimate kept boy, isn’t it?” he said. “Not only does Daddy buy you anything your heart desires, but you get promoted to godhood at the end.”

“A nice present, if you don’t mind dying to get it. What are you doing here?”

He paused, eyes averted. I saw him mentally run through several alternative answers. Then, he made a wry face and leaned against the altar, palms down, “What I was doing here was rescuing your silly ass. What I am doing now is holing up with you and hoping they leave us alone.”

In the sky to the east came again the sound of aircraft. “You’re scaring me, so cut it out.”

He glared. “Oh, now he’s scared! Back in Rome, before you took this fookin’ job, that would have been the time to get scared!”

“Scared of what!”

A trio of low flying jets roared by overhead. They seemed to burst out of nowhere, and the terrible noise reverberated painfully within our enclosure of stone walls. The shock was so extreme I almost lost control of my bladder.

“Jesus, Raff!” I shouted. “Are they Soviet!” Armageddon scenarios played in my head. The final conflict. The world in flames. The crew boys were shrieking at each other in Arabic and pointed at the sky.

“Soviets,” Raff sneered. “What the fuck would the Soviets want with Lebanon, Mackland?” Two more planes made another deafening run over the site, drowning out his next words. The boys had turned heel and were escaping as a group up the highway. Their collective instinct must have been to run home to their mountain villages.

“What!” I shouted. “What!”

“I said, they’re from Israel!” Raff shouted back.

Screams from the fleeing boys turned us around in time to see three armored vehicles come down out of the mountains. They careened abruptly around the bend in the highway where it disappeared behind the low sandstone cliffs, and cut off the crew’s path of escape. The boys turned in unison and ran back towards us.

A metal trap door opened up in the top of one of the vehicles and a uniformed soldier popped up. In his hands was some kind of automatic weapon—I know less about guns

than about cars—with which he opened fire on the backs of the running crowd. The boys in the rear fell, arms flailing.

“Get down!” Raff shouted, and suddenly I was crashing to the ground on the other side of the altar. I think Raff actually picked me up and threw me. He came down on top of me as dozens of bullets ricocheted against the base of it. Ridiculously, my first thought was outrage that an artifact was being vandalized.

“Stay down!” Raff said. He was shaking violently. So was I.

Several more bursts of gunfire erupted and the boys screamed. Then came the sound of squealing brakes, metal doors opening, deep Arab voices calling orders, booted footsteps. Raff shouted something in Arabic. He repeated the same phrase over and over and, as he reached into his pocket and unfolded his UN identification papers, I realized he was telling them he was a diplomat.

A soldier appeared around the side of the altar and leveled his weapon at us. Raff continued to shout the same sequence of words in the same placating tone, waving his papers in front of us like a flag of truce. He kept his body between me and the soldier.

“Oh, shit,” I whispered, staring at the barrel of the gun. “Oh, shit, oh shit, oh shit, oh shit, oh shit, oh shit...”

The soldier, a young man not much older than Abubaker and the others, narrowed his eyes at the tattered scrap of paper. He shouted something in Arabic to someone outside my line of sight. An older soldier, apparently the commanding officer, appeared next to him. The older man snatched the document out of Raff’s hand and examined it solemnly. He said something to the younger soldier who then pulled Raff roughly to his feet. Raff kept up his steady stream of Arabic babble. “Get up,” he said to me in the midst of it. “Slow. Hands up.”

As he went on talking to the silent pair, I stood. My legs were trembling badly, but I willed them to hold me up; I was afraid any sudden, incongruous act, even falling over, might get me shot.

The ranking officer asked Raff a curt question. Raff answered him frantically, obviously saying more than he needed to, in order to distract them from the idea of killing us. The young soldier had the nozzle of his gun pressed into Raff’s solar plexus. Just that would have turned me to mush. But Raff kept eye contact with them and did his best to maintain a reasonable tone of voice. He was doing the fastest talking he’d ever done in his life.

I looked out across the site, and my stomach twisted. “Oh, Jesus Christ,” I whispered. The bodies of eight of my crew lay face down on the asphalt with red blotches staining the backs of their shirts. The others had been herded into a corner of the temple and

were being held at gunpoint by more than a dozen stern faced soldiers. The boys were silent and staring, obviously terrified. A few were crying.

One of those sobbing was Abubaker. A soldier barked a command at him, probably telling him to stop crying. He made some pitiful, choking reply. The soldier shouted angrily.

He grabbed Abubaker's arm and another soldier took the other. Abubaker's eyes went wide with terror as they dragged him into the center of the temple. He shrieked imploringly in Arabic. As they forced him down on his knees, he wet himself. The soldier who had shouted put his rifle to the back of Abubaker's head and fired.

"What are you doing!" I screamed. Abubaker's body fell forward on its ruined face.

"Mack! Shutup!"

"My God, they're children!"

The soldiers who had killed Abubaker looked up at me. I took one stumbling step towards them.

"Mack! Freeze! Freeze!"

I stopped. Raff's Arabic chattering increased in intensity. The two soldiers came forward and grabbed my arms. They pulled me over next to Abubaker's corpse. They pushed me down on my knees, facing away from them.

I had been trying to contain my quaking, but now I lost all control and shook all over. My guts churned. All I could see was the row of columns outlining the perimeter of the temple, and the packed dirt covering the old Roman floor. Behind me, Raff talked and talked.

This is the last thing I'll ever see, I said to myself. *This is the last thing I'll ever see.*

I heard the rifle's safety click open.

The commanding officer shouted. One syllable: *Qif!*

Halt.

Raff fell silent.

I heard boots scuffling in the dirt, weapons clicking.

I risked a look. As I turned my head, the officer in charge walked over to his men and issued commands. They lowered their rifles. He barked at the prisoners. When the boys all stared at him stuperously, he repeated the same command, this time waving one arm. *Go away. Run. Get lost.* They timidly crept backwards away from him, cautiously eyeing the soldiers. Then, they turned as one and ran up the highway into the mountains.

The commander turned and looked at us one more time, scowling. He threw Raff's identification papers on the ground and shouted orders to the men. They returned to

their vehicles. One of the soldiers who had pushed me to the ground turned and glared at me. I did not look him in the eye. The engines revved. Still watching me, he climbed up onto the last vehicle in line and sat in the roof door, rifle ready. As the convoy drove away, our eyes locked, his head turning as the van departed. A moment later, the sound of automatic gunfire and shattering glass told me that they had shot up my mobile home and Raff's jeep.

Then, the sound of their engines faded into the dusk.

A few hundred yards away, one of the crew boys, whose name was Beyazid, was kneeling in the highway next to the body of his older brother Mohammed. He pulled on the corpse's arm and spoke pleadingly to it in Arabic. Raff ran over to him and spoke to him in a harsh tone, barely audible to me at that distance. The boy became more frantic, his voice rising. Raff slapped him. Beyazid stared in astonishment and, in the moment of silence, Raff shouted at him, pointing up the highway in the direction the others had fled. The boy took one last look at his brother and ran away.

Raff stood in the road and looked at the bodies strewn around him. They included the two friends of Abubaker with whom he had been flirting a few minutes before. He walked back to where I sat in the dust, his steps unsteady. He knelt down next to me. He hugged himself and stared at the ground in front of him.

"All dead?" I asked him quietly.

"Well, for Christ's sake, Mackland, of course they're dead." His face collapsed in on itself and he wept.

"Now you're going to cry," I said. I put my arms around him. "You get me thinking you're the gay John Wayne, and then you burst into tears."

"Fuck you," he sobbed into my shoulder. "Fuck you, fuck you...."

I hugged him. "Rafferty," I said, "you are something else."

I held him while he cried, until I began to cry, and then we held each other.



"And no radio," I said, holding up the blasted remains of my tiny short wave. The side of my mobile home had a neat row of golf ball sized holes in its metal hull. The bullets had buried themselves in the furniture. "No radio, no jeep." I turned to Raff, who sat slouched in my murdered armchair, his eyes still red from weeping, as mine no doubt were as well. "So, Double O Seven, what do you suggest?"

He didn't respond to my feeble joke. He stared at the wrecked radio. "Did they get the reservoir?"

"Yes."

"No water, then."

I sat down on the arm of the chair. "There's a separate reservoir for the crew out on the site."

He nodded. "Good. Food?"

"Lots."

"Well, then." He stood up, still a little wobbly in the legs. "I suggest we make camp in the temple."

"What? Why? We can stay in here. There's a bed and a couch."

He sighed and pointed at the row of bullet holes. "As you can see, they will shoot up anything that looks remotely like a fortified position. Our transportation is wrecked and even if it weren't I'd think it most unwise to go for a drive on a highway that surely must have military and/or insurgent roadblocks set up every few miles. I suggest we make a fire out in the open and hope that anyone who passes by sees us as two harmless foreigners stranded by a bit of ill luck. Which is what we are."

"I've got a better idea. How about we huddle in stark terror behind the altar in the dark?"

"Because it's winter and we'll freeze to death." He went to the door and stopped. "And Mack: we'll need to move the bodies."

"Uh, what?"

He looked at his feet. "We can't leave them laying in the road, can we? The animals will be gettin' at them. Come. It'll be dark soon."

"Animals...."

He jumped down to the ground and went to his jeep. Two of the tires had been penetrated by bullets and the water from the radiator had leaked out onto the dry earth.

"What the hell does Israel want with Lebanon?" I asked him.

We stopped where the road passed the entrance to the dig. The eight corpses lay face down where they had fallen. Their light cotton shirts fluttered in the chill breeze.

"Because this land was given to them by God," Raff said.

We went forward to the nearest of the inert forms. Raff squatted down at the corpse's head. He worked his hands into the armpits and flipped it onto its back. I stood and looked down at the face, which seemed stupefied by death, as if under the influence of some powerful narcotic.

“His name was Samir,” I said. “He came from a town called Rasheiya in the mountains east of here.” My breathing became more labored. “Jesus, Raff, he was only....”

“Mackland,” he said harshly. He gave me a hard look in the eye. “It’s very important that you not talk like that. Now, these are eight objects that we are moving from here to over there. Got it?”

I inhaled deeply. “I got it.”

We moved the bodies.

Raff then had us gather firewood from the surrounding area. We built a pleasant blaze in the center of the temple floor. We cooked up some canned chili and pita bread from the site’s larder, surprised to discover that we were voraciously hungry. After we ate, we sat and stared into the flames, or at the stars. The columns of the temple cast long shadows on the surrounding rock walls. The eight corpses were laid out at the edge of the fire’s light in a long ditch which some of them had helped to dig when they were alive. We felt incongruously peaceful, the result, no doubt, of the emotional intensity of the afternoon.

“Why does Israel want Lebanon?” I said, breaking a long silence. “I mean, it’s not really because of God, is it?”

“To end the Palestinian threat.”

“Is there a Palestinian threat to Israel?”

“Aye. A threat to their real estate. The Arabs in this region consider the Israelis to be foreign interlopers. The Israelis believe they are mandated by God to have their own homeland, which the Palestinians have annoyingly occupied for centuries.”

I lowered a long stick into the flames, watched it catch fire. “If everybody knew that Israel was about to invade Lebanon, why didn’t Lebanon protect herself? How come we didn’t get wind of it up here?”

“Everybody didn’t know about it.”

“You knew. That’s why you came out here to get me, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I knew. A fellow I dated a few years back is a secretary now in the Israeli parliament. He called to warn me. He wanted me to get out of Beirut.”

“Ah. Gay gossip. Time honored instrument of international diplomacy.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You think it isn’t?”

“Didn’t you tell your superiors?”

“Certainly.”

“And they didn’t believe you?”

“I recall he made some sarcastic remark like, ‘Ah, gay gossip, time honored instrument....’”

“Okay, okay.”

“Anyway, I couldn’t just leave you here in the middle of it, could I?”

Our eyes met. “I’d be dead if you had, Raff.”

He looked back into the fire. “So you would.”

I continued to stare at the side of his head. In the forgiving golden light, I could see the younger Rafferty, the one I had met in Spain, before time had set to work on him. “You’re the best friend I’ve ever had, Eamon.”

He smiled. “And you.”

I looked out at the darkness where the road lay invisibly in the night. “If someone comes by and finds us—soldiers, I mean—they’ll kill us, won’t they?”

“Very likely.” He thought about it. “Maybe not. Human beings are lucky creatures. We have real luck. We find our way out of bad situations in very surprising ways.” He held his palms out to the flames. “But, yes, they’ll probably kill us.” He laid back on the hard ground.

I laid down next to him. The sky, so far from the city lights and in the clear mountain air, was packed with stars. “Who were the ones who shot up my crew? They weren’t Israelis. You spoke Arabic to them.”

“Phalangists.”

“What?”

“Lebanese Christian militia. Allied with the Israeli cause.”

“Why did they kill Abubaker?”

“They felt like it.”

After that, we lay there in silence, listening to the fire crackle.

“You were incredible today,” I said after a while. “You know that, don’t you?”

He frowned. “There have been moments in my life, Mackland, as there have been in yours, I know, when I’ve confronted with a choice of several unacceptable alternatives. Sometimes in those moments an impulse would strike me, an impulse to say or do something entirely out of character or which made no rational sense. At those times, I would take action on an idea concocted by some subliminal part of my mind that didn’t bother to confer with my conscious self before commandeering my body. In those moments, my life was saved by some internal intelligence that stepped in and spoke through my mouth and acted through my limbs. I call it Exigent Inspiration. God reaches down and makes my dick a little bigger.”

“What were you thinking?” I said.

“Hm?”

“When you were standing there knowing he could cancel you out just by twitching his index finger. They say whatever you think of in that moment is what your life is really all about. What were you thinking?”

He didn't answer right away. “What were you?” he said.

“I asked you first.”

“That's an infantile evasion.” *In-FAN-toil ee -VA Y-zhee-on.*

I spoke first: “Always in the back of my head I carry around the idea that someday I'm going to connect with someone. I mean, really connect. With the right woman, the right friends. People I can be tight with, people I feel in sync with. Friends I don't have to explain myself to. Like you and me. I tell myself that it's not dysfunctional to be more interested in a dead empire than living people. I tell myself the reason I'm obsessed with work is because I'm laying the foundation for my warm and cozy future, that I'm not going to end up like one of those eccentric, pipe-smoking male spinster archaeologists who live out their lives at digs and symposiums. And when they had their guns on me today, I thought *That was it? That was my whole life?*”

He reached over and squeezed my hand, and then discreetly released it.

“I mean, what am I connected to, Raff? I haven't been in the same room with my parents in nine years. I'm forty-two years old and I've never had a relationship with a woman that lasted longer than a semester.”

“I've never met your father,” Raff said, “and from what you've told me, I never want to. He's a power boy. Control lover. The bane of life in this world.”

“You know what I wish sometimes?”

“What?”

“I wish I was gay.”

He laughed. “No, Mack, you don't. Believe me, you don't.”

“If I were gay, you and I could be lovers. Right?”

“Well, right.”

“And that would solve a lot of problems in both our lives, wouldn't it?”

He stared off into the night and smiled. “So it would.”

“Well, then. Did you ever wish I was gay?”

“Not after I got to know you.”

“Oh, thanks.”

“No, no, I mean, when I realized we were becoming good friends, well, I had to put such feelings aside. I mean, you're just what I like, boyo: Tall, thin, long brown hair, green eyes....”

“Raff...”

“Good looking, but not so handsome as to be a constant problem. I wouldn’t always be defending my territory, d’ye see?”

“Yes, I see.”

“Well, just so.”

“Yes? And? What were you thinking about?” I said.

“Thinking about when?”

“When he had his gun to your chest. What were you thinking about?”

“Oh.” He raised an eyebrow. “I thought I had neatly distracted you from that question with my amusing banter.”

“Nice try.”

He sat up and tossed more dry branches onto the dwindling fire. “Ah, well, then.” He stared into the flames. “I was thinking of Sister Mary Brigid.”

“A relative.”

“Balls, no! Not that old bitch. She was one of my teachers. In what you Americans call the second grade.”

“Not a happy memory?”

He broke a frail branch into little pieces and threw them one by one into the fire. “Sister Mary Brigid had a terrifying reputation for discipline. It wasn’t that she whacked your wrists with a ruler or whipped you or anything. That was just it: nobody knew what she did. All we knew was that bullies and troublemakers would get dragged off in the middle of class and come back pallid and trembling. And though they might go on bullying and troublemaking, they didn’t do it around Sister Mary Brigid. Never again.

“Well, one day it was my turn: you see, the seat of my wooden chair had come a bit loose from the frame and when I sat down, I pinched the skin of my finger and it hurt like hell. ‘Jesus, Mary and Joseph!’ I cried. Well, such blaspheming and in Sister Mary Brigid’s very classroom.

“She took me by the ear. She was a great, angry pudding of a woman, like an attacking pile of loam, and she smelled quite peculiar: the nuns in her order bathed while clothed in these sort of smock things, you see, so that they couldn’t contemplate their own bodies, and I believe it was not a very effective system of personal hygiene.”

Parsonill hoy-jane, I said to myself, smiling.

“Well, she took me by the ear and dragged me down the hall into one of the utility rooms. See, this was back before the green revolution and on every floor of the school building there were these chutes that went down into the school’s incinerator. The nuns would throw old newspapers and the like into them.

“So, she hoists me up in front of this chute that leads down to the incinerator and she pulls open the heavy, rusted cast iron safety door and pushes my head in.”

As he told his tale, his demeanor slowly changed. The mocking tone with which he began graduated into anger and then into a kind of timid awe as he relived in his mind the events he described. As he stared into the fire, I knew that he only barely remembered that I was there with him, or where “there” was.

“D’ye see the flames, Eamon Rafferty?’ she says to me.” His voice—her voice—was a malevolent hiss.

“‘Aye, Sister Mary Brigid,’ I says, all quavering like. And indeed I could see a kind of orange-y glow from below and I could smell the smoke.

“Well, then,” she says, “this is one of the gateways to the devil. And when little boys take the Lord’s name in vain, as well as that of his blessed mother, well, we just take those boys and toss them right in and they go straight down to hell!”

“Fuck.”

“I was seven years old, Mackland. And let me tell you, in that moment I swear I could hear the devils laughing and the screams of the tormented down that rubbish chute. That was the moment I learned to believe in Hell. I mean believe in it, Mack. We always heard about it, of course, that it was where the bad people went. But I saw it. She showed it to me. And from then on, I felt it always under my feet, under the streets of Sligo. And for all my young years after that, I truly believed that all over the city there were iron doors tended by nuns and priests who’d throw us down into the Pit if we got out of hand. Oh, you can laugh, you’ve no religious sense at all, I’ve always said it.”

“Raff, I’m not laughing....”

“I tell myself I’ve left all that behind me. Superstition. If my father challenges me, tries to make me go to church, I’ll have none of it, not even when my Ma cries. My college chums back in Dublin all praise me for standing fast while they dutifully plod off to mass every Sunday and have their babies baptized to wash away the sin of Adam. But in the few times in my life where, just for one fleeting, terrifying moment I thought I was about to die, there is Sister Mary Brigid standing before me and that trap door down to Hell and I say to myself, *What if she was right? Oh, sweet Jesus, what if she was right?* What if, a moment after my death, I find myself dragged down into....”

“Hey,” I said. “Hey!” He looked at me when I thumped his arm. “She’s not right. If there really is a God she can’t be right.”

“I know that. I know that.” He smiled. “But I don’t know it for sure and certain. Look.” He reached inside his shirt and pulled out a tiny necklace, a pendant depicting a

female figure swathed in voluminous robes. “It’s called a Miraculous Medallion. Blessed by the Pope himself it was. I’ve worn it for twenty years at least.”

“What does it do?”

“It assures the wearer of a happy death.”

“Something to look forward to. The Romans had the right idea. They had a god for everything. Everything was a god. You know what I think, Raff?”

“What?”

“I think—I have thought for a long time—that monotheism is the single greatest catastrophe ever to befall the human race.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

“Because of one bad tempered Bronze Age storm god....”

“The mighty El.”

“Yes, we’ve got Christianity, the Old Testament, and Islam. What a mess. The Romans knew what gods were for. And I’m not talking about those tired, imported, Greek gods like Jupiter and Minerva....”

“I know who you mean, lad. You mean, like, Fornax the bread goddess and Epona, the goddess of horses.”

“Yes! You light a fire, you pray to Vesta. You see lightning in the sky, you ask Fulgora to spare you. And if your neighbor down the street worships a whole different set of gods? *Pas de probleme!* Plenty of room! Every star in that sky was a god to them. Every event in a person’s life had a god working in it.”

“Forculus, the god of door thresholds,” Raff said.

“Cluerca, the goddess of hinges,” I said.

“Limentinus, the god of lintels.”

“Laverna, goddess of thieves and impostors.”

“Mercia, goddess of laziness.”

We smiled at each other. “I bet I can name more silly Roman gods than you can,” I said.

“I bet you can’t!” he said.

“Okay, your turn. And no famous ones like Priapus and Janus.”

He thought for a moment. “Salacia, the goddess of the ocean deeps.”

“Venelia, goddess of the shallows.”

“Hm. Educa, the goddess of baby food.”

“Tutilina, protectress of stored grain.”

“Summanus, god of nocturnal thunderstorms.”

“That is obscure,” I said. “How about Robigo, the god who protects against grain mildew?”

Raff smiled. “And his wife, Robiga, the goddess who protects against grain mildew.”

“No, too easy,” I said. “Do another.”

“Okay: Cloacina, goddess of the sewers.”

“Mania, the grandmother of ghosts.”

“Ach, Mania! Now, there was a nasty bitch. Sister Mary Brigid to the life.”

“No stalling.”

“Aye, then, Fessonnia, the goddess who gives strength to the weary.”

“Carna, the goddess who quiets evil or traitorous thoughts.”

“Fluonia, goddess of menstruation,” said Raff.

“Yeah, was she for it or against it?”

“Unclear.”

I wracked my memory. I had to come up with one he hadn’t heard of. “Caca, goddess of shit.”

“Say what now?”

“Serious. There was.”

“All right, all right. How about Scabies, goddess of the itch.”

I let my eyelids droop. “There was no Scabies, goddess of the itch.”

He raised his hand, swearing an oath. “It’s where the name comes from.”

“Oh, come on!” I laughed and put my head back down against the ground. “A venereal disease goddess. Well. Live and learn.”

Raff didn’t answer right away. When he did, his tone had changed. He said: “Maybe not.”

I turned to him and saw that he was staring off towards the highway. I sat up so I could see what he saw.

Four men with guns stood at the entrance to the site.

“Who?” I whispered.

“No idea.” Raff stood, arms extended, and greeted them in Arabic.

They said nothing.

They were dressed in dark combat fatigues and berets. There were no markings or emblems to tell us for which side they fought. They each carried an enormous rifle, like a mutated elephant gun, bristling with lattices of metal and lenses on stalks.

When they didn’t respond, Raff talked more, and faster. He walked slowly towards them. I caught bits and pieces of his babble: UN, civilians, bad luck, history, harmless, Lebanon, college professor, would you like something to eat?

They stayed where they were, watching him. They did not respond.

In the face of their silence, Raff began to falter. His patter slowly broke up.

We both realized at the same time what was about to happen.

He dropped his hands to his sides and stared at the soldiers, his face a mask of resignation. I knew what he was thinking. *What if she was right? Oh, sweet Jesus, what if she was right?*

One of the men raised his rifle to his shoulder and shot Raff in the face.

The back of his head exploded into small bits and his body fell to hard ground. The man who shot him walked over and began to rummage through Raff's pockets. The other three joined him. They cast the occasional amused glance at me.

I realized that I was screaming.

I don't know what I was screaming. I had stood up by the fire and was shaking savagely, spray flying from my lips as I shrieked at them.

Two of them left off pillaging Raff's corpse and came over to me. Smiling, they aimed both their rifles at my stomach. *Who do you serve?* I remember screaming at them. *Who do you serve?* I wanted to know which God they claimed as their own. I wanted to tell them what a sham their piety was. I wanted to tell them that a God who asked us to kill was no god, was a demon, a fraud, a prince of darkness! Their god was the destroyer of the world, not its savior!

They fired.

The recoil from their weapons was tremendous. I felt the bullets enter me, explode in passing and burst out my back. Blinded by the flash, I was thrown into the air by the force of the blast and crashed down onto stone. My body went into shock. I vomited, and voided into my pants. My brain reeled from the massive decompression as my blood poured out of me. There was terrible pain, cold pain, like shards of black glass slashing my abdomen.

The men came over and went through my pockets. As I lay there spasming, they took my money, my watch, my Swiss army knife, my silver pipe tool.

I blacked out.

I awoke and they were gone. The fire had gone out and the darkness was complete except for the cool moonlight and the heartless stars. I was lying atop the stone altar, Antinuous's impassive head at my feet, the face turned away. Apparently, I had landed there when they shot me.

The pain was appalling.

I blacked out.

I awoke again, astonished to be still alive.

Fucking hell, how much blood do I have? I said to myself. The pain in my gut had begun to fade, and I knew I would soon be dead.

I felt very cold. My body shuddered all over as if I were being shaken like on a bus on a mountain road.

I looked up at the sky. "Since I'm not going to live," I whispered, "could we get this over with? Please? It hurts."

The stars said nothing.

"Oh, fuck you, you son of a bitch!" In anger, I tried to sit up, and shattering pain exploded from my stomach. I fell back. "Your people did this to me," I gasped. I raised a trembling hand and gingerly touched my abdomen. It was wet with blood, but the damage was really not so bad. Two neat holes. It was within me that the bullets had done the most harm, as I expect they were designed to do. I knew my lower back was a mass of torn flesh.

I held out my hand to the idol's head. My blood dripped from my fingers onto the altar, which was already drenched with it.

"Here," I rasped. "This is for you. A blood sacrifice." In the light of the moon, the statue's head seemed darkly solid, ponderous and self-knowing. "Might as well take it. You're the only god around worth talking to."

My hand dropped. My vision began to blur, and there was an odd rattling in my throat. I felt like I had begun to float. The pain seemed to recede very far away, to the bottom of a deep well. I looked at the statue of the boy who, seventeen centuries before, had gone where I was going.

What were you thinking? I said to it silently. I was a dying archaeologist. One last question before I went. *Was it suicide? Did you drown yourself in the Nile that day?*

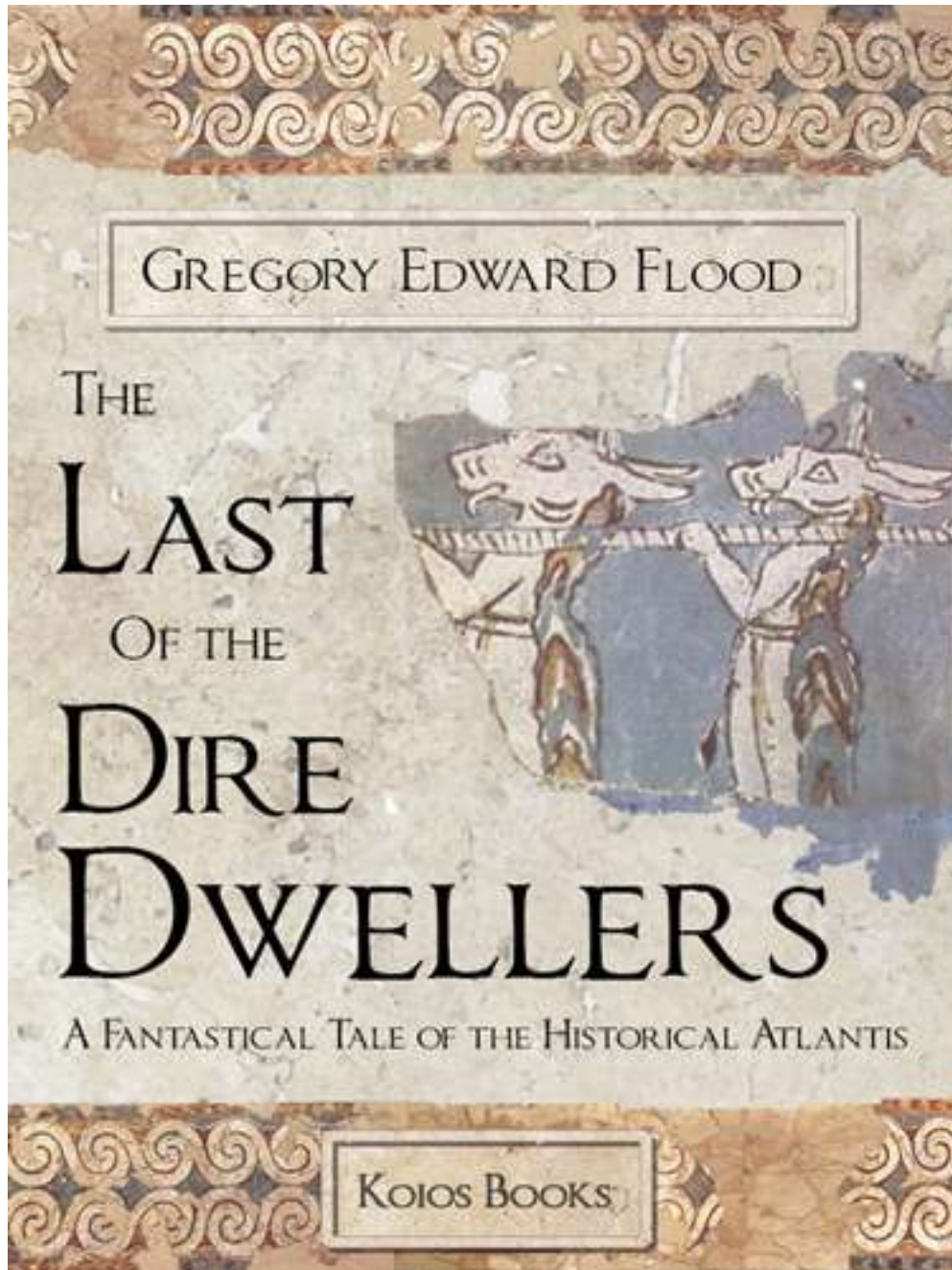
With the sound of stone grinding on stone, the marble head turned 180 degrees and glared at me.

"I most certainly did not!" it said.

Click Here

Buy It Now

**A Fantastical Tale of the
Historical Atlantis**



Check it out [here](#)
Or read the sample chapter

Chapter 1

Not a Good Place for Humans

Sometimes I thought the Forest was the world and humans merely settled in the empty spaces it forgot. I looked at the immensity of it, a deep green blanket of primordial cedar trees mixed with tamarisk, ilex, myrtle, olive and cypress, spreading darkly to the horizon from my vantage point at the gates of the city of Konoso. It filled the island to the south and west, a blank spot on mortal maps. The darkness of it stood in stark contrast to the city's dazzle of color and light, its brightly painted buildings and its people with their lively attire and light-hearted music.

My heart was hammering in my chest. I, who had never been outside the manicured confines of a palace or temple, was to go out into the world an exile. I murmured a plaintive prayer to Britomartis.

At the west gate, I made a melancholy goodbye to the gatekeepers, simple country boys from Vathypetro, long-legged and low-waisted like all Kaftoran men with close-cropped soldiers' hair.

Kasato had tears in his eyes. "Excellence, who's going to take care of the animals? Oba and Hoop? And what about Dwo? Couldn't you bring her with you?"

"Maybe we could help out the new priest as he settles in," Ijero said. With typical Kaftoran indifference to military discipline, Ijero and Kasato would leave their posts at a moment's notice to witness the rituals in my temple; although Konoso had gates, it had no walls, so their presence was hardly crucial to the security of the nation.

"I suggest you stay away from the temple for the next few weeks," I said. "It could get a little messy."

There was an awkward silence.

"Everyone knows you didn't steal the sacred ax, Lord Ekoto."

"Everyone does not seem to have leaped to my defense, Ijero." I turned my back on the city and on them. Behind me, the noise of the marketplace was joyful, full of life. Merchandise from the reaches of the eight winds changed hands: ceramic pottery, bronze figurines, gorgeous jewelry, ornate Kaftoran daggers and axes, patterned wool and linen and silk, fish and fowl, viands and vegetables, the handiwork of the gods from earth and ocean, the handiwork of men and women from all the countries of the world.

“Oh, wait!” Kasato said. “Wait, Lord Ekoto!” He rummaged frantically in a leather sack that he extracted from under the folding chair he kept next to him. “I was going to have this for lunch, but I would be honored if you would take it, Excellence.” He produced a pomegranate. Sheepishly, he stood before me, hands extended.

My eyes smarted, a foreshadowing of tears. What had I ever done in my whole useless life to win me the adoration of these two beautiful boys? Sturdy country folk like them were the real backbone of the country, not us silly idiots from the Palace flouncing about in our finery. Why did they think they owed me anything?

“I...I thank you for your gracious gift, Kasato.” I accepted the fruit from him, the most precious thing he had on hand to offer me, and tucked it in my traveling bag. Without another word, I turned again away from Konoso.

My bag contained cheese, bread and a flagon of resinous Canaanite wine. I had a wallet full of jewelry and silver trinkets for barter. My traveling clothes were in the usual Kaftoran style: shirtless in a white kilt, my scrawny torso a beacon to highwaymen. *Ho, weary brigand! Here is your next stroke of luck!* I wore knee-high Kaftoran boots specially designed to disguise my hooves; I didn't want to have to explain them to every passerby, great clopping things. My long hair was tied with a silver ligature; the tail of it stroked my back like a comforting hand. A flat hat with a wide brim protected my eyes from the sun. I walked next to a goat cart piled with my belongings.

Before me was the Road.

I had a destination. I was going to find my paternal uncle -of-Many-Sons, an Egyptian grain merchant who operated out of the island of Alaysia. He was very rich, and would certainly assist me in...well, whatever I was going to do. My sister's sporadic prophetic raptures and my own singular talent had secured us comfortable sinecures in the Kaftoran priesthood, but I couldn't imagine much demand for my services in the larger economy.

Alaysia had a Kaftoran colony. I might be forced to give up the luxuries of Konoso, but I could not bring myself to leave the Kaftoran culture altogether. Besides, what would I do back in Egypt? The Egyptian side of my family regarded my sister and me as Kaftoran half-breeds, tolerable but not particularly welcome. The arduous trip would hardly be worth such a humorless reception. No, it would be a simple matter to walk to Kytaiton and catch a ship to the outer islands. Kikeru, in his wisdom, suggested I not try to leave from the port below Konoso; Syra might not have been able to execute me in public, but who could blame her if I got a knife in the ribs down by the docks?

The Road was full of traffic at that hour. I came across an Egyptian timber merchant and we stopped and chatted in our native language for a while. He complained bitterly

of the catastrophic cedar shortage; but I knew nothing about that, so he told me horror stories instead: “A callicant, they said it was.” He was at the end of a particularly grisly tale about a recent murder that had occurred farther up the Road. “Sucked the life clean out of him! Nothing left of him but a shell, like a milkweed husk!”

“I shall be alert,” I said. He moved on toward Konoso, bidding me walk with Hathor, goddess of peace, though this seemed unlikely with all the gruesome images he’d put in my head. I patted my goat’s rump and she lurched into motion again. I peered at the dark trees. They don’t come out during the day, of course.

It had always been known only as the Forest, a word tinged with dread when spoken by a Kaftoran. For a person traveling to or from the Kaftoran capital, a break in the trees could reveal alarming sights: a gryphon heading home with its prey in its beak, animal-headed daimons playing indefinable games in the tall grass, blue monkeys peering from the undergrowth as if the woods were the inside and Konoso the outside. The Forest was rife with blue monkeys. And, of course, the Dire Dwellers. Also lurking in its darkness were ferocious predators not native to the island, descendants of beasts who escaped from temple menageries of centuries past; no previous priest of Britomartis had had my peculiar talent. It was not a good place for humans. Mortal travelers were not permitted to stray from the Road, the long, unpaved thoroughfare that connected Konoso with its sister towns and neatly separated the magic-laden woodland from the city. Those that did wander regretted it. Or, at least, it was assumed they regretted it.

The Road was extremely wide and there was room for all of us and our wagons; not just Kaftorans, but gloomy Etruscans and fierce Mycenaeans, proud Hittites and Babylonians and Mitanni, black Ethiopians and golden Phoenicians. Voices rang out blessings in a multitude of tongues. The air smelled pleasantly of oleander and manure and human sweat. Cows grazed lazily in the fields to my right. The bay and its port fell away behind me and I entered the thick of the countryside. I was alone, but I was surrounded by humanity and so not alone. The golden light of Poteidon’s sun bathed the scene in warm softness. I was happy enough.

But the day wore on. It was high summer, just before harvest, so the night did not close in too quickly. But as I walked the mountains began to rear up higher and higher on either side of me, making an early dusk. As darkness approached, the number of other travelers dwindled until I seemed to be the only person left on the Road, trudging along with my little goat cart and my bag of snacks. The Forest, which was merely a pleasant decoration during the day, began to manifest an ominous presence as night fell. Occasionally I would pass a solitary farmhouse made of dried mud brick with its attendant shade trees and courtyard; through the distant windows I could make out the

red plaster walls and the yellow cooking fires. For the first time in my pampered life I envied people who had snug little houses to live in, four walls to keep out the encroaching world.

It wasn't until then that I began to think in practical terms. I had no knowledge of how to survive on the road. I'd had a vague expectation of charming rustic inns with jolly barmaids wiping their hands on their aprons, but no such establishment appeared.

Finally it was night, and I was in darkness. There was no one else on the Road.

"Qerana," I said to my goat, "I think everybody knows something we don't."

As the moon rose and cast a silver light over the landscape, I found myself staring more and more into the depths of the Forest, terrified that I would see movement there. I removed my boots so as to give my hooves free reign. If I had to run, better not to be stumbling along in my camouflage footgear.

We came upon a small spring by the side of the road with a weathered statue of some water goddess or other. I stopped there to rest myself and give Qerana a drink and some grass to graze in. I sat on my cart, cautiously faced the Forest, and broke out my cache of food.

I ate sparingly, something I had not had to do before. I felt weak, useless, unworthy of my dinner. In the immensity of the night I was hopelessly tiny. As the savory cheese dissolved on my tongue, I began to cry. I wept piteously, like a child separated from his mother on a dark street. My tears touched my lips and their salt taste mixed with my food.

As if by reflex, I resorted to the one practice that could dispel such a black mood. It was one I had used since my childhood, huddling in the guttering lamplight in the communal sleeping room at the Amunic school in Abydos, longing for my distant father.

I sang.

An odd choice, you will think, since I was trying so hard to be inconspicuous, but in my despair I truly believed things could not get worse. And a Kaftoran priest with no singing voice was a sad and solitary creature indeed. I sang a triumphant song, a piece of an epic poem by the Kaftoran poet Dipteraporo about the death of Velchanos, the Divine Boy, at the hands of his beloved goddess.

*I rise! I rise!
On silver beams of light
From the dark unto the skies
Into warrens bright!
I come! I come!
To my lover's arms...*

It was one of my favorites, and I became quite lost in the beauty of the melody. Enfolded by the gentle tones of my own voice, I began to feel more myself. At the end of it, I let the last note linger a while, and then I released it.

“Much better,” I said to myself.

Something in the Forest moved, a rustle of leaves. Instantly terrified, I leaped up onto my cart as if I was prepared to engage in fisticuffs with whatever ghastly, hirsute horror was about to confront me. Suddenly, there were a dozen things moving in the Forest, the dead leaves and the branches of bushes revealing their presence.

And, as quickly, they were all gone.

I had attracted an audience. I sat back down, breathing heavily. I had not had a good day; an encounter with the Dwellers was definitely not on my list of things to do.

In the distance, I heard the pounding of many horses’ hooves. A large contingent of riders approached. Perhaps this is what frightened off my listeners, who would have heard the hoofbeats sooner than I with their beastly ears. I hopped down and began to lead Qerana to the side of the road. As I maneuvered the cart onto the greensward, the sound became much louder and suddenly they appeared out of the darkness. They were not Kaftoran soldiers as I had anticipated. They were not any kind of soldiers. It was a gang of rough, unshaven men, perhaps fifty in all, who roared down the broad avenue of the Road as if it belonged to them. They bristled with Mycenaean weaponry and armament that glinted in the moon’s glow. They radiated violence. I wondered what business these Greeks could have in the capitol of gentle Kaftor, and why they traveled at night when no one else (except a silly ex-priest) was willing to.

“Move, girl, move!” I said to Querana. But the dim beast wouldn’t budge, absorbed in her grazing. I had the ill fortune to be on the side of the cart facing the road when they appeared, and I had not quite managed to bring it entirely on the grass. As I struggled to push it out of their path, one of the riders, veering out a little from the pack, clipped me hard. I shouted as the weight of the horse threw me into the air, and I landed very roughly on a limestone outcropping. Harsh laughter clattered out of the crowd. Whichever of these verminous fellows had struck me, none of them stopped to offer assistance. They rode on, until they had all passed by me and rumbled off into the distance.

I sat up painfully. If I had any broken bones, I would be in a terrifying situation until morning. My leg was hurting badly, but it seemed to be intact when I checked it. My fingers came back with blood on them. Of course, I hadn’t packed any healing supplies.

“Did they harm you?” a sultry voice asked me.

I gasped and looked up. Standing at the edge of the Forest was a woman, tall and slender with chiseled features. She wore a long gray robe. She was beautiful in a hard sort of way. My heart leapt to have found another human being in this empty place. But then, as she drew near, I saw in the bright moonlight that her hair, which was tucked into the back of her garment, was dark green.

Dire Dweller, I said to myself.

“Did they harm you?” she said again. Her voice was like the silk from the island of Cos, cool and sinuous. Now that she was close I could see that the pupils of her eyes were elongated like a snake’s.

“Well, yes, I’m afraid they did, a little.”

She came forward and bent over my leg. “Oh, dear, dear. You must let me dress that for you.”

“Could you?” I said pathetically, relieved to have someone handling my problems for me once again.

“My cottage is a few steps away. Come with me.” She gestured towards the towering trees.

“Uh, go in there?”

“Of course, go in there. Come now.” She put her hands under my arms and hoisted me up. She was very strong, and her fingers felt like copper pipes as they pressed against me. She helped me hobble forward.

And so, leaning on the arm of a green haired woman, I entered the Forest. It wrapped itself around us like the wings of a bat. The thickness of the canopy was so great that the moonlight didn’t penetrate. She led me along like a blind man. My rescuer’s habits of personal hygiene seemed not to be as advanced as I was used to and her pungent body odor, like the green dross that formed on a pond, assailed me. In a few moments, we emerged into a clearing and I could see again.

Her cottage was a cave.

“There we are,” she said gently. “Now, I see that my sisters are home, so it would be best if we stayed out here. They are both a little...nervous around strangers.”

“Well, all right,” I said. “Do you think you could dress my leg, now?”

She smiled sweetly at me, “Oh, my dear, I shall dress it beautifully. With coriander and garden cress and a side dish of new figs.”

“Uh, I beg your pardon?” I said ridiculously.

“And I shall wash it all down with the rest of that excellent Kaftoran wine you have brought me.”

“I don’t understand.”

She threw her head back and laughed, a laugh that chilled the hearer, a laugh without mirth. When she looked back at me, her eyes blazed and her finely detailed features had drawn back into a death's head.

“Dinner time, little morsel! Didn't anyone tell you to stay off the Road at night!” Her hair suddenly began to move of its own accord. The ends pulled themselves out of the back of her robe. A thick strand of it rose into the air and curved towards me. Its tip opened into a soft, pink mouth armed with two fangs like Babylonian daggers. Each of the other writhing appendages faced me likewise.

It wasn't hair. It was snakes. Snakes that grew out of the crest of her head, the scales connected obscenely to the pale scalp.

They reared and struck. I screamed in horror, but I could not, no human could, move fast enough. Their fangs sank into my flesh once, twice, a dozen times while she laughed savagely. And I knew what kind of creature I had encountered.

I turned to run, but it was already too late. My head seemed filled with straw. “No!” I shrieked. And “No!” and “No!” again.

My legs buckled and gave way. I fell into the grass face down and discovered that I could not get up. “No, no, no,” I sobbed.

I felt her cold breath on my neck. “The cycle of life, my dumpling. Creatures eat each other. It is the way the gods would have it.”

A heavy pounding reverberated through the earth beneath me. Perhaps I heard it before she did because my ear was to the ground. Could it be... footsteps? The footsteps of what? An elephant?

Above and behind me, she let out a ratcheting roar, the cry of a defiant predator. Something huge swung down out of the dark and smashed into her with such force that she flew backwards with a yelp and disappeared into the night. That same something grasped me around the waist and lifted me off the soft grass.

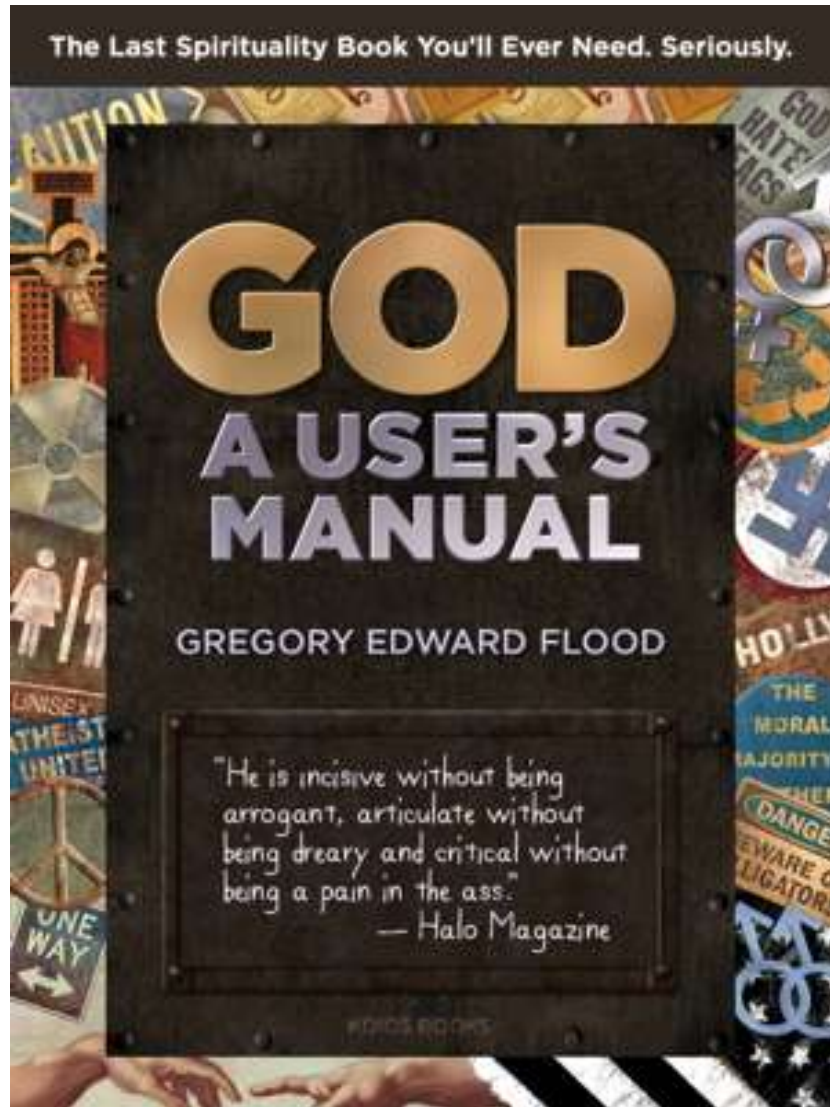
Poisoned by her venom, I was unable to move. But my emancipator held me in such a way that I could see him. It was an utterly gigantic human, bigger than any human ever was. And not human. For over the bridge of its flat nose it sported three round eyes blue like winter sky.

Not eaten by a gorgon, I thought. Eaten by a three-eyed giant instead. What a day.
And I fainted.

Click Here:

Buy It Now

And now for something
completely different...



It's the

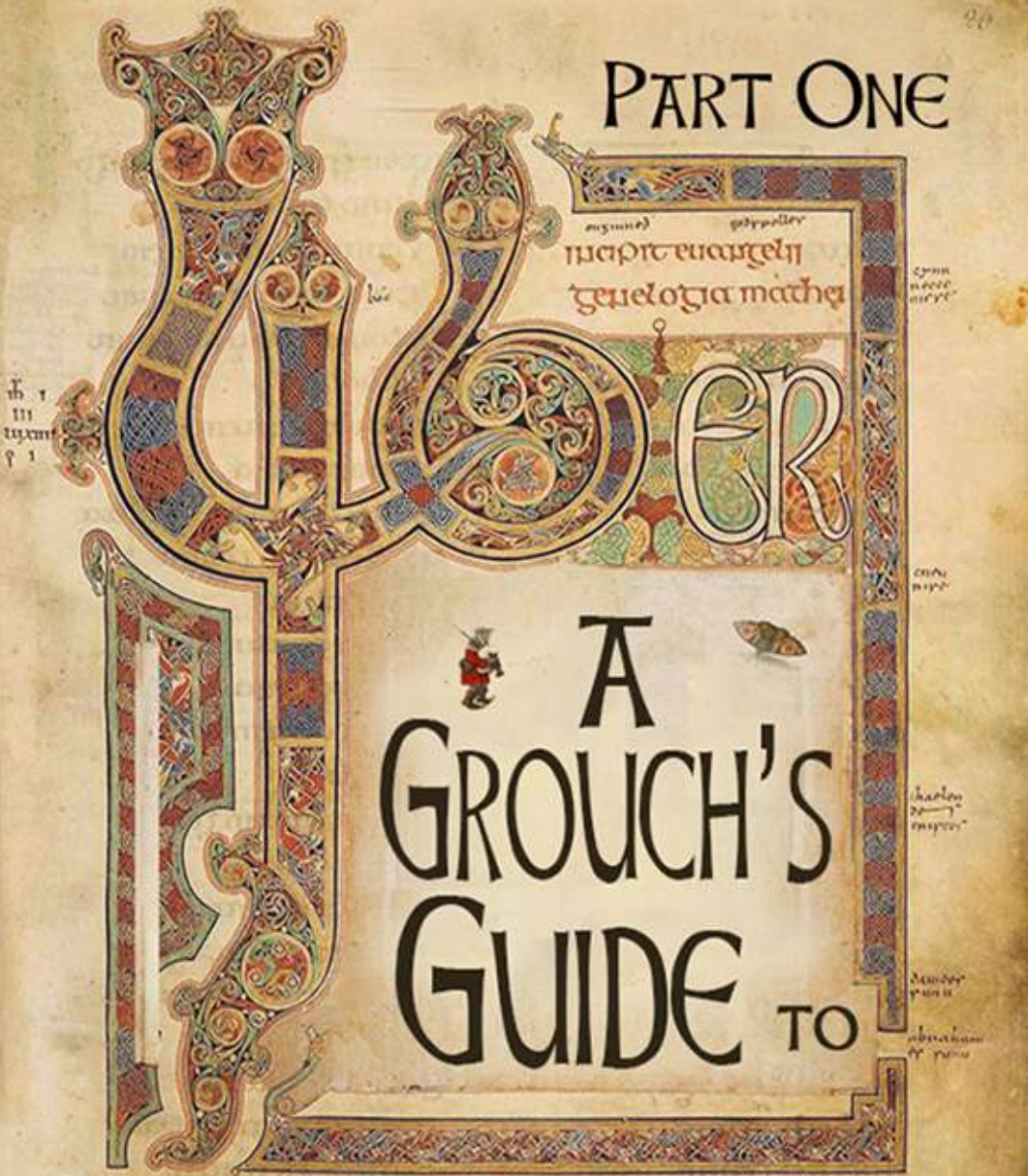
spirituality book
you'll ever need. Seriously.

last

Click [Here](#) to Learn More
or Read the Sample Chapter

PART ONE

ἡ ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου
καὶ τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ οὐρανοῦ
ἐγγεγραμμένη ἐστὶν ὑμῖν
ἵνα ἴδητε ἵνα καὶ ὑμεῖς
ἐπιστάταις τῆς γραμμῆς
ταύτης



ENLIGHTENMENT

Introduction

The most costly of all follies is to believe passionately in the palpably untrue. It is the chief occupation of mankind.

—H. L. Mencken

You're a grouch.

Oh, you are so. Just admit it.

It's okay. I'm a grouch, too.

We're in good company. Some of the greatest spiritual teachers of the past were grouchy. Being grouchy is one of the things that made them so great. They didn't suffer fools gladly.

You've gone the traditional route. Sunday service. Singing hymns. Sit. Kneel. Stand. Sit. Kneel some more. You've watched their antics on television: laying on of hands, calls for donations and crying. A lot of crying. You've been told stories about carpenters rising from the dead and a celestial vacation resort called Heaven that you'll get into if you're good. Whatever "good" is. The people who tell you of these things assure you it's all true. Honest. We wouldn't make up something like that, would we?

And it just doesn't do it for you.

Nevertheless, you'd still like to have a relationship with God or the Infinite or the Universe or whatever you like to call it. (God doesn't care what you call It.) Or, before that, you'd just like a definitive answer on whether or not God exists. This book is for you.



There's you, and there's the Presence that you sense all around you. And beyond that, it's tough to know what's true and what isn't. You can appeal to the wisdom of spiritual teachers, but sooner or later, a person who is truly committed to knowing the Truth gets tired of listening to stories about other people's experiences. You want to be able to find your own answers about God or Spirit or Infinite Mind or whatever you call It.

And you want real answers. You don't want to jump to conclusions. You don't want to believe something just because you read it in a book or heard it from someone who claims to know what he's talking about. You want to *know*. And you want to know how you know. You want to know why you believe what you believe. It's not enough for you to say, "If I believe it, then it's true for me." (I hear that all the time and I have no idea what it means. Something is either true or it isn't. What the hell does "true for me" mean?)

You're here in this life and you want to get it right. You want to know you're doing a good job. You sense a great Power all around you, and you want to make sure you're okay with It, that you're not working against It, that you're not pissing it off. Your life is filled with problems and anxieties and you want to know why; you want to know what you've done to deserve these things; you want to know what you can do to make them go away. Not everybody has this obsession for knowing the spiritual nitty-gritty. Only people like you. You're a special and valuable kind of person: you're a spiritual grouch.

A grouch who wants to investigate his or her spirituality has a tough time of it these days. Most of the groups you go to want you to hug people you wouldn't touch with a pair of tweezers, or get rebirthed, or get saved by Odin or somebody; you're required to assume strange positions, fondle strange objects and accept advice on the stock market from things called "trance channeled entities." You're encouraged to avoid eating meat and abstain from sugar and talk to yourself in mirrors and avoid the use of certain words—not the words that made your maiden aunt blush, but regular words like "should" and "can't." (*Should* and *Can't* are negative words! Oh my God! Run for your life!)

But you don't like being told what to do, do you? It's tough to find your niche in today's spiritual movements if you're a Republican who puts sugar in his coffee, has cocktails every night at six and thinks nothing of saying "I *should* be going," or "I *can't* stand that rap music." We grouches always seem to be getting the message that to live spiritually, we're just going to have to become different people.

Most every spiritual teaching has a personality profile to which its adherents are expected to conform. So, a religion works beautifully for you if you possess the personality traits it requires. A religion based on judgment and Armageddon will appeal to people with strong—I might say "narrow"—concepts of right and wrong and a flair for the dramatic. A religion of renunciation and withdrawal will appeal to people who feel victimized by external things, or are distrustful of them. A religion of confession and rebirth will appeal to people who feel that they've been bad.

But trouble arises for people who don't match the personality profile of the religion in which they were raised: feminist ideals, unmarried cohabitation, homosexual orientation, or even a love of sarcasm and gallows humor can put you in the dog house. This is particularly true of the so-called "alternative" teachings.

The new personality profile for spiritual people has begun to take shape. And it's a real downer: the new students of Truth are expected to be soft-spoken, unopinionated and "loving" in the drippiest and most sentimental sense of that word. They avoid conflict at all cost. They regard all spiritual teachings as valid, even teachings that wildly contradict each other. They have unicorn decals on the back windows of their cars, sigh volubly when other people discuss "negative" things and sit in restaurants and say "Oh God, how can you *eat* that?" while you're trying to enjoy your hamburger. (The can't-fail response is to look thoughtful for a moment and then say, "Adolf Hitler was a vegetarian. Did you know that?" Shuts them right up.)

There's a whole population of would-be spiritual seekers out there who feel left out of all these new metaphysical goings-on because their personalities don't match this new identikit for spiritual people. These excluded individuals aren't soft-spoken, they don't avoid conflict—at least, not at all cost—and they don't think everything is valid. They're opinionated and they're skeptical—not an absurd, all-negating skepticism but the thoughtful, now-hold-on-a-minute-here skepticism of people who aren't willing to believe just anything because it feels good.

So, if you've ever felt that spiritual growth is not a viable pursuit for someone the likes of you, this book is for you. In fact, even if you're a macrobiotic anarchist this book is for you, if any spiritual teacher has ever pressured you to become someone you didn't want to be. A spiritual grouch can be recognized by the following characteristics:

1. He just wants the facts. Skip the incense and robes, thank you, just tell him how it works.
2. He asks questions that the standards of good taste usually don't permit like, "How would *you* know?"
3. He doesn't believe anything he can't personally verify.
4. He's hard to impress and gets bored easily.
5. He wishes everybody would stop acting like such damn fools and be more like him.

These are all positive traits. Well, except for that last one.

The purpose of this book is to make you *spiritually independent*. I want you to rely on no one but yourself in forging your relationship with God. And, yeah, that means not even me.

Don't expect to be spiritually independent when you finish this book. It can take years. But this book will give you all the tools you need to do it. And it will give you all the information you need to understand what you're doing and why it works.

I know what you're going to want to do. You're going to want to skip to the last section that teaches Effective Prayer and get to all theory stuff some other time.

Sigh. Such greedy children.

Don't.


Effective Prayer is tough to pull off if you don't have a crystal clear understanding of why it would ever work in the first place. Read the teaching sections first. It'll be fun, I promise.

So, let's start with something simple: You're here.

Now you respond: "Okay. I'm here. So what?"

Excellent question.

Click Here



Buy It Now