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The SWARM



**THEY ESCAPED
THE VAMPIRES...
OR DID THEY?!**

Also: THE FUTURE! A Ghost Story! And more! All inside!

RACHEL AND DAVID sat together in the darkness of the world, in the sparse light of a small fire; and they talked, their faces orange and barely illuminated, watching a few embers rise toward the stars. In the abyss beyond the two young people is a world that has been destroyed by some force, so long ago that it has been forgotten, and few stories dare to discuss it. People live day by day as nomads, surviving off of whatever the barren land can provide. In the night, the young are restless; the days provide no means of entertainment except for moving from one place to another or scavenging. Time in this world means nothing, for the only skill necessary to life is physical aptitude. Intelligence and learning are insignificant, and a primitive way of life is dominant.

Rachel and David stayed up later than all of the other young ones this night. The blackness of the world was no stranger to them. In fact, as they had no duties to think of, the bleakness of the air refreshed their minds. In this world, it is a blessing to have no religion or politics to trifle over.

But in a world so mundane and banal, some things do, perhaps, remain.

Rachel gazed over at David, admiring his jaw line as his eyes reflected the flames. "What do you think we'll do tomorrow, David?" she said wispily.

"Same as every day I'd imagine," he said as he sat back on the log, finding a more relaxed position.

Rachel sighed. She wore a tattered dress of a long-passed era that she found one day in a large mansion. As she scampered about in the decadent chateau, she imagined what life had been like there: never having to move, never having to sip water from a puddle on the ground, never having to sleep in the dirt.

"What are you thinking about?" said David, breaking the brief silence between them.

Rachel sighed yet again, "Oh, nothing."

"What's on your mind? C'mon, you can tell me anything. We've been friends as long as I can remember."

"It's really nothing David. Just something stupid."

"Nothing you think of is stupid, Rachel."

She sat for a moment on the log, stroking her hand down her leg and brushing the dirt off of her dress. It was once pink, but has long since faded. The marred dress made her feel melancholy. "Thank you, David, really, but I'm just thinking about the past. How beautiful this dress must've been when it was first made. How beautiful the original owner must've looked. How hard the designer must've worked. Do you think this dress is beautiful, David?"

"It's not the dress I think is beautiful."

Suddenly Rachel's mind drifted off. She thought of that estate once more. She thought of how many people could live there all at once, if they never had to move. She thought of how it felt to lay on the mattress of the bedroom, how each soft mound gently pressured the light curves of her back, and how she felt slightly strange. She felt like an expression that she often heard the older members of the group use: "At home."

"You don't need to say that, David. You know how all of the younger kids will act if they hear you say something like that. They'd jump out of their skin and just tease us to death." And she was very right. The elders often taught the children to tease those who would flirtatiously stare into the eyes of others. Fidelity has been long forgotten as well. It was realized early on that "love" was another trifle to throw away with the institutions of religion and politics. It complicated things. It was much better to focus on procreation and continue a dwindling population. But Love, though people tried to force it from society, lived on like a pest, and was synonymous to "complication."

"What, Rachel? I was just complimenting you and..." The end of his sentence trailed off in a nugatory mumble.

"I know, I know, David. But that's how these things start. You know if we get into any kind of conniption they'll just toss us aside, we've both seen it happen," Rachel was right again. Some time ago, two adults were shunned from the group for complicating matters. A woman had just had a child to a man, and that man found her having relations with another man. Of course, the man exploded in a fit of anger. In the course of their argument the

the elders overheard their feud and told them to go on their own way. They had no choice. Complication is against regulation, for complication affects efficiency and in a world so hopeless, efficiency and simplicity reign supreme.

"Love is a smoke and is made with the fume of sighs," said David lowly.

"What was that?" said Rachel as she cocked her head towards David.

"Oh, just something I read in a book somewhere when we were scavenging. It just sort of stuck with me I guess,"

"You can read?"

"Yes, I can read. I don't make much sense of things, but I can make words out. Before one of the elders passed away, he used to read to me at night because I would always be the last kid asleep,"

Rachel's chest heaved heavily. She stared deeply into the fire, trying not to look at David at all, but instead stared deeply into herself. For an unknown amount of time, the two sat in silence, staring into the fainting fire. The glow of the coals was fading away, and the cold of the night was closing in. Before the fire was completely exhausted, David removed his shirt and threw it into the fire. For a brief moment, the fire grew a great amount, and by the light, Rachel could not resist looking at David's weathered body.

"I'm going to rest now," said David, and he turned and walked away into the darkness. Rachel sat there for a moment, disheartened. As the last of the coals ceased to emit heat, Rachel removed her dress and threw it into the fire. She walked out, naked, into the darkness.

The Fading Kind

by Jack Farrell

“I WANT HER BACK”, Joel whispered, pleading. “Please, you’re the only one who can help me...I need this.” The rain was heavy and the alley was dark, making Joel feel that the whole situation was a lot shadier than it needed to be. Cain was a friend, so why was he feeling so afraid?

“Alright, listen, man. The first thing you need to understand is that this will not bring her back. Your wife is dead and this can't change that. Second thing you need to understand is that by doing this I could not only lose my job, I could end up in jail for a long time if anything happens to you. And Joel, man, something will definitely happen to you.”

Joel looked guiltily at his feet. He knew the risk he was asking his friend to take. But he needed him to. It was the only way. “I understand what I’m asking. But there isn’t anything else. Without her, I don’t know how to go on. You are the only one who can help me.”

Cain said nothing. He shook his head. He removed a paper bag from his coat pocket and tossed it toward Joel. He started to walk away, not even asking for the money. Before he could go, Joel needed to ask one last question. The only question that mattered. “Wait, please. One more thing...does it work?”

“Of course it works. That’s the whole problem.”

Reminiscence. It was more than a drug. It was more than powerful. If it did what they were saying it did, it was everything Joel needed. Since his wife had died in the car crash, he hadn’t been able to let go. He still needed her. He still wanted her. Only, she wasn’t there. So he placed his hope in Reminiscence, the drug that his friend Cain had said was in the process of seeking approval from the FDA. Joel was willing to wait. He was willing to get it legally, once the time came. Only it turned out that time would never come. Cain had said it himself; something had gone wrong in the clinical trials, he said. Very wrong. Cain was legally bound not to say what it was. The drug would never see sale. But Joel needed it. It was his only way.

The goal of the drug was memory. Perfect memory. If it worked, it would make every instant of a man’s life as clear to him as if it were happening that instant. He would smell the scents that were in the air and see the things he had seen and feel everything he had felt when the memory had been made. What Joel saw when he looked in the paper bag was his only way of getting his wife back: every second that he had spent with her would be his again. Just as long as it worked.

When he got home he took it immediately, according to the dosage that Cain had scrawled on a piece of notepaper. Even the makers of the drug were never perfectly sure of how it was going to work or how long it would take. The note said that it might take anywhere from two days to three weeks before Reminiscence would take its full effect. Joel felt it in five minutes.

When it happened, Joel was looking for the remote. His mind and soul were exhausted, but his body knew it was only nine o’clock, so he needed something mindless to do until he could fall asleep. TV was the perfect choice. The only problem was that he didn’t know where the controller was, and he’d be damned if he would walk across the entire room in his state. As he was trying to remember what he had last done with it, things started coming back to him. To be precise, everything started coming back to him. He remembered that he had walked into the kitchen with the remote when he got the call from Cain. He remembered first putting the batteries in it three years ago. He remembered the sound it made when it hit the floor that time he’d dropped it while drunk at the super-bowl last year, arguing with his uncle about who had really killed JFK. He had been drinking Bad News, a drink his friend had concocted that tasted like chocolate milk but put you on your ass before you had finished your first drink. He thought he had blacked out that night, because of that damned drink. No, he had blacked out. He realized he was remembering it all now. It was time to get to work.

Joel, realizing that he had more important things to do than numb his mind with television, sat in the most

comfortable chair in the house, and set about remembering. He spent a long time wondering what his best memories with his wife had been before settling on the obvious one: their wedding day. Only, Reminiscence doesn't make you remember things as you want to remember them. It makes you remember them as they happened.

Before Reminiscence he remembered it as a perfect sunny day. His wife had looked gorgeous and everyone was there to see what a beautiful couple they made. After Reminiscence, however, he remembered that he had had too much to drink the night before, and his head had been pounding as he wavered at the altar, trying to stand. Before, he remembered how wonderful he had looked in his tuxedo. Now, he remembered that a cloudless day and a full suit made things damn hot, and all he could think of was how uncomfortable and long the ceremony felt, and how all he could think at the time was how he wished it could end so he could get out of there.

This discomfort disturbed Joel, who remained sitting in his chair, brow furrowed. "Perfect memory" meant the memories were supposed to be perfect, didn't it? He tried not to think about it, and instead went to another memory that he knew he would enjoy...the wedding night.

He had remembered it as a beautiful consummation, and they were both truly together for a moment, as man and wife. After Reminiscence he had remembered how tired they had both been at the end of a long, stressful day surrounded by family members and a seemingly endless supply of alcohol. Before Reminiscence he remembered it was a quiet, intimate experience that put them asleep in each others' arms. After Reminiscence it was awkward, uncomfortable, and went on for too long before they both passed out from the food and exhaustion. Neither of them had finished.

Coming back to himself, Joel was afraid. Was this how it would be? Would every moment that they had been together pain him like these memories? If this was how the good times felt, then what about the bad ones. 'Oh no...' He thought. His mind went to the night she died.

He couldn't stop himself. He couldn't bring himself away. Before Reminiscence it was a bad memory. Now it was a nightmare he couldn't escape from. He remembered the full hour he had spent watching her die as they waited for help to arrive. He remembered the smell of her burning body. He remembered the pain he felt as the light fell from her eyes. He couldn't even scream because of the smoke in his lungs, and he couldn't escape. Thinking about it was enough to make it happen again. And again. And again.

The problem with perfect memory is that you can't forget anything. Even if you want to. Just before slipping into the welcoming arms of insanity, Joel remembered what Cain had said about the drug.

"Of course it works. That's the whole problem."

Thomas Aquinas: Private Eye

by Leonard J. Franks

I WALKED DOWN Persia street, and then up Thermopylae lane towards Sparta Avenue. If I was going to be spying on someone, I needed to scope their house. And ten at night seemed like it would be the best time to do it.

As I had expected, the place was a mansion, and well gated. I didn't see anyone on guard, so I walked closer to get a better look. It was a very impressive place, I had to admit, and also very secure. I could see cameras everywhere. It was obviously someone who was very afraid of being hurt. Probably a real tyrant.

But just as I was turning around, I heard a sharp clicking sound that I instantly recognized. It was a pistol being cocked. And I knew that it was pointed right at me before I even saw the thug holding it.

"Hands up," he said. "This pistol may not be big, but it's big enough to shoot my enemy." I obeyed. There are two things that command respect from me. Virtue, and a loaded gun. And I encounter the second a lot more often than the first.

"Are you one of Priam's men?" he snarled.

"Of course not," I said. "I was just looking." "We'll see about that. Show me your right arm. And no funny business." I guessed that that was where Priam's men got marking tattoos. I lowered my arm, pulled up my sleeve, and displayed it to him. He was surprised to see that it was bare.

"All right then, peeping Tom. We're going to go see the boss." He hit a combination that opened the gate and led me inside. Quickly, it closed behind us. He guided me towards a doorway where two other guards were waiting and led me in. Then I was taken up a staircase and finally into a door. Inside was a very imposing figure, surrounded by even more guards, his back turned towards me. It was obvious that this was Menelaus.

"What is it?" he bellowed, with a great war cry.

"Someone was looking at the house," the thug replied. "It's not one of Priam's men. Or one of Creon's. I thought you might like to judge."

"I'd prefer you not waste my time with every little-" As soon as he turned around and saw me, he laughed. "I take it back. I'm overjoyed that you disturbed me! How nice that you and I should finally meet, Mr. Aquinas!"

"Do I know you?"

"I shouldn't think so. But I certainly know you. You've been something of an annoyance over the years."

"I'm flattered."

"You should be. After all, you were the one who took down my drug-running sophistry school. And you drove my men out of that woman Penelope's house before they could make off with anything. Frankly, I'm rather honored to finally have you in front of me."

I looked around the room carefully for any escape routes. It didn't look easy. "I take it that you're going to kill me?"

"Well, I've been considering. On the one hand, that would make everything rather easy for me. But on the other hand, what good is a dead body when the living aren't any good?" He stared at me. "Yes," he decided at last. "I think that I am going to kill you. But as a special gift, to honor our guest-host relationship, I'll make a compromise. You'll have a slow death. Knock him out. And take him to the basement."

Suddenly, something hit me in the back of the head harder than the truth of the thirty-second proposition of Euclid.

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When I woke up I felt a little groggy, so I needed a second to fully get hold of my situation. I was chained to a chair, my head clamped to face a blank stone wall. The only light I could see was that of a flickering candle, placed behind

my head. I then heard Menelaus' voice from behind me.

"Welcome to my little cave, Mr. Aquinas. What do you think of it?" He laughed. "Oh. I forgot. You don't have a very good view of it." I snarled. "All right, Menelaus. What's your game?" "It's really your game. And here are the rules. I'm about to hold up an object. I want you to try and recognize it. If you get it right, you get a point and a little bit of water. Then, an hour later I'll come in with another object. If you get it wrong, however, you get no water, and I won't come in again until two hours later. Every time you get one wrong, the intervals between my entrances get one hour longer. And every time you get one right, you get water. And I know you're the type who'll fight to live as long as he can. So here's the first object." A shadow appeared ahead of me. The candlelight distorted it terribly, but after looking at it for a few seconds, I saw it was a rectangular shadow. "A deck of cards," I said, at random.

"You lose a point. And the next one's going to be harder." With that, he left.

I had to assume that his brother Agamemnon was a whole lot saner than he was if he really did have a criminal army. In reality, the object that he had held up was a matchbox. Paper matches, to be specific, though I couldn't quite tell the brand. But I didn't need water at that point. I needed two hours to get out of these chains. I had tested them and found that they were more solid than a right triangle rotated around one of the legs. But that was no reason to give up.

"Come on," I reminded myself. "I've worked through chains of logic a lot more arduous than these."

I remembered nabbing a small bit crook by the name of Crito. He was an expert at breaking himself and others out of prison. I had watched him do some of his tricks, including a way to get yourself out of chains. It was time to see if I could still remember it.

After about twelve tries, I finally did. It was a special way of bending the wrists and then the body. As I began to remove the rest of the chains from me, I couldn't help being glad that the laws were with me and not against me.

I turned around and walked towards the door of the cellar. Now that I was on guard, I wasn't worried about being able to make an escape. All I needed was a phone and as for his Phulakes... well, I wasn't the heavyweight boxing champion of the Dominican order and a master of Sumo Theologica for nothing.

I whipped the door open as fast as I could. There were two guards outside it, each carrying guns, and each facing the exact wrong way. Practically before they could move I slammed their heads together, and they fell on the floor. I picked up a pistol from one of them and stuck it in my pants. I never like using guns of course. But occasionally, certain measures can become necessary. There weren't any more guards on the lower floor, so I ran unimpeded up the stairs to the next door. I threw that one open, and found myself in an anteroom. There were two more crooks waiting for me there.

I lunged at one of them and pushed his head against the wall, while at the same time pointing the gun directly at the other one's face. Seeing that, he froze, and I laid him flat with two blows. Obviously, it did not belong to cheap hired hands to be essentially good at fighting.

As I had hoped, there was a telephone on the wall. I spun the dial and waited for an operator to pick up.

Having finished my phone call, I turned and saw the outside door that I had been led into. Just the thing I needed. I ran out, and saw that I was directly opposite the gate exit. I made for it faster than the sensation of touch through the medium of flesh. And I was almost there when I hit a snag.

In fact, I hit ten snags. Eight of them were guards. One of them was Menelaus. And the tenth was the pistol in his hand.

Survival

by Marco Daimano

MICHAEL CLUTCHED ONE HAND to his wounded side, using the other to steady himself as he stumbled across the blood-slick floor of the darkened warehouse. Finally he felt a wall in front of him and sighed, the only noise present except for Will's retching. Michael slid his back down the wall until he was sprawled against it and closed his eyes while he caught his breath, opening his front pocket as he did so. After a few moments of fumbling he removed a cigarette and surveyed his surroundings. It was as he expected; he and Will were the only ones who survived the attack. Just barely at that, he saw, examining his side.

Will seemed to be regaining his composure finally and as he lit his cigarette Michael noticed that Will was clutching his neck. It didn't seem to be serious, as only a trickle of blood was running down his fingers, so why did he have such a stricken look on his face? Michael struggled to remember how they got to their current circumstances; everything had happened so fast. He remembered standing over Emily as Will held her sprawled in his arms, his cheek wet with tears and blood. He remembered he was standing back as the others knelt by her, watching her pale, weak face give one last smile. And he remembered Will's voice, tight with anger and grief: "They die tonight. All of them." They all had loved her in their own way, romantically or otherwise, and they all had quietly, but forcefully agreed. Michael had stood off to the side, his face obscured by shadow and smoke, as Arthur and Will dug the grave of their sister and girlfriend, respectively. Bob had stalked off into the woods without saying a word, but when he returned his knuckles were bruised and bloody. Mordecai simply closed his eyes and wept.

After the grave was dug they each said a few words, filling in some dirt when they finished. Arthur went first, telling his sister that their parents would have been proud of her and that she was always there for him as a child, but before he could go any further his voice cracked and he stopped talking. Mordecai, tears now nearly spent, admitted that when they first met he did have a crush on her, but he now just saw her as friend, and a very good one, and told her that their lives would be forever changed by her passing. Bob was next, and Michael remembered tensing up for what might happen next. Emily was the closest thing Bob had ever had to a sister, and while their relationship had never been anything more, Will had always been suspicious. To their surprise though, Bob, a man of few words, said he had a poem to read and then stared at Will, daring him to object. Will, eyebrow raised but otherwise looking more interested than angry, simply nodded. It was one of the most beautiful poems they had ever heard. Will went next. There were many things he could have said, apologies he could have made, but he knew they did not have the time, so he kept it short: "I love you, and I hope you are at peace now. I doubt I'll be able to go where you are." Michael went last, and everyone conspicuously busied themselves with preparing as he went up the grave. If anyone heard his whisper, before he covered her with dirt, they didn't show it.

It was midway through the night now, and they had to move before they lost their chance. As dawn drew closer, so did the chance that the creatures responsible had moved. Things were a blur to Michael's memory. He remembered them coming up on the not-so-abandoned warehouse, partially obscured from their position by trees and bushes. He remembered the inside, all seven of those . . . things standing, their faces and postures reveling in the aftermath of the night's kill. Until two of them dropped dead from Arthur and Mordecai's crossbows, their hands clutched around the spikes of sharpened wood that had sprouted from their chests, that is. From there he struggled to piece together what happened. Four rushed them, Michael's blade flashed out, Bob armored fists glinted, Will threw something. Fire, blood, screams. Four bodies hit the ground. They looked up for the fifth. Then the laughing. It was a maddening, almost child-like laugh of sadistic glee.

They turned around and there he was. The one responsible, the creator of these monsters and the group's problems. The head bloodsucker himself. Magnus. Or perhaps it was Primus. His kind always chose such names. They were beyond caring at this point though, because whatever his name was he was licking Arthur's blood from his fingers as Mordecai's body fell to the ground in nearly two pieces. Then before they knew it he was upon them.

They stumbled back, briefly confused. Then Michael remembered hearing a strangled cry, followed by a roar of anger. By the time Michael could focus clearly he saw Will on the floor, clutching his throat and coughing. Magnus was moving away from him to confront Bob, whose arm he had clutched in his hand. Bob struggled futilely to break his grip as Magnus raised his other hand. Then he heard the sound of Bob's head snapping, and saw Magnus's face twist into a feral grin. Then he screamed in agony as Michael pushed his sword as far as possible into his heart. Michael blacked out as Magnus' spasms tore open his side and his head hit the floor.

Which brought him back to the present. Judging by the circumstances, he couldn't have been out for long, so why was Wil...then it hit him. It all made sense now: Will's gurgled shout. Magnus standing over him, blood on his fangs. The ferocious look on Bob's face before his death. All of it. Michael opened his mouth to say something but was cut off by the sound of Will's laughter. It started as a giggle, steadily getting louder until it became a maddening cackle. Michael just stared as Will threw his head back and laughed, his eyes streaked with tears. Imperceptibly, the laughter had turned to tears, until it finally degenerated completely into frantic sobbing.

"Michael, you there?" Will said.

Michael's voice was strained as he responded. "Yeah. I'm here."

"We the only ones who made it?"

"Looks like it."

Will suppressed a snuffle. "Well at least that bastard's dead."

Michael didn't say anything. After what seemed like forever Will said what they both dreaded.

"He bit me, Mike."

"Yeah," Michael gulped. I know."

Will laughed again, a low snicker this time.

"You going to kill me?" He said after awhile.

Now it was Michael's turn to laugh. "Will, I couldn't kill you if I wanted to. Not in the state I'm in."

Will nodded. "So what are we going to do?"

"I think that's up to you," Michael said as he flicked his cigarette butt into the shadows.

They were silent for a while. Then Will spoke.

"Perhaps . . . perhaps it's not so bad. Maybe . . . maybe I can control it. Drink when I have to. Never let anyone contract the disease."

Now Michael's back straightened and he stared straight at Will. "You know you know better than that. Emily is all the proof you need."

Will started to say something, but then thought better of it. They stayed like that for a while. Eventually though, Michael noticed something. Slivers of light began to break into the darkness of the warehouse. The closed shutters blocked most of it, but it was enough for Will to raise his head.

"Heh. The sun's rising."

"Yeah, looks like it."

Will stared thoughtfully at the floor. Michael busied himself with his side. Then Will stood up. "I think . . ." Will took a breath and steadied himself. "I think I've made my decision."

Michael gulped down tears, forcing himself to respond.

"Oh?"

"Yeah." He paused. "Do you . . . do you think I'll see her again? In what comes next? Presuming there even is one. But . . . but if there is. Do you think she'll be there, waiting for me?"

Now the tears fell freely. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm almost sure of it."

Will laughed again. He sounded almost cheerful. "Well then. I suppose, if you're right, it's not so bad then, is it?"

"No. No, I suppose not," Michael managed to get out. Will laughed again, then stood up unsteadily but purposefully. Michael looked away as he walked towards the door, his skin sizzling as he passed through the spots of light. He

heard Will's footsteps reach the door, and the doorknob turned.

"You know, sometimes I wonder."

Michael looked at him, surprised. Will had paused there, in shadow of the door, with his hand on the knob.

"Wonder what?"

Will looked thoughtful. "Oh, just whether you're the one who has it the worst. Having to be the only one who lives. But then . . ." He looked at Michael and smiled. "Tell me something. What did you say to her?"

Michael stared at Will for a few seconds before answering. When he did it was barely audible.

"Maybe in another life."

Will nodded slowly, still smiling. "You know, that's always been your problem Mike. Promise me something."

Michael gave him a confused look, but nodded.

"Promise me you'll make your survival mean something. Live in this life, stop thinking about what could have been. It's what she would have wanted. It's what we all would have wanted. You hear me?"

Michael had to blink to see now. "Yeah." He swallowed. "Yeah, I hear you."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

"Alright then, guess that's it." He breathed deeply. "Later buddy."

"Later," Michael said hoarsely. He closed his eyes and finally stopped fighting the tears. The warehouse was quiet for a while except for the sound of his sobs. Then Will opened the door and stepped into the light.

Some Things Never Change

by Kyle Amann

September Fourth, 2159

Web-diary

SO I ALMOST DIED at work today. The straps on my harness had been held together by ducttape so long I forgot how fundamentally torn up they were, so needless to say I was surprised when they gave way and sent me flying into the infinite void that is space. I sort of kind of managed to grab hold of one of them, and was hanging on for dear life as my rocket cart (the safety, by the way, should have activated and stopped the fucking thing the moment I fell off; no such luck) went on its merry way. Without me to steer it, it just picked a trajectory and went with it, as did I. It took me twenty minutes of delicately exerting pressure on the strap to pull myself back into the driver seat.

That isn't the worst part. The worst part is that after I got back on, I realized I was about two minutes away from running out of fuel entirely. I had to eye-ball the damn return vector, turn the rocket cart around, and slowly and carefully thrust my way back in that direction trying desperately to conserve fuel. Thank god I paid attention in high-school geometry back in the day; as it was I barely made it. A little more off and I would have been floating through space until someone rescued me or my suit ran out of oxygen. Aren't there supposed to be safety protocols for this kind of thing? To top it all off, I had to jettison the boxes I was transporting to save fuel, and my boss says it's coming out of my pay.

I hate working at Wal-Mart; I should really quit.

A Ghost Story

by Jonathan Whitcomb-Dixon

MUSIC FILLED UP THE ROOM while people danced. The hall they danced in was beauty itself. Every detail of the room was magnificent; even the walls, colored a pale gold which looked like it should have stretched over fine curves of a goddess, held an impossible attraction. The wood of the floor was supple; shoes seemed profane, but bare skin sinful. The curtains, redder than blood, left the skin tingling with the desire to touch and to feel. The windows showed nothing of the night outside, but reflected every beauty back, as if the hall existed again on the other side of the glass. The chandelier was glass like water; it flowed while resting and defied the meaning of still.

The music was something other than man played. Each note seemed pure and yet it was as if the next note had been intimately a part of the last. No jazz lover had heard it, no jazz musicians reached it, no brass could play it, but this was what each dreamed of. It knew every love and what each love desired. It knew how to satisfy, but it knew how to make you ache for more. But mostly it knew you. It knew you because it was in you, in your heart the moment it began.

Neither mattered once the dancing began. Every dancer was, when still, something to behold. They were all pale, and their bodies beyond a sculpture, obvious even beneath the clothes. Every woman had the most beautiful curves, the shape of nature's perfection. Each man was tall and wide shouldered, each strong as rock without any ridiculous show of muscles. The dresses were as fitting as their skin and each billowed around, or hugged tight, in the perfect way, each a cascade of colors perfecting the beauty of the women. Each suit was tailored exactly and looked almost like it had been made yesterday on these men who had up till this point been naked, for they could only wear those suits.

With all this beauty, it was the dance that captured the eye, more fully than a web might a fly. The dance was something besides dancing. Each couple was amazingly graceful and yet no two of the pairs danced similarly. Actually it was impossible to look at more than one at a time, so they could have changed, dancing seamless and discordant. The dresses of color and the suits of black mixed swinging to the swing music. The dancing was pure beauty. It was a hook in the eye of the viewer.

Julie watched it all from a door to an old kitchen. The kitchen was useless and had a rather large hole in the wall, the one the girl climbed in through. She watched from the door and sketched the scene as best she could. Her work didn't dance and the lines didn't swing enough for what she saw. The shadows eluded her; each dancer seemed to bring their own light. She tried and erased and retried and tore out pages over and over again.

The more she worked the less she noticed of her work. As the dancing continued her drawing was more rushed. Her hand knew only motion and her eyes could not leave the dancers lest she missed some trick to their movement. She stopped thinking, stopped noticing, stopped seeing, stopped all but drawing.

Her hand halted. She closed the sketchbook and realized she had stopped watching the dance. She didn't look again, but stood up and walked out the hole.

It was just after 5:34 am when Julie got home. The number struck her as odd so she scrawled it on the last page of her sketchbook without looking. It was past the time for looking and she began to take off her shoes on the stairs. She was without a shirt in the hall and left all the outer clothing on the floor by her bed.

She woke up the next morning in her underwear, face in the sweatpants she normally wore to bed. Oddly enough she was still clutching the sketchbook. She put it on her night stand and imagined the breakfast she could make in the kitchen. She glanced at her clock and saw 8:12 and after addition knew that meant it was 12:34. So afternoon, she thought. Then she remembered thirty four, and then she remembered the whole night before.

When she opened the sketchbook she first saw the pictures she remembered from last night, the sketches she hadn't liked at all. She was bored soon just flipping through the sketchbook and barely even looking. Then she realized though they looked all wrong, they were mainly good. The pictures were beautiful, like nothing she ever did

before. They were a perfect drawing of what she had seen. They were nearly as beautiful as what she remembered in that hall. "The last page," she wrote in her journal, "is the greatest thing I could ever call my own."

She had it all written in her journal before she called her boyfriend. He came over when she asked, and they had sex. The only thing she said after they did it was "Still not enough." She spent a few hours with him, and then kicked him out. She spent a little time with her parents, even ate dinner with them, but spent most of the day in her room. She left around ten, because it was normal for her to leave at that time.

She went back to the old hotel. She needed to see what happened in the hall. She craved the dance, and this time she did not bring a sketchbook. She knew it was unnecessary; she had done what she knew was beyond her ability and it was not enough. That was all she thought about the whole day: the dance.

The dance. That single memory had complete hold of her mind. This was all she cared about now and when it began her soul sighed and her body relaxed. So much tension drained and her hand dropped. It began by exploring her skirt's hem, but did not stop there for long; soon it was exploring something much more personal, something of her.

The dance stopped and the dancers all turned toward her, in time. There was accusation in their eyes, but that was not what terrified her. It was the joy that followed the accusation. No, that was a part of it, but that wasn't what terrified her. It was a hunger, a lust. It was there all along and only now did she see it. The dance had teased them as much as it did her. Now their stares told her that it had not been for their benefit. The sick, twisted rules of this ball had ensnared her and now she was horror-struck, left to panic. But a voice, the same that had demanded more than the images and more than the boyfriend, told her that this was why she came. "This was all you could have wanted."

No one saw her again, but the pictures and the journal were found and seen as art and a story and nothing more. The only thing that caught anyone's attention was the last page of the sketchbook, which was nothing but scribbles.

Penelope & Ismene: Chrononauts

by H.P. Legomenon & Sophronia Tamaya

A BLINDING FLASH ricocheted off the walls and pavement of Long Acre, a loud ‘pop’ split the air, and two women in incongruous dress stood on the sidewalk. The prostitutes and their prospective client looked on.

“Right,” said the one in the green dress. “We need a library.”

“I need an airship.”

“Airships can wait—”

“You oughtn’t tell untruths.”

“—but law cannot. We must know what our situation is.”

“Why don’t we ask that nice official-looking man in blue where they keep the airships?”

“My love, your one-track mind could not be less well received at the moment. Pardon me, sir!”

The policeman turned around and stared at the two young women hurrying to cross the thoroughfare. One was shamelessly exposing everything from the knees down, a strange dress scarcely covering her ample assets, a tall pair of funny-looking sandals wrapped around her athletic legs. The other bore herself more calmly, instead having a dress of modest length that exposed her collarbones and arms without remorse. Two of the most lurid working girls in the whole city, to be certain!

“Well, all right,” said he, grinning. “What can I do for you, luv?”

“Could you direct me to the nearest lawgiver, sir? I desperately require a comprehensive knowledge of your statutes.”

This was unprecedented. “You can’t want that, girl. Not in your line of work.”

“Our line of work?”

“He means hookers, Ismene.” Penelope had slid off from the conversation and was politely perusing the wares. “Ladies of the night.”

“Oh, sir, we are not at all prostitutes, I assure you!”

“Dressed like that?” He grumped and shook his head. “All right, you ain’t worth it. Be on with you.”

Ismene caught her paramour by the collar and pulled her away. “Penelope! Stop looking at those! They’re illegal!”

“Excuse me?”

“The line of work of a prostitute, I have been given to understand, is not one the law smiles upon! They are criminals! And this man is a criminal for doing what I expect he will soon do!”

“But it looks like such a nice brothel!”

“Too bad!”

“But Chinese triplets, Ismene! We’ll finally live the dream!”

“Oh. Chinese? ...but no! Illegality, Penelope!”

“Blast your hide.”

~ ~ ~

They found a station. Ismene sat down happily with an enormous tome’s worth of law. Penelope bought a meat pie.

“Hah. Here it is. Prostitutes are most very much illegal. As are opiates. The Chinese triplets would certainly have had opiates.”

“I’m sure that’s wildly offensive.” Penelope stood and stretched, cracking her back in several places. “All right, you have the law. Now we’re going to go explore.”

"Oh yes?" Ismene found herself moving at a rather rapid pace, tugged along by one wrist, the book held tightly in the opposite arm.

Penelope did not deign to respond, instead hurrying down the street at a rapid pace, determined to find something interesting to do. "Let's see. What did they say about this place? Lots of steam. And brass. A bit like home, actually. There's got to be something fun. Like an airship."

Ismene glanced across the street and stopped. Penelope jerked to a halt in front of her. "The prostitutes!"

Penelope frowned. "You choose now, of all times, to—"

"No, of course not, it's against the law!" Ismene cried. "But these poor girls must not know! They should know better than to challenge those who have mounted the position of power. Come. We must correct them."

"But why? They seem happy enough."

"They'll be punished! We must help them. They will be grateful for the correction and the assistance, when they find out what a narrow miss they've had."

Penelope sighed. "Must we go over this again, dear? If people want to disobey the law, that's their prerogative. We're not from around here. It's none of our business. Now come along. I want an airship."

"But surely, if we find them a nice house and some steady, paying, legal work, they would happily turn from their lives of disobedience! Look, I'll find the house, you teach them to weave. They could be turning a profit within...let's see- a year?"

"Ismene. It is none of your business. And if you think that I will teach weaving to anyone ever again, you are wrong. Let's just leave them to their lovely, sinful lives, and get on with ours. Unless you've changed your mind about those triplets..."

"I most certainly have not!" cried Ismene indignantly. "But I do feel a certain legal obligation to these unfortunate women. And I never said they were sinful. Illegality is far worse than a sin. The gods occasionally accept apologies- the law never does."

Penelope opened her mouth to reply, and kept it open as the skyline lit up in a brilliant hue of orange. There was a phenomenally loud bang.

"I think that was an explosion," Ismene said. Penelope looked near to tears with jealousy.

"Someone else is setting off bombs and you want to convince prostitutes to stop prostituting!"

"Well, illegal is as illegal d—" Ismene found herself being dragged off in short order, pulled and tugged through veritable throngs of unwashed persons of dubious character as Penelope shoved her way through to the center of the action, five streets down.

A building labeled 'Menelaus Furnishings' was up in flames, and two men were tussling in the street, while a lovely woman looked on, wearing a little smile.

"Bloody frog!"

"Ginger nitwit!"

"Homewrecker!"

"Cradle robber!"

Penelope had a low, deep, terrible feeling in her gut of having seen all this before. She dropped Ismene's hand, reasonably sure in her belief that the other woman would not go wandering off to right the social wrongs, and pulled the two men apart, holding each at arm's length from the other. The temporary shock of a diminutive woman in distracting dress forcibly pulling them apart cooled their ire enough to prevent undue struggles.

She looked carefully into the face of the man with red muttonchops with a sinking feel. "...'bloody frog'?"

The gentleman puffed himself up enormously. "This poncy French tosser is making assertions towards my fiancé!"

Ismene felt she was missing something. "French?"

Penelope grumbled. "Ismene? Meet Paris. The gentleman with the black eye would be Menelaus."

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“TELL ME, O MENO, whether pulp fiction is something good, or if not good, can it be something worthwhile, or at least entertaining? And if any of these are true is it something that comes to human beings by publication or some other way?”

“It is not hard to tell, Socrates. First we must know what the virtue of a pulp story is. If it's the virtue of hard boiled crime you want, it's easiest to say that it's this you want: a detective who does well to his friends and manages the affairs of dangerous dames and crimes, and a nemesis who does harm to his enemies, and the detective who avoids the twists and turns of convoluted plot points. And if it's the virtue of a space opera that you want, that's not too hard. It is to manage well the breaking of the laws of physics and to boldly go where no man has gone before. And the virtue of horror, and of fantasy, and of parody, and light poetry, and there are a great many other genres, so that there is no difficulty in knowing what the virtue of pulp fiction is.”

“But Meno, I have asked you for pulp fiction, and you have given me *The Swarm*.”

“Yes. I have.”

