

SHORT FICTIONS

black glass

From the PEN/Faulkner-winning
Man Booker-shortlisted author

karen joy fowler

NEW YORK TIMES – BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
WE ARE ALL COMPLETELY BESIDE OURSELVES

ALSO BY KAREN JOY FOWLER

We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves

What I Didn't See and Other Stories

Wit's End

The Jane Austen Book Club

Sister Noon

The Sweetheart Season

Sarah Canary

Artificial Things

KAREN JOY FOWLER

BLACK GLASS

short fictions



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Version_1

FOR SHANNON

FOR RYAN

MY HOMEGROWN INSPIRATION

AND ALSO TO THE STARRY URSULA LE GUIN, FOR LIGHTING THE PATH

Contents

[Also by Karen Joy Fowler](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Preface](#)

[BLACK GLASS](#)

[CONTENTION](#)

[SHIMABARA](#)

[THE ELIZABETH COMPLEX](#)

[GO BACK](#)

[THE TRAVAILS](#)

[LIESERL](#)

[LETTERS FROM HOME](#)

[DUPLICITY](#)

[THE FAITHFUL COMPANION AT FORTY](#)

[THE BREW](#)

[LILY RED](#)

[THE BLACK FAIRY'S CURSE](#)

[THE VIEW FROM VENUS: A CASE STUDY](#)

[GAME NIGHT AT THE FOX AND GOOSE](#)

Preface

I was raised by professionals. My father was a behavioral psychologist and my mother was a highly educated nursery school teacher. Already, I know how you expect this story to end, with my confessing that, despite their education and qualifications, or better yet, *because* of all that, they made quite a hash of being parents.

Nothing could be further from the truth. They were pretty wonderful. The household ran on the scientifically supported principle of positive reinforcement. I was loved, admired, encouraged, disciplined gently, and listened to seriously. All this will be confirmed by my older brother, who had much the same experience and remembers it better. Those mistakes we have gone on to make are entirely our own.

Recently, I did an event with another writer who said, in answer to a question, that he had become resigned to his material. “We all had the childhoods we had,” he said. “Nothing can be done about that.” I might change that to “We all think we had the childhoods we think we had,” if it weren’t, in addition to being true, also nonsensical. We’ll stick with his configuration, but asterisk it.

I’m far from the only writer to have had a happy childhood. But I think we writers who did share a nagging sense of it not being very writerly, all that early happiness. We suspect, as Maeve Binchy once said, that a happy childhood is an unsuitable beginning for a writer. (She said “Irish writer,” but why quibble?) We wonder why, reared in relative contentment, we became writers in the first place. What *is* our material?

For many years I never asked myself those questions, as I could see no way in which the answer would be helpful to me. I like to think of myself as wide-ranging, no book much like the last. I like to think I follow whatever obsession has its current hold on me. I like to think my material changes. But when, as in this book, I’m confronted with a collection of my stories written over a number of years, certain themes become impossible to ignore.

My father is a clear obsession—I sometimes wonder if I write about anything else. We fell out when I was an adolescent and he died before our relationship could right itself. I am always trying to fix that.

As an adjunct, the scientific study, particularly when focused on human behavior, seems to come up often in my writing. Scientists appear frequently as extraterrestrials. I imagine that not only speaks for itself, but also demands an apology.

I have always suffered from the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern syndrome—an excessive concern with peripheral characters. This first manifested when my ninth-grade English class was taken to see *Prometheus Bound*. My idea of great storytelling at that time was *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* There were no sexy Russians, no triumph of good over evil, no action, no ending of any kind in *Prometheus Bound*. There was, however, a strange tormented cow that caught my interest. I asked my teacher about her and was given some extra reading to do as a consequence. This is how I learned that most c

the male gods were horrible rapists and most of the females, jealous harpies. (For the record, I have never minded being asked to do additional reading. It is a privilege.)

At its core, this focus on the peripheral is a struggle against literature's ubiquitous suggestion that some people are more important than others. This is a deeply outrageous, globally damaging thing to believe. But I haven't yet found a way to write that doesn't inevitably partake of it.

And finally there is also this recurring theme: Eden lost. This popular plot was standard in many of the stories I loved as a child—*A Little Princess*, *The Hobbit*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Once and Future King*, *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Black Beauty*. My own first stories, written when I was about five years old, never deviated from it. But at five, while I understood that happiness could be lost, I expected it would also return. A return home was not only possible; it was the way stories ended.

• • •

THIS IS THE THING about a happy childhood—it ends, and not in the way of those stories. “There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in” (Graham Greene).

For me, that door into the future was, of course, a book. One day, when I was maybe eight or nine years old, I was looking through the case in the hall and I pulled something off a shelf for no other reason than this: I had never seen a book that tried less hard to get someone to read it.

The spine was a plain black with a barely discernible title: *The Black Book of Polish Jewry*. There were photos inside, so I turned at once to those. What I saw made no sense to me: pictures of beings who mostly looked human, but not completely—their bones too prominent, their heads, their eyes, too big. My first thought was that I was looking at some alien life-form I had never been told existed. I called on my mother to explain.

Her explanation was the worst thing I had ever heard. It is no exaggeration to say that I lived in one world before my mother began to speak and a completely different one when she was done. Why didn't everybody stop it? I asked, and my mother had no good answer.

I was surprisingly angry with my parents about this.

As was quite common in the time and place of my childhood though quite rare today, I had enormous freedom, both in space and time. I wandered at will, unsupervised and unscheduled, having my own adventures, making my own plans. There was a lot of room in my childhood.

In their actions, in letting me roam as I had roamed, my parents had as much as said that the world was a safe place, that people could be trusted. I felt in some indirect and unclear way that they had lied to me, that my whole life had been a lie.

My school was about four blocks from my house. I usually walked there. One day, a woman I often stopped to chat with as she worked in her yard asked for my phone number. That night my mother told me that she'd invited me to lunch. By myself. I was nervous about this, because I was extremely fussy about food back then, not liking most of it. Being asked to eat something I didn't like was the greatest horror I was capable of imagining. Not to worry, my mother told me. It had all been covered in the phone call.

Sure enough, my hostess was ready with my favorites. We ate off china plates and she told me stories about her own childhood. Before the lunch was over, she'd promised me a kitten from her cat's next litter and she was as good as her word. It turned out that she wrote a gardening column for the local paper. A few days later, I was in print, being publicly celebrated for my sweetness and sunshine.

This was how strangers treated you: they brought out the good china and made your favorite foods; they entertained you with stories; they gave you kittens; and they wrote laudatory newspaper columns

about you.

~~They didn't snatch you from your mother and father, then beat and starve and gas you.~~

More revelations followed. *Life* magazine did an article on abused children that included a pair of siblings raised in a basement. Once again, there were pictures. Once again, I was looking at an image of something dreadfully wrong written on someone's body. The children were stunted. They were bonsai children. And the people who had done this to them were their very own parents.

• • •

I'VE LIVED MY ADULT LIFE at the exact halfway point between joy and rage, gratitude and dismay. There is surely no need to say that, at sixty-five, I've had a great many disappointments and suffered some agonizing losses. No one gets through unscathed. Still, by any reasonable reckoning, life has treated me gently.

I like almost everyone I know, easy enough as the people I know are quite lovely. I would think well of us as a species, if I'd never read a history book. Or the newspaper. Or the comments sections of the Internet. Quite recently I learned of a new app, a way to quickly assure your family and friends that you've survived a shooting, a bombing, a drone strike, a military assault. The app is called I Am Alive. Developed for those in Lebanon, but useful in so many places around the globe. A great future is predicted for such an app.

This, I now believe, is the place my writing comes from; this is the central puzzle of my life. Is the world more beautiful than terrible? Is it more terrible than beautiful?

How can I praise such a world?

How can I be so ungrateful as to not?

Some days I answer these questions one way and some days the other, but I am always asking the questions. As I work my way through any given story, the answers often change as I go. What doesn't change is this—I am always aware that, beautiful as the world sometimes is, deeply as I sometimes feel that beauty, there is no denying or forgetting that I once lived somewhere so much better.

Karen Joy Fowl

January 21, 20

BLACK GLASS

It was a Wednesday afternoon in the Senate Bar. Schilling, the proprietor, stood behind the curved counter, stroking the shot glasses with a towel. Every part of the bar was reflected in the mirrored wall behind him: the marble and black onyx floor, the oiled cherry-wood counter, the brass bar rail. A chandelier hung in the center of the ceiling. Rows of cut-glass decanters filled the shelves. Schilling ran his towel over their glass stoppers. In the corner, on the big screen, Cher danced and sang a song for the U.S. Navy. Schilling had the sound off.

There were three customers. Two sat together at a table near the door. They were businessmen. One of them smoked. Both of them drank.

Every time either of them picked up his glass and set it down again, he made a new wet ring on the table between them. They were careful to keep the spreadsheet out of the water.

The third customer, a college student, sat at the bar, drinking his way through an unexpected romance with a woman old enough to be his mother. He'd asked Schilling to bring him three drinks at once, three different drinks—a Bloody Mary, a Sex on the Beach, a Velvet Hammer. As a compromise, Schilling had brought him the Bloody Mary and put in an MTV tape, picture only, out of deference to the businessmen and as a matter of personal preference.

A fourth man came into the Senate Bar from the street. A shaft of sunlight sprang into the room when the door opened and vanished when it closed. "Give me a drink," the man said to Schilling.

Schilling glanced at the man briefly as he polished the wood bar with his sleeve. "Get out of here." "Give me a drink."

The man was dirty and dressed in several tattered layers, which still left a bare hole the size of a tennis ball above one knee. He was smoking the stubby end of a cigarette. It was not his cigarette; there was lipstick on the filter. He had retrieved this cigarette from the sidewalk outside the bar. "You pay your tab first," said Schilling.

"I don't have any money," said the man. Cher closed her eyes and opened her mouth.

"Where's my Sex on the Beach?" asked the boy.

"You're disturbing my customers," Schilling told the man at the door. "You're stinking up my bar." He reached under the counter for a bottle of gin.

"He gave me my first drink," the man at the door said to the boy at the bar. "I used to be just like you." He took two steps into the room, leaving two gritty footprints on the black onyx. "Finish what you started," he told Schilling.

"Get out," Schilling said.

The boy rolled a quarter down his nose and let it drop, catching it loudly in his empty Bloody Mary glass. "Can I get another drink?" he asked. "Am I going to get another drink?"

A second shaft of sunlight appeared in the room, collided with the mirrored wall. Inside the sunlight, barely visible, Cher danced.

She turned her back. Schilling heard a woman scream, and then the Cher in the mirror broke into five pieces and fell behind the counter. The sunlight disappeared. “Madam,” said Schilling, hardly breathing, in shock. A nightmare dressed in black stood at the door of his bar, a nightmare in the shape of an enormous postmenopausal woman. In one hand she held a hatchet. She reached into the bodice of her dress with the other and pulled out a large stone. She wore a bonnet with black ribbons.

“Glory be to God!” shouted the woman. “Peace on Earth! Goodwill to men!” She hit the big screen dead center with the rock. The screen cracked and smoked, made spitting noises, blackened. She took a step, swept the cigarette from the shabby man’s mouth with one hand. “Don’t poison the air with your filthy gases!” she said. Then she held her hatchet at the vertical. She charged into the bar, clearing the counter. Maraschino cherries and stuffed olives flew. “Madam!” said Schilling. He ducked.

“You purveyor and protector of obscenity!” the woman shouted. “Has your mother ever been in the place?” The boy at the bar slipped from his stool and ran for the rear door. In three steps the woman caught him. She picked him up by the neck of his sweater as if he were a kitten, throwing him to his knees. She knelt over him, singing. “Touch not, taste not, handle not. Drink will make the dark, dark blot.” He struggled, and she let him go, calling after him, “Your mother did not raise you for this!” The back door slammed.

The businessmen had taken cover under their table. Schilling remained out of sight. The shabby man was gone. The woman began, methodically, with her hatchet to destroy the bar. She punctured the decorative keg behind the counter and then, apparently disappointed to find it empty, she brought her hatchet down on the counter, severing a spigot from one of the hoses. A fountain of soda exploded into the air. She broke the decanters. Pools of liquor flowed over the marble and onyx floor. The woman’s bonnet slipped to the side of her head.

“That brandy costs seventy-five dollars,” Schilling said.

“Broth of hell,” she answered. “Costs your soul.” She gashed the cherry wood, smashed the mirrored wall. She climbed onto a stool and brought the chandelier down with a single stroke. Schilling peered over the bar. She threw a rock at him, hitting a bottle of bright green crème de menthe behind him.

He ducked out of sight again. “You’ll pay for this,” Schilling told her. “You’ll account for every penny.”

“You are Satan’s bedfellow,” she said. “You maker of drunkards and widows. You donkey-faced rum-soaked Republican rummy.” She lifted the hundred-and-fifty-pound cash register from the counter and held it over her head. She began to sing again. “A dreadful foe is in our land, drive him out, oh, drive him out. Oh, end the monster’s awful reign, drive him out, oh, drive him out.” She threw the register at what remained of the big screen. It barely missed the tabletop that hid the businessmen and crashed onto the marble and onyx floor.

She worked for twenty minutes and stopped when there was nothing left to break. The woman stood at the door, straightening her bonnet, tightening the ribbons. “Until the joints close,” she said, “the streets will run red with blood.” She opened the door. Schilling crouched lower behind the bar. The businessmen cowered beneath the table. Nobody saw her leave.

“The sun was in my eyes,” Schilling explained to the police. “When she opened the door, the sunlight was so bright I lost sight of her.”

“She came in screaming?” A man from the press was taking notes.

“Shrieking.” The first businessman tried to read the reporter’s notes, which were upside down from his point of view and cursory. He didn’t enjoy talking to newsmen. When you dealt with the fourth

estate, accuracy was your social responsibility. You could still be misquoted, of course. You wouldn't be the first.

"Kind of a screech," the second businessman offered.

"She's paying for everything," said Schilling. "Don't even ask me to be chivalrous."

"She was big," said the first businessman. "For a woman."

"She was enormous," said Schilling.

"She was as big as a football player," said the first businessman carefully.

"She was as big as a truck," said Schilling. He pointed with a shaky finger to the register. "She lifted it over her head like it was a feather duster or a pillow or something. You can write this down," he said. "You can quote me on this. We're talking about a very troubled, very big woman."

"I don't think it's such a good idea," the second businessman said.

"What's not a good idea?" asked the reporter.

"Women that size," said the second businessman.

"Just look what she did," said Schilling. Rage made his voice squeak. "Just look at my bar!"

• • •

PATRICK HARRIS HAD BEEN a DEA agent for eight years now. During those eight years, he had seen some action. He had been in Mexico and he had been in Panama and he had been in LA. He had been in one or two tight spots, but that didn't mean he couldn't help out with the dishes at home.

Harris knew he asked a lot of his wife. It couldn't be the easiest thing in the world, being married to a man who disappeared into Latin America for days at a time and might not even be able to get a message out that he was still alive. Harris could run a vacuum cleaner over a rug without feeling that he was doing his wife any favors. Harris could cook a meal from the very beginning, meaning the planning and the shopping and everything, without feeling that anyone needed to make a fuss about it.

He stood with the French bread and the Gruyère cheese and the imported Emmentaler Swiss in the nine-items-only-no-checks checkout line, wondering how he could use the tomatoes, which he hadn't planned to buy but were cheaper and redder than usual and had tempted him. The woman in front had twelve items. It didn't really irritate Harris. He was only sorry that it was so hard for some people to play by the rules.

While he waited for the three extra items to be tallied and worried in an ineffective, pleasant way over the tomatoes, he read through the headlines. Evidence of prehistoric alien cannibals had been found in Peruvian cave paintings, and a statue of Elvis had been found on Mars. A husband with bad breath had killed his wife merely by kissing her. A Miami bar had been destroyed by a sort of half woman/half gorilla. Harris saw the illustration before he read the story, an artist's rendering of Queen Kong in a black dress and bonnet. He looked at the picture again. He read the headline. One of his tomatoes spun from the counter to the floor. Harris stepped on it, squished it, and didn't even notice. He bought the paper.

He had never been in so much trouble in his life.

• • •

THE DOORS WERE HEAVY and padlocked. A hummingbird dipped through the entryway twice, held for a moment over an out-of-season fuchsia, and disappeared. The largest of the MPs tried to shoulder the doors open. He tried three times, but the wood did not give. One of the women smashed through a

window instead. Harris was the fifth person inside.

The soldiers searched for fugitives. They spun into the hallways, kicked in the doors. Harris found the dining room on the other side of some broken glass. The table was set with china and the flatware was gold. An interrupted meal consisted of rack of lamb, braised carrots, curried peach halves served on lettuce leaves. The food had been sitting on the china plates for at least twenty-four hours.

He started into the library, but one of the MPs called to him from farther back in the house. The MP's voice sounded self-consciously nervous. I'm still scared, the tone said. Aren't I silly?

Harris followed the voice down a hallway and through an open door.

The MP had her rifle slung over her back. In her hands she held a large statue of St. George, spear frozen over the neck of the dragon. The dragon was considerably smaller than St. George's horse.

Behind the MP, three stairs rose to an altar with red candles and white flowers and chicken feathers. The stairs were carpeted, and a supplicant could kneel or lie supine if the supplicant weren't too tall. The room itself was not carpeted. A black circle had been painted on the stone floor, with a red triangle inside. The four cardinal points of the compass were marked.

Harris looked east. The east wall was a wall of toads. Toad-shaped stones covered every inch of seven shelves, and the larger ones sat on the floor. The toads were all different: different colors, different sizes. Harris guessed there were four hundred, five hundred toads. "Why toads?" Harris asked. He stepped inside.

The MP shook her head and put the statue back on the altar. "Shit," she said, meaning nothing by it, merely making conversation. "Is this shit for real?"

One of the smallest toads was carved of obsidian. Its eyes were a polished, glassy black; it was no bigger than Harris's thumbnail. It attracted him. Harris reached out. He hesitated briefly, then touched it. At that moment, somewhere in the room, an engine cycled on. Harris started at the sound, closed his hand convulsively over the toad. He looked at the MP, who gestured behind him.

The noise came from a freezer back by the door. It was a small freezer, not big enough to hold the body of an adult. A goat, maybe. A child. A head. Harris looked at the MP. "Groceries," he said.

"Stash," the MP suggested. This made opening the freezer Harris's job. Harris didn't think so. He would have stared the MP down if the MP had only looked at him. Harris watched to be sure the MP wasn't looking. He put the black toad in his pocket and went to open the freezer. He was simply not thinking about the toad. Otherwise he would never have taken it. Harris was DEA, and even when he was undercover he played by the rules. Taking the toad marked the beginning of a series of atypical transgressions. Harris was at a loss to explain them. It was not as though he wanted the toad.

The freezer worked laboriously. When Harris and his wife were first married, they'd had a noisy refrigerator like this. They would argue: arguments of adjustment, kitchen arguments as opposed to bedroom arguments, as vehement and passionate as they were trivial. And the refrigerator would be a third voice, grumbling in dissatisfaction or croaking in disbelief. Sometimes it would make them laugh. Harris tried to resurrect these comfortable, pro-appliance kinds of feelings. He closed his eyes and raised the lid. He opened his eyes. The only thing inside the freezer was a stack of pictures.

Harris pushed the lid up until it caught. Some were actual photographs. There was a Polaroid of the General's wife seated in a lawn chair under a beach umbrella, a fat woman who'd left the marks of her nails on more than one of the General's mistresses. There were some Cubans, including Castro, and some Americans, Kissinger and Helms, pictures cut from magazines, but real photographs of the President and the ex-President. There was a fuzzy picture of two men shaking hands on the steps of a public building. Harris recognized one of the men as the Archbishop. The edges of every picture had been dipped in red wax.

HE STILL HAD the toad in his pocket that night when he attended a party at the home of Señora Villejas. Many American officers were there. Señora Villejas greeted him at the door with a kiss and a whisper. “*El General llevo a la embajada con calzoncillos rojos.*” The General had turned up in the Vatican embassy wearing red underwear, she said. She spun away to see that the band had refreshment.

A toad in a hole, Harris thought. It was Christmas Eve. Harris arrived late, too late for the champagne but just in time for the mixed drinks. The band was ethnic and very chic. Harris could hear a concertina, a bobla, a woowoo, the triangle. They played a waltz.

“Have you heard the one about the bitch at the dog kennels?” one of the American captains asked him. The captain had a strawberry daiquiri; he stirred the strawberries with his straw.

“I have now,” said Harris.

“Don’t pull that shit with me,” the captain said. He drank. “You some kind of feminist? You got a whole lot of women working undercover in the DEA?”

Harris ignored him. He spotted Ruiz by the windows and made his way toward him. Some couples had started to dance in the open space between Harris and Ruiz. Harris dodged through the dancers. A woman he had never seen before put a drink in his hand, alcoholic, but hot and spiced. “What am I drinking?” he asked Ruiz.

Ruiz shrugged. “You had a chance to call your wife?”

“This afternoon,” said Harris. “I’m on my way home tomorrow. You?”

“South,” said Ruiz. “What any of this shit has to do with anything I do not know.”

“It’s a statement,” said Harris. “At least it’s a statement.”

“It’s an invasion,” said Ruiz.

Well, of course there was that. Harris was sorry Ruiz was choosing to see it that way. “He collected toads,” Harris offered, by way of changing the subject. “Stone toads.”

“He collected yachts,” Ruiz said. “The *Macho I*, the *Macho II*, and the *Macho III*. Don’t ever tell me he had a problem in this area. And don’t tell me he lacked imagination.”

Harris took a sip of his drink. It stung his mouth. “Why toads?” His eyes were watering. He took a larger sip, drained the glass halfway.

“Maybe they were hollow,” Ruiz said.

“No.”

“Maybe just one was hollow and the others were all to hide the hollow one.”

A young woman refreshed Harris’s drink. “*¿Que estoy bebiendo?*” Harris asked the woman, who left without answering.

“Have some of mine,” Ruiz said. He was drinking a margarita. He handed it to Harris. Harris turned the glass to a virginal part of the salt rim and sipped. He rotated the glass and sipped again. “Go ahead and finish it,” said Ruiz. “I’ll get another.”

The music had begun to sound odd. A man stood in the middle of the dance floor. “I’ll tell you who’s coming here. I’ll tell you who’s coming here!” he shouted. He threw the contents of his drink into the rafters of the house. Others did the same. Harris laughed and drank his margarita instead. He started to say something to Ruiz, but Ruiz was gone. Ruiz had been gone for a long time.

The dancers began to stomp, and the high treble sound of the triangle reached too deeply into Harris’s ears. It hurt. Harris could smell alcohol and herbs, drifting down from the roof. The drums and the stomping worked their way into his body. Something inside him was pounding to match them. Harris resisted finding out what. He pulled the little toad from his pocket. “Look what I have,” he said.

to Ruiz, but Ruiz had gone; now Harris remembered, Ruiz had gone south to get a margarita. It was quite some time ago.

“In short, you were stoned out of your gourd,” said Harris’s superior.

“Now it gets a little blurred for a while,” Harris told him. This was a lie, one of several lies. The story Harris was actually telling was far from complete. He had certainly not mentioned stealing the toad. And now he was not mentioning remembering a woman in an evening gown who smiled at him, holding out her hand. There were flowers in it. They bloomed. Everyone was dancing.

“My ears hurt,” Harris told her. “Ants are crawling on me.” He tried to brush them away, but his hands wouldn’t move. She knelt and was still above him so he must have been on the ground. The flowers turned into a painted egg. “This is your brain on drugs,” Harris said, laughing. She held it out to him, knowing he couldn’t reach for it, teasing him.

“What do you want?” Her shoulders were bare; she answered the question as she asked it by breathing deeply so that her breasts swelled at the neckline. “In your heart, what do you really want?”

Harris’s soul detached from his body and floated away.

“I think I had a very narrow escape,” Harris told his superior.

“It’s a hazard of fieldwork. Sometimes you draw suspicion to yourself by refusing. We know that. The tabloid Harris had purchased was spread out on the desk between Harris and his superior. His superior was adding a mustache to one of the cannibal aliens in the Peruvian cave painting. He blacked in the teeth. It pained Harris, who was not the sort of person to deface pictures and certainly not prehistoric pictures. “I appreciate your coming in, but I don’t think I’m even inclined to report this. I mean, in your case, it wasn’t even advertent. You were inadvertently drugged.”

“I was poisoned,” said Harris.

“What does it have to do with gorilla women?”

“Guerrilla women?” Harris repeated. “Everything. I was poisoned by female agents of the Panama Defense Forces.” He took a deep breath. “You got anything here I can drink?”

His superior gestured to the wet bar. Harris poured himself a shot of whiskey. He swallowed it all once. “The toad is an important Mayan symbol of hallucinosis.” Whiskey warmed his tongue and his throat. “In medieval European witchcraft, they used to decompose toads in menstrual blood for use in potions.

““Toad, that under cold stone, / Days and nights has thirty-one / Swelter’d venom sleeping got, / Boil thou first i’ the charmed pot!”” Harris said.

Harris’s superior was staring at him. Harris’s superior was not an educated man. “Shakespeare,” Harris said, by way of apology for showing off. “I’ve been reading up on it. I mean I don’t know these things off the top of my head. I’m not really a toad man.” Harris’s superior continued to stare. Harris poured another drink to steady himself. “In Haiti, the toad is a symbol of the zombie.” Harris tossed his whiskey into his throat and avoided looking at his superior. “What do you know about Carry A. Nation?” Harris asked.

“Make it a written report,” his superior said.

Item one: There are real zombies.

The woman could see where Harris was floating above his body. She began to sing to him, low, but he could hear her even over the drums. “Ti bon ange,” she sang. The egg in her hand became a jar made of clay. She held it out so he would come down closer and look. She wanted him to look inside

and not at her, because her shape was not holding. She was not a beautiful woman at all; she was an ugly woman, old and ugly. Her skin folded on her neck like a toad's. Harris found this transformation a little insulting. He remembered how much he loved his wife. He had spoken with her only today. He couldn't wait to get back to his body and home to her. He refused to be seduced by an ugly old woman instead. "Ti bon ange," she sang, and her voice was low and croaked. "Come look in my jar."

Item two: the ti bon ange. Ti bon ange means the little good angel. Every person who has ever lived is made up of five components. These are the z'etoile, the n'ame, the corps cadavre, the gros bon ange, and the ti bon ange. We need concern ourselves here only with the last three.

The gros bon ange is the undifferentiated life force. It binds you to the rest of the living world.

The ti bon ange is your personal life force. The ti bon ange is your individual personality. The corps cadavre is your body.

Harris could see the dark opening of the jar beneath him, a circular pool of black. The circle grew until he could have fit inside it. He didn't know if it was growing because the woman was raising it or if he was slipping toward it like sand sucked into the throat of an hourglass. Either way was perilous. Harris looked for someplace dark to hide. He slid into the bright blackness of the stone toad, resting in the hand of his inert corps cadavre.

The American captain came and knelt on the other side of Harris. "What have we here?"

"DEA." The beautiful woman was back. The American captain wouldn't have even spoken to the ugly old woman. She turned her jar into a wineglass and drank from it innocently.

Item three: creating a zombie. In order to create a zombie, you need to separate the ti bon ange from the gros bon ange. You need to take the ti bon ange out of the corps cadavre and leave the gros bon ange behind.

The bokor accomplishes this with bufotoxin, an extremely potent poison milked from the glands of the *Bufo marinus* toad, and tetrodotoxin, taken from the skin, liver, testicles, and ovaries of the Tetraodontiformes, a family of fish that includes the blowfish. Bufotoxin stimulates cardiac activity. Tetrodotoxin causes neuromuscular paralysis. In proper doses, taken together, they produce a living corpse.

It is critical that the dosage not be too high. Too much poison and you will kill the body, forcing the gros bon ange to abandon it as well.

"I know," the captain said.

The woman wanted the captain to go away so that she could sing to Harris again. "He's had too much to drink."

The captain flicked a finger at Harris's nose. Harris saw him do it. "Undercover is pussy work. I wish just once the DEA would send out an agent with some balls."

The woman was angry and it made her old, but the captain wasn't looking.

"Pompous self-righteous pricks," he said. "The most ineffective agency in the whole U.S. Government, and that's saying something."

The captain looked at her. She was beautiful and drank red wine. Her eyes were as bright as coins. "I wish . . ." said the captain. He moved closer to her. "Shall I tell you what I wish?" he said. Harris

was relieved to see that the captain was not going away, not unless the woman became old before him and this was something she was, apparently, reluctant to do. Perhaps she wanted to surprise the captain with it. It served the captain right, seducing some old crone. The party spun around Harris, dancing couples, drinking couples. The black opalescence of the toad cast a yellow filter over the scene, but Harris could still see, dimly, that inside every woman there, no matter how graceful, no matter how beautiful, there was an old crone, bidding her time.

• • •

“WHAT ARE YOU WRITING?” Harris’s wife asked him. She had come in behind him, too quietly. It made him jump. He leaned forward to block the screen.

“Nothing,” he said. Harris loved his wife and knew that her dear, familiar body did not conceal the figure of a hostile old woman. Hadn’t he always helped with the dishes? Hadn’t he never minded? He was safe with her. Harris wished she wouldn’t sneak up on him.

“What are you reading? Children’s books?” she asked incredulously. She taught British, American, and women’s literature at the junior college. She was, Harris thought, but lovingly, a bit of a snob. In fact, he had a stack of books on his desk—several Japanese pharmacologies, several volumes of Voudon rituals, and a couple of temperance histories. Only one was for children, but this was the one Harris’s wife picked up. *The Girl’s Life of Carry A. Nation*, it said on the spine. “Are you coming to bed?” Harris’s wife asked.

“In a moment.”

She went to bed without him, and she took the book with her.

• • •

FIVE-YEAR-OLD CARRY MOORE sat on the pillared porch and waited impatiently for her mother to come home. Her father had bought her mother a new carriage! Little Carry wanted to see it.

The year was 1851. Behind Carry was the single-story Kentucky log house in which the Moores lived. It sat at the end of a row of althea bushes and cedar trees. The slave cabins were to the right. To the left was the garden: roses, syringa, and sweet Mary. Mary was Carry’s mother’s name.

Carry’s mother was not like other mothers. Shortly after Carry was born, Mary decided her own real name was Victoria. She was not just playing let’s pretend. Mary thought she was really the Queen of England. She would only speak to Carry by appointment. Sometimes this made Carry very sad.

Carry saw one of the slaves, Bill, coming down the road. Bill was very big. He was riding a white horse and was dressed in a fine red hunting jacket. Didn’t he look magnificent? He carried a hunting horn, which made loud noises when you wound it. *Honk! Honk!* The Queen was coming!

Carry could see the carriage behind him. It was the most beautiful carriage she had ever seen. It had curtains and shiny wheels and matched gray horses to pull it. Henry, another slave, was the coachman. He wore a tall silk hat.

The carriage stopped. Mary got out. She was dressed all in gold with a cut-glass tiara. She wanted to knight Farmer Murray with her umbrella. Farmer Murray was their neighbor. He was weeding his onions. Farmer Murray tried to take Mary’s umbrella away.

“Oh, Ma,” said Carry. She ran down the road to her mother. “Take me for a ride.”

Carry’s mother would not even look at her. “Betsey,” said Mary. Betsey was one of the slaves. She was only thirteen years old, but she was a married woman with a baby of her own. “This child is filthy

Take her away and clean her up.”

“Ma!” said little Carry. She wanted so badly to go for a ride.

“We don’t want her in the house,” said Mary. Queens sometimes say *we* when they mean *I*. Mary was using the royal *we*. “She is to sleep with you tonight, Betsey,” said Mary.

Carry didn’t mind sleeping with Betsey, but it meant she had to sleep with Josh, Betsey’s husband too. Josh was mean. “Please don’t make me sleep with Josh,” Carry asked, but her mother had already walked past her.

Sometimes Carry’s mother was not very nice to her, but Carry had lots of friends. They were her slaves! They were Betsey; and Judy, who was very old; and Eliza, who was very pretty; and Henry, who was smart; and Tom, who was nice. Carry ate with them and slept with them. They loved Carry.

One night Henry told a scary story. It was dark in the slave cabin, and they all sat around the fire. The story was about a mean slavemaster who died but came back in chains to haunt his slaves. They all believed in ghosts, which made the story even scarier. The story made Carry shiver.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door. Carry jumped right out of her seat. It was only Mr. Brown the overseer. That made Carry laugh. “We thought you were someone bad coming,” Carry said. Mr. Brown laughed, too. He had just come to talk to Eliza. He took Eliza away to talk to her in his cabin. Judy and Betsey scolded Henry for telling a story that frightened Carry.

Item four: On Christmas Eve, at a party at the house of Señora Villejas, I narrowly survived an attempt by the Panama Defense Forces to turn me into a zombie. The agent of the attack was either a beautiful young Panamanian woman or an old one. She appeared to me as both.

Under ordinary circumstances, the body’s nerve impulses are relayed from the spine under conditions of difference in the sodium and potassium concentrations inside and outside the axon membrane. The unique heterocyclic structure of the tetrodotoxin molecule is selective for the sodium channels. A change in the sodium levels, therefore, alters the effectiveness of the drug. My escape was entirely fortuitous. I had just drunk half a margarita. The recent ingestion of salt was, I believe, all that saved me.

I hardly need point out the usefulness to the drug cartels of a DEA agent entirely under their control.

Harris’s hands were sweaty on the keyboard. He licked a finger to taste the salt. There was a map on the wall beside him, marked with five colored pins. One pin went through the Vatican embassy in Panama. One was in the Senate Bar in Miami. The others continued northward in a more or less direct line. If extended, the line would pass through Washington, D.C.

Item five: the loa. At death, the *ti bon ange* survives and returns to live in another body. Each of us has a direct spiritual lineage back through history. After many such renewals, the individual spirit metamorphoses into disembodied, undifferentiated energy. It joins the cosmic pool of life where the loa reside. When a loa is called back, it returns from this pool as a purified, mythological version of itself. The individual *ti bon ange* has become archetype. The same mythological figures we know as saints of the Catholic Church also appear to the Voudon as loa.

On the evening of December 24, 1989, I convinced several DEA agents to join me in calling forth a loa. We did not call forth a specific spirit by name. We called to our own

spiritual ancestors. We asked for a weapon in our struggle against the drug cartels.

“Send us a DEA agent with balls,” Harris shouted. He was laughing, ecstatic to be in his body again. His hands tingled, his lips were numb, his thighs were warm. The war was over and he was not among the dead. It was Christmas Eve. Ruiz and Casteneda and Martin and several others, ties loosened, suit jackets askew, shoes off, danced the dance with Harris in Señora Villejas’s garden. They threw the contents of their drinks into bushes pruned to the shapes of elephants and camels and giraffes. They crushed flowers with their hands, and Martin had unzipped his pants, re-zipping them so that a white hothouse iris extended from his crotch. Of course, it hadn’t really been the dance. It had only been something they made up.

I would prefer not to identify the men who joined me in this ceremony since the suggestion was entirely my own. I would like to repeat, in my defense, that I was at this time under the influence of bufotoxin, known for its hallucinogenic properties, as well as alcohol. I was not conducting myself soberly. We did not for a moment believe that we would be successful in calling up such a spirit. The entire enterprise was conducted as a drunken lark.

Clinically speaking, I suppose we were trying to protect ourselves from our fear of the Voudonist by making a joke of it. I had just survived an attack on my soul. That I did not believe in this attack, imagining it to be purely hallucinatory, does not change the fact that I was unnerved by it.

In the light of recent events, however, and with the benefit of hindsight, it seems possible to me that we have underestimated the effectiveness of the South American drug cartel Voudon. The Haitian zombie is typically described as dim and slow-witted. Among our top government officials are men who fit this description, men known also to have been in Latin and South America. The DEA should make a list of these men, meet with them on some pretext, and offer them heavily salted foods.

Ruiz was gaping at him. A z’etoile fell from the sky into the garden. It came in the form of a burning rock. It landed in one of the camel bushes and melted the garden.

The shapes of the flowers and trees remained, but now they were made of fire. The DEA agents burst into flames. Harris could see their shapes, too. They continued to dance, stamping their flaming feet into the liquid fire of the lawn, shaking their flickering hands.

A woman emerged from the camel bush, not a real woman but a woman of flame. She grew larger and larger until she was larger than he was, wrapped her fiery arms around him. The air was so hot he couldn’t breathe it. Harris panicked. He fumbled for the toad in his pocket, remembering how he’d escaped into it once already, but she touched it with one finger, melting it into something small and phallic. She laughed and melted it again, shapeless this time, a puddle of black glass.

“Who are you?” Harris asked, and she told him. Then she scorched the bottoms of his feet until he fainted from the pain and had to be carried home.

The next morning, the toad was in his pocket and his feet were healed. Ruiz came to say good-bye. “*Feliz Navidad*,” said Ruiz. He brought a present of candied fruits. “Kiss your wife for me. You luck bastard.”

Harris thanked him for the gift. “Great party,” said Harris carefully.

Ruiz shrugged. “You had a good time,” he agreed. “You were a wild man.”

They said little else. On his way to the airport, Harris directed his taxi past the home of Señora Villejas. The garden was green.

• • •

CARRY'S MOTHER WAS sometimes better when she had new places and people to see. Carry's father, George, had trouble with his real estate business. The Moores moved often, and they grew poorer. When Carry was ten years old, they moved to Cass County, Missouri. Carry missed Kentucky. She missed Bill and Eliza, who had been sold. She missed her beautiful Kentucky house.

But Cass County was an exciting place to live! Just across the border, in Kansas, people who liked having slaves were fighting with people who didn't. The people who liked slavery were called bushwhackers. The people who didn't were called jayhawkers. Kansas had an election to see if they would be a free state with no slaves. Bushwhackers from Missouri took the ballot boxes and said they would count the votes for Kansas.

They said that Kansas had voted to make it illegal to even say that you didn't like slavery. Anyone who said they didn't like slavery could be killed. So many died, people began to call the state "Bleeding Kansas."

This was a hard time for Carry. She went to bed for five years.

Psychologists now say maybe having a mother who thought she was Queen Victoria is what made Carry sick for such a long time. Psychologists are people who study how people feel and behave.

In 1857, her doctor said she had consumption of the bowels.

But George, her father, said her sickness was a punishment for not loving God. He came to see her sometimes in her bedroom. "Why won't you love God, Carry?" he would ask. He would have tears in his eyes. "You are going to die and break my heart," he would say.

Carry didn't want her father to be unhappy. She tried and tried to love God better. Carry thought slavery was a horrible sinner. Sometimes, when she was a little girl, she stole things for her slaves, little bits of ribbon, spoonfuls of sugar. Her own heart, Carry said, was the blackest, foulest place she ever saw.

One day when Carry was twelve, George took her to a revival meeting. "Who will come to Jesus?" the minister asked. Carry said that she would. Carry had a fever. George was afraid she was about to die, so even though it was winter, the minister and George took her right away to an icy creek. The water was cold! Carry waded into it, and the minister pushed her under.

When she came up, Carry said that she had learned to love God. She made her slaves come to her bedroom so she could preach to them. Carry told them that God sent you troubles because He loved you and wanted you to love Him. God loved Carry so much He made her ill. God loved the slaves so much He made them slaves. Now that Carry loved God, she began to get better, and in two more years she was able to get out of bed.

The slaves thought that since they loved God, maybe they didn't need to be slaves anymore. They told George they wanted to go to Lawrence, Kansas, where slavery was illegal. Lawrence, Kansas, was very close to Cass County, Missouri.

George told the slaves they were all moving to Texas instead. Texas was very far from Lawrence, Kansas.

Item six: I don't know where she got the body. A loa usually manifests itself through possession, but I remember no one at the party as large as this woman is reported to be. In addition, I have a memory of the loa materializing out of flame. I need not repeat that I was

under the influence of bufotoxin at the time.

~~Item seven: The loa are frequently religious archetypes. Carry Nation, by her own account, spoke to angels when she was still a child and saw the Holy Ghost at her basement window. She performed two miracles in her life and applied for sainthood, although the application was turned down. Since the DEA agents and I performed only a quasi-Voudon ritual, there is a certain logic to the fact that we got only a quasi-saint in return. The loa I summoned was Carry Amelia Nation. She told me so herself.~~

Item eight: Ask the General why he left the Vatican embassy.

Harris already knew the answer to item eight. Harris had friends among the attorneys on Miami's "white powder bar." It was not that their interests were compatible. It was merely a fact that they saw each other often.

"So what was it?" the attorney told Harris he had asked the General. "Why did you come out? Was it the white room with no windows and no TV? Was it the alcohol deprivation?"

"It was a woman," the General said.

"You spoke to your mistress." The attorney knew this much. She had been in U.S. custody at the time. "She persuaded you?"

"No." The General shuddered violently. His skin turned the color of eggplant. "It was a horrible woman, a huge woman, a woman no man would sleep with." He was, the attorney told Harris, very possibly a homosexual. Hadn't he started dressing in yellow jumpsuits? Hadn't he said that the only people in Panama with balls were the queers and the women? "She sang to me," the General said.

"Heavy metal?" asked the attorney.

"Who Hath Sorrow, Who Hath Woe," said the General.

Harris did not include this in his report. It was an off-the-record conversation. And anyway, the DEA would trust it more if they found it themselves.

Harris pushed the key to print. Only the first part of his report fit on the DEA form. He stapled the other pages to it. He signed the report and poured himself a bedtime sherry.

. . .

THE MOORES DID NOT LIVE in Texas very long. Many of their slaves developed typhoid fever while walking there from Missouri. All their horses died. George tried to farm, but he did not know how. Mary told one of their neighbors that she was confiscating his lands and his title, so he threw all their plows into the river. Soon there was nothing to eat.

George called his slaves together. He told them he had decided to free them. The slaves were frightened to be free with no food. Some of them cried.

It was very hard for the Moores to leave their slaves. But Carry said her father had done the right thing. She believed that slavery was a great wrong. She admired John Brown, a man who had fought for the rights of slaves in Kansas and was hanged for it when Carry was thirteen years old. All her life John Brown was a hero of Carry's. "When I grow up," Carry said, "I will be as brave as John Brown."

Between Texas and Missouri was the Civil War. The Queen's carriage had been sold. When the Moores went back to Missouri, they had to ride in their little wagon. One day the ground shook behind them. They pulled off the road. It was not an earthquake. It was the Confederate cavalry on their way to the Battle of Pea Ridge. After the cavalry came the foot soldiers. It took two days and two nights for all the soldiers to pass them.

On the third day, they heard cannons. The Moores began to ride again, slowly, in the direction of the cannons. ~~On the fourth day, the Confederate Army passed them again. This time they were going south. This time they were running.~~ The Moores drove their little wagon straight through the smoking battlefield of Pea Ridge.

They spent that night in a farmhouse with a woman and five wounded Union soldiers. The soldiers were too badly hurt to be moved, so the woman had offered to nurse them. She told Carry she had five sons of her own. Her sons were soldiers for the South. Carry helped her clean and tend the boys. One of them was dying. Mary knighted them all.

. . .

“ARE YOU ENJOYING the book?” Harris asked, surprised that she was still awake. He took off his clothes and lay down beside her. She had more than her share of the comforter. He had to lie very close to be warm enough, putting an arm across her stomach, feeling her shift her body to fit him.

“Yes, I am,” she said. “I think she’s wonderful.”

“Wonderful?” Harris removed his arm. “What do you mean, ‘wonderful’?”

“I just mean, what a colorful, amazing life. What a story.”

Harris put his arm back. “Yes,” he agreed.

“And what a vivacious, powerful woman. After all she’d been through. What a resilient, remarkable woman.”

Harris removed his arm. “She’s insane,” he suggested stiffly. “She’s a religious zealot with a hatchet. She’s a joke.”

“She’s a superhero,” said Harris’s wife. “Why doesn’t she have her own movie? Look here.” She flipped through *The Girl’s Life* to the collection of photographs in the middle. She skipped over Carry kneeling with her Bible in her jail cell to a more confrontational shot: Carry in battle dress, threatening the photographer with hatchetation. “She even had a costume. She designed it herself, like Batman. See? She made special dresses with pockets on the inside for her rocks and ammunition. She could bust up bars and she could sew like the wind. Can Rambo say as much?”

“I bet she threw like a girl,” said Harris, trying for a light tone to mask the fact that he was genuinely upset.

His wife was not masking. “Her aim was supposed to have been extraordinary,” she said in her schoolteacher tone, a tone that invariably suggested disappointment in him. “Women are cut off from the rich mythological tradition you men have. Women are so hungry for heroines. Name one.”

“What?” said Harris.

“Name a historical heroine. Quickly.”

“Joan of Arc,” said Harris.

“Everyone can get that far. Now name another.”

Harris couldn’t think. She tapped her fingers on the page to let him know that time was passing. He had always admired Morgan Fairchild for her political activism, but he assumed this would be the wrong answer. If he hadn’t been so irritated, he could probably have come up with another name.

“Harriet Tubman,” his wife said. “Donaldina Cameron. Edith Cavell. Yvonne Hakime-Rimpel.”

She really was a snob, but she was also a fair-minded woman. She was not, Harris thought, one of those feminists who simply changed history every time it didn’t suit her. Harris got out of bed and went back to the study. His feet were cold on the bare wood floor. Blankets or no blankets, it would take a long time for his feet to warm up. He fished Carry Nation’s autobiography out of his stack and

brought it back.

“You haven’t read about her daughter,” he said. “There’s nothing about Charlien in the pretty little version for children that you chose to read.” He flipped through his own book until he found the section he wanted. He thrust it in front of his wife’s face, then pulled it back to read it aloud. “‘About this time, my precious child, born of a drunken father and a distracted mother, seemed to conceive a positive dislike for Christianity. I feared for her soul and I prayed to God to send her some bodily affliction which would make her love and serve Him.’”

Harris skimmed ahead in the book with his finger. “A week later, Charlien developed a raging fever,” he told his wife. “She almost died. And when she recovered from that, part of her cheek rotted away. She had a hole in her face. You could see her teeth. But it was a lucky thing. Because then her jaws locked shut, and she wouldn’t have been able to eat if there wasn’t a hole in her cheek to stick a straw through.” He made an effort to lower his voice. “Her jaws stayed locked for eight years.”

There was a long silence, a silence, Harris thought, of reevaluation and regret for earlier, hasty judgments. “That is a very ugly story,” his wife said. She took the autobiography away from him and began to turn the pages.

“Isn’t it?” Harris wiggled his arm underneath her. There was a longer silence. Harris stared at the ceiling. It was a blown popcorn landscape, and sometimes Harris could imagine pictures in it, but he was too tired for this now. He looked instead at the large cobwebs in the corners. Tomorrow Harris would get the broom and knock them down. Then he would get out the vacuum to suck up the bits of ceiling that came down with the cobwebs, the little flakes of milky asbestos, the poisonous snow, the toxic powders. Nothing the vacuum couldn’t handle. And then Harris would need a rag to remove from the furniture the dust the vacuum had flung up. And then the rag would need to be washed. And then . . . it was almost like counting sheep. Harris drifted.

“You can’t possibly think those things happened because of Carry’s prayers,” his wife said.

Harris woke up in amazement. His arm had already gone numb from his wife’s weight. He pulled free. “So now she’s Carry?” Harris asked. “Now we’re on a first-name basis?”

“Look at the religious climate she grew up in. You don’t believe God afflicted a little girl with such a horrible condition because her mother asked Him to?”

“What kind of mother would ask Him to?” said Harris. “That’s the point, isn’t it? What kind of a horrible mother is this?”

Harris’s wife was still reading the autobiography. “Carry worked for years to earn the money for surgery,” she told Harris.

“I’ve read the book,” he said, but there was no stopping her.

“She ignored the doctors who said the case was hopeless. Every time a doctor said the case was hopeless, she went home and earned more money for another doctor.” Harris’s wife pointed out the relevant text.

“I’ve read the damn book.”

“The condition was finally cured, because Carry never gave up.”

“So she says,” said Harris.

His wife regarded him coolly. “I don’t think Carry would lie.”

Harris turned his back on his wife and lay on his side. “It’s very late,” he said curtly. He turned off his light, punched angrily at his pillow. Unable to get comfortable, he flipped from side to side and considered getting himself another sherry. “What’s to like about her? I really don’t understand.” Harris felt that his wife had suddenly, frighteningly, become a different person. They had always been so consensual. Not pathologically so—they had their own opinions and their own values, of course—

but they had also generally liked the same movies, enjoyed the same books. Suddenly she was holding unreasonable opinions. Suddenly she was a stranger.

His wife did not answer, nor did she turn off her own light. "This is an interesting book, too," she said. He heard pages continuing to turn. "There are hymns in the back. Honey, if you dislike Carry Nation so much, why do you have all these books about her?"

Harris, who always told his wife everything, had not yet found just the right moment to tell her that the last time he was in Panama, he had summoned a loa. Harris pretended to be asleep.

"You just don't like her because she had a hatchet," his wife said quietly. "Because she was a big, loud woman with a hatchet. You're threatened by her."

Harris sat bolt upright so that the comforter slid off him. Was that fair? Was that at all fair? Hadn't they had a completely egalitarian, respectful, supportive marriage? And didn't it make him sort of a joke in the DEA for his lack of machismo, and hadn't he never, ever complained to her about this?

"Good night," his wife said evenly, snapping her light off. She had her side of the comforter wound in her fists. It fell just a bit below her shoulders so he could see her neck and the start of her spine, blue in the moonlight, like stitching down her back. She breathed, and her spine stretched like a snake. She pulled the comforter up around her again. She had more than her share of the covers.

Beside the books on her nightstand was the little black toad. Harris had given it to her for Christmas. It stared at him.

And wasn't he, after all, the person who'd brought Carry back? Now he was glad he hadn't told her. Harris's feet were too cold, and he couldn't sleep at all.

. . .

"I'VE READ OVER your report," Harris's superior told him. "I took it up top. It's a little spotty."

Harris conceded as much. "The form was so small," he said.

"And not really designed for exactly this sort of problem." With tone of voice, phrasing, and body language, Harris's superior managed a blatant show of generosity and condescension. Harris's superior was feeling superior. It was not a pretty thing to see. It was not a pretty thing to see in the man who fought so hard to award the Texas Guard a \$2,900,000 federal grant so they could station themselves along the Mexican border disguised as cactus plants and ambush drug traffickers.

Harris looked instead at the map on the wall behind him. It was a map much like the map in Harris's study; the pins were different colors, but the locations were identical. "This is the DEA's official position," his superior said. "The DEA does not believe in zombies. The DEA believes in drugs. One of our agents was inadvertently drugged on Christmas Eve and imagined a great many things. This agent now understands that the incidents in question were hallucinatory.

"If it is ever proved that this agent called forth a loa, then it is the DEA's position that he did so in his leisure time and that the summoning represents the act of an individual and not of an agency.

"The DEA has no knowledge of or connection with the gorilla woman. Her malicious and illegal destruction of private property is a matter for the local police. Do you understand?"

"Unofficially?" asked Harris.

"Unofficially they're reading your report in the men's room for light entertainment," said Harris's superior. "You'll see bits of it on the wall in the second stall." Harris already had. *Item six: I don't know where she got the body.* Scratched with a penknife or the fingernail-cleaning attachment on a clipper, just above the toilet paper dispenser.

His superior leaned forward to engage in actual eye contact with Harris. It took Harris by surprise;

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