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In The Night, In The Dark

A Note on the Appreciation of Weird Fiction

No one needs to be told about what is weird. It is something that becomes known in the early stages of every life. With the very first nightmare or a childhood bout of fever, an initiation takes place into a universal, and at the same time very secret society. Membership in this society is renewed by a lifelong series of encounters with the weird, which may assume a variety of forms and wears many faces. Some of these forms and faces are familiar only to oneself, while others are recognized by practically everybody, whether they will admit it or not.

Weird experience is in fact so prevalent that it is taken profoundly for granted, lying unnoticed in the back rooms of a person's life and even further removed in the life of the world at large. But it is always there, waiting to be recalled in those special moments that are all its own. These moments are for the most part rather brief and relatively rare: the intense weirdness of a dream fades upon waking and is often utterly forgotten; the twisted thoughts of a delirium soon uncoil themselves upon recovery from illness; even a first-hand, wide-awake confrontation with the extraordinary may lose the shocking strangeness it initially possessed and ultimately consign itself to one of those back rooms, those waiting rooms of the weird.

So the point is clear: experience of the weird is a fundamental and inescapable fact of life. And, like all such facts, it eventually finds its way into forms of artistic expression. One of those forms has been termed, of all things, weird fiction. The stories that constitute this literary genre are repositories of the weird; they are something like those remote rooms where the dreams and deliriums and spectral encounters are kept, except that they may be visited at any time and thus make up a vast museum where the weird is on permanent display.

But does anyone need to be told what weird fiction is all about, anymore than an introduction is required to the weird itself? It is strongly possible that the answer to this question is yes. The reason for this answer is that weird fiction is not something experienced in the same way by everyone: it is not a nightmare or a fit of fever; certainly it is not a meeting in the mist with something that is not supposed to be. It is only a type of story, and a story is an echo or a transmutation of experience, which is also an experience in its own right, different from any other in the way it happens to someone and in the way it is felt. It seems probable, then, that the experience of weird stories can be enhanced and illuminated by focusing on their special qualities, their various forms and many faces.

For example, there is a well-known story that goes as follows: A man awakes in the darkness and reaches over for his eyeglasses on the nightstand. The eyeglasses are placed in his hand.

This is the bare bones of so many tales that have caused readers to shiver with a sense of the weird. You might simply accept this shiver and pass on to other things; you might even try to suppress the full power of this episode if it be too vividly conceived. On the other hand, it is possible, and considered by some to be desirable, to achieve the optimal receptiveness to the incident in question, to open up to it in order to allow its complete effect and suggestiveness to take hold.

This is not a matter of deliberate effort; on the contrary, how much more difficult it is to put this scene out of one's mind, especially if such a story is read at the proper time and under proper—circumstances. Then it happens that a reader's own mind is filled with the darkness of that room in which someone, anyone, awakes. Then it happens that the inside of a reader's skull becomes the shadow-draped walls of that room and the whole drama is contained in a place from which there is no escape.

Stripped-down as this tale is, it nonetheless does not lack for plot. There is the most natural of beginnings, the perfect action of the middle, and a curtain-closer of an end that drops down darkness upon darkness. There is a protagonist and an antagonist and a meeting between them which, abrupt as it is, remains crystalline in its fateful nature. No epilogue is required to settle the issue that the man has awakened to something that has been waiting for him, and for no one else, in that dark room. And the weirdness of it, looked full in the face, can be quite affecting.

Once again: A man awakes in the darkness and reaches over for his eyeglasses on the nightstand. The eyeglasses are placed in his hand.

At this point it should be recalled that there is an old identity between the words "weird" and "fate" (of which one notable modern instance is Clark Ashton Smith's "The Weird of Avoosl Wuthoqqan," the fate of the title character being one that is prophesied by a beggar and consummated by a famished monstrosity). And this old pair of synonyms insists on the resurrection of an old philosophy, even the oldest - that of fatalism.

To perceive, even if mistakenly, that all one's steps have been heading toward a prearranged appointment, to realize one has come face to face with what seems to have been waiting all along - this is the necessary framework, the supporting skeleton of the weird. Of course, fatalism, as a philosophical slant on human existence, has long since been out of fashion, eclipsed by a taste for indeterminacy and a mock-up of an "open-ended" universe. It nevertheless happens that certain ordeals in the lives of actual people may reinstate an ancient, irrational view of things. Such ordeals always strike one with their strangeness, their digression from the normal flow of events, and often provoke a universal protest: "Why me?" Be sure that this is not a question but an outcry. The person who screams it has been instilled with an astonishing suspicion that he, in fact, has been the perfect subject for a very specific "weird," a tailor-made fate, and that a prior engagement, in all its weirdness, was fulfilled at the appointed time and place.

No doubt this queer sense of destiny is an illusion. And the illusion is created by the same stuff that fleshes out the skeletal framework of the weird. This is the stuff of dreams, of fever, of unheard-of encounters; it clings to the bones of the weird and fills out its various forms and fills in its many faces. Because in order for the illusion of fate to be most deeply established, it must be connected to some matter that is out of the ordinary, something that was not considered part of the existential plan, though in retrospect cannot be seen otherwise.

After all, no weird revelation is involved when someone sees a dime on the sidewalk, picks up the coin, and pockets it. Even if this is not an everyday occurrence for a given individual, it remains without any overtones or implications of the fateful, the extraordinary. But suppose this coin has some unusual feature that, upon investigation, makes it a token of considerable wealth. Suddenly a great change, or at least the potential for change, enters into someone's life; suddenly the expected course of things threatens to veer off toward wholly unforeseen destinations.

It could seem that the coin might have been overlooked as it lay on the pavement, that its finder might easily have passed it by as others surely had done. But whoever has found this unusual object and discovers its significance soon realizes something: he has been lured into a trap and is finding it difficult to imagine that things might have been different. The former prospects of his life become distant and can now be seen to have been tentative in any case: what did he ever really know about the path his life was on before he came upon that coin? Obviously very little. But what does he know about such things now that they have taken a rather melodramatic turn? No more than he ever did, which becomes even more apparent when he eventually falls victim to a spectral numismatist who wants his rare coin returned. Then our finder-keeper comes into a terrible knowledge about the unknowable, the mysterious, the truly weird aspect of his existence - the extraordinary fact of the universe and of one's being in it. Paradoxically, it is the uncommon event that may best demonstrate the common predicament.

At the same time the weird is, to repeat, a relatively elusive, unwonted phenomenon making its appearance in the moments that upset the routine and that are most willingly forgotten. As it happens in real life, the nightmare serves primarily to impart an awareness of what it means to be awake; the unfavorable diagnosis most often merely offers a lesson in the definition of health; and the supernatural itself cannot exist without the predominant norms of nature.

In fiction, however, those periods may be prolonged in which someone is trapped in an extraordinary fate. The entrapments presented in weird fiction may go so far as to be absolute, a full illustration of what was always in the works and only awaited discovery. Because the end of any weird story is also quite often a definitive end for the characters involved. Thus, it only remains for the reader to appreciate a foregone conclusion, a fate that is presented, in a manner of speaking, at arm's length.

The principal effect of weird fiction is a sense of what might be called macabre unreality: "macabre" because of that skeleton of fate, which points its exposed finger in the direction of doom; "unreal" because of the extraordinary habiliments of that fate, a flapping garb of mystery which will never uncover its secret. The double sense of macabre unreality attains its most piercing intensity in the enigma that is at the center of every great weird story. And it is this quality that forms the focus of one's appreciation of the weird in fiction.

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By definition the weird story is based on an enigma that can never be dispelled if it be true to the weird experience - which may occur entirely in an author's imagination - that serves as its only justifiable provenance. While this enigma will definitely exude an ambiance of the graveyard, it menaces as much by its unreal nature, its disorienting strangeness, as by its connections with the great world of death. Such a narrative scheme is usefully contrasted with that of the realistic "suspense" story, in which a character is threatened with a familiar, often purely physical doom. Whatever identifiable manifestations and phenomena are presented in a weird story - from traditional ghosts to the scientific nightmares of the modern age - there remains at the heart of the tale a kind of abyss from which the weird emerges and into which it cannot be pursued for purposes of analysis or resolution. Some enigmatic quality is thereby preserved in these tales of nameless and terrible unknowns. Like the finder of that "valuable" coin, the man who awakes in the night and reaches out for his eyeglasses is brought into proximity with an unknown, on this occasion in the form of a thing without a name. This is an extreme instance, perhaps the purest example, of a plot that recurs

throughout the history of weird fiction.

Another, more distinguished, example of the enigmatic plot of a weird tale is that paradigm of weirdness - H. P. Lovecraft's "The Colour out of Space." In this story a complex of phenomena and events is set off by an intruding force of unknown origin and nature that comes to settle itself in a domain well at the center of the narrative and from there proceeds to rule like a faceless tyrant over every mechanism of the plot. When it finally makes its exit toward the end of the story, neither the characters involved nor the reader knows anything more about this visitor than they did at the beginning. This last statement is not entirely factual: what everyone quite certainly learns about the "colour" is that contact with this apparition from the stars is an introduction to that macabre unreality that is both a commonplace of the weird and yet also an experience to which one never grows accustomed - and with which one is never at ease.

Still other examples of the all-important enigma on which the great weird stories are founded could be proffered, from E. T. A. Hoffman's "The Sandman" to Ramsey Campbell's "The Scar," but the point is evident by now? what is truly weird in both literature and life only carries a minimum of flesh on its bones - enough to allow certain issues to be raised and evoke the properly gruesome response but never so much that the shredded fingers stretched out to us turn into the customary gladhand of everyday affairs.

Admittedly, the extraordinary as a shaper of one's fate -that is, one's inevitable death - is a rather ostentatious and, more often than not, vulgar device for representing human existence. However, weird fiction seeks not to place before us the routine procedures most of our kind follow on the way to the grave but to recover some of the amazement we sometimes feel, and should probably feel more often, at existence in its essential aspect. To reclaim this sense of amazement at the monumentally macabre unreality of life is to awaken to the weird - just as the man in the room awakens in the perpetual hell of his brief story, shakes off his sleep-dulled sensibility, and reaches out to that unknown thing in the darkness. Now, even without his eyeglasses, he can truly see. And perhaps, if only for that moment of artificial terror that weird fiction affords, so can the rest of us.

The Medusa

I

Before leaving his room Lucian Dregler transcribed a few stray thoughts into his notebook.

The sinister, the terrible never deceive: the state in which they leave us is always one of enlightenment. And only this condition of vicious insight allows us a full grasp of the world,

all things considered, just as a frigid melancholy grants us full possession of ourselves.

We may hide from horror only in the heart of horror.

Could I be so unique among dreamers, having courted the Medusa - my first and oldest companion - to the exclusion of all others? Would I have her respond to this sweet talk?

Relieved to have these fragments safely on the page rather than in some precarious mental notebook, where they were likely to become smudged or altogether effaced, Dregler slipped into an old overcoat, locked the door of his room behind him, and exited down a series of staircases at the back of his apartment building. An angular pattern of streets and alleys was his usual route to a certain place he now and then visited, though for time's sake - in order to waste it that is - he chose to stray from his course at several points. He was meeting an acquaintance he had not seen in quite a while.

The place was very dark, though no more than in past experience, and much more populated than it first appeared to Dregler's eyes. He paused at the doorway, slowly but unsystematically removing his gloves, while his vision worked with the faint halos of illumination offered by lamps of tarnished metal, which were spaced so widely along the walls that the light of one lamp seemed barely to link up and propagate that of its neighbor. Gradually, then, the darkness sifted away, revealing the shapes beneath it: a beaming forehead with the glitter of wire-rimmed eyeglasses below, cigarette-holding and beringed fingers lying asleep on a table, shoes of shining leather which ticked lightly against Dregler's own as he now passed cautiously through the room. At the back stood a column of stairs coiling up to another level, which was more an appended platform, a little brow of balcony, than a section of the establishment proper. This level was caged in at its brink with a railing constructed of the same rather wiry and fragile material as the stairway, giving this area the appearance of a makeshift scaffolding. Rather slowly, Dregler ascended the stairs.

"Good evening, Joseph," Dregler said to the man seated at the table beside an unusually tall and narrow window. Joseph Gler stared for a moment at the old gloves Dregler had tossed onto the table.

"You still have those same old gloves," he replied to the greeting, then lifted his gaze, grinning: "And that overcoat!"

Gler stood up and the two men shook hands. Then they both sat down and Gler, indicating the empty glass between them on the table, asked Dregler if he still drank brandy. Dregler nodded, and Gler said "Coming up" before leaning over the rail a little ways and holding out two fingers in view of someone in the shadows below.

"Is this just a sentimental symposium, Joseph?" inquired the now uncoated Dregler.

"In part. Wait until we've got our drinks, so you can properly congratulate me."

Dregler nodded again, scanning Gleer's face without any observable upsurge in curiosity. A former colleague from Dregler's teaching days, Gleer had always possessed an open zest for minor intrigues, academic or otherwise, and an addiction to the details of ritual and protocol, anything preformulated and with precedent. He also had a liking for petty secrets, as long as he was among those privy to them. For instance, in discussions - no matter if the subject was philosophy or old films - Gleer took an obvious delight in revealing, usually at some advanced stage of the dispute, that he had quite knowingly supported some treacherously absurd school of thought. His perversity confessed, he would then assist, and even surpass, his opponent in demolishing what was left of his old position, supposedly for the greater glory of disinterested intellects everywhere. But at the same time, Dregler saw perfectly well what Gleer was up to. And though it was not always easy to play into Gleer's hands, it was this secret counter-knowledge that provided Dregler's sole amusement in these mental contests for

Nothing that asks for your arguments is worth arguing, just as nothing that solicits your belief is worth believing. The real and the unreal lovingly cohabit in our terror, the only "sphere" that matters.

Perhaps secretiveness, then, was the basis of the two men's relationship, a flawed secretiveness in Gleer's case, a consummate one in Dregler's.

Now here he was, Gleer, keeping Dregler in so-called suspense. His eyes, Dregler's, were aimed at the tall narrow window, beyond which were the bare upper branches of an elm that twisted with spectral movements under the floodlights fixed high upon the outside wall. But every few moments Dregler glanced at Gleer, whose baby like features were so remarkably unchanged: the cupid's bow lips, the cookie-dough cheeks, the tiny gray eyes now almost buried within the flesh of a face too often screwed up with laughter.

A woman with two glasses on a cork-bottomed tray was standing over the table. While Gleer paid for the drinks, Dregler lifted his and held it in the position of a lazy salute. The woman who had brought the drinks looked briefly and without expression at toastmaster Dregler. Then she went away and Dregler, with false ignorance, said: "To your upcoming or recently passed event, whatever it may be or have been."

"I hope it will be for life this time, thank you, Lucian."

"What is this, quintus?"

"Quartus, if you don't mind."

"Of course, my memory is as bad as my powers of observation. Actually I was looking for something shining on your finger, when I should have seen the shine of your eyes. No ring, though, from the bride?"

Gleer reached into the open neck of his shirt and pulled out a length of delicate chainwork, dangling

the end of which was a tiny rose-colored diamond in a plain silver setting.

"Modern innovations," he said neutrally, replacing the chain and stone. "The moderns must have them, I suppose, but marriage is still marriage."

"Here's to the Middle Ages," Dregler said with unashamed weariness.

"And the middle-aged," refrained Gler.

The men sat in silence for some moments. Dregler's eyes moved once more around that shadowy loft where a few tables shared the light of a single lamp. Most of its dim glow backfired onto the wall, revealing the concentric coils of the wood's knotty surface. Taking a calm sip of his drink, Dregler waited.

"Lucian," Gler finally began in a voice so quiet that it was nearly inaudible.

"I'm listening," Dregler assured him.

"I didn't ask you here just to commemorate my marriage. It's been almost a year, you know. Not that that would make any difference to you."

Dregler said nothing, encouraging Gler with receptive silence.

"Since that time," Gler continued, "my wife and I have both taken leaves from the university and have been traveling, mostly around the Mediterranean. We've just returned a few days ago. Would you like another drink? You went through that one rather quickly."

"No, thank you. Please go on," Dregler requested very politely.

After another gulp of brandy, Gler continued. "Lucian, I've never understood your fascination with what you call the Medusa. I'm not sure I care to, though I've never told you that. But through no deliberate efforts of my own, let me emphasize, I think I can further your, I guess you could say, pursuit. You are still interested in the matter, aren't you?"

"Yes, but I'm too poor to afford Peloponnesian jaunts like the one you and your wife have just returned from. Was that what you had in mind?"

"Not at all. You needn't even leave town, which is the strange part, the real beauty of it. It's very complicated how I know what I know. Wait a second. Here, take this."

Gler now produced an object he had earlier stowed away somewhere in the darkness, laying it on the table. Dregler stared at the book. It was bound in a rust-colored cloth and the gold lettering across its spine was flaking away. From what Dregler could make out of the remaining fragments of the letters, the title of the book seemed to be: *Electro-Dynamics for the Beginner*.

"What is this supposed to be?" he asked Gler.

"Only a kind of passport, meaningless in itself. This is going to sound ridiculous - how I know it! - but you want to bring the book to this establishment," said Gler, placing a business card upon the book's

front cover, "and ask the owner how much he'll give you for it. I know you go to these shops all the time. Are you familiar with it?"

"Only vaguely," replied Dregler.

The establishment in question, as the business card read, was Brothers' Books: Dealers in Rare and Antiquarian Books, Libraries and Collections Purchased, Large Stock of Esoteric Sciences and Civil War, No Appointment Needed, Member of Manhattan Society of Philosophical Bookdealers, Benjamin Brothers, Founder and Owner.

"I'm told that the proprietor of this place knows you by your writings," said Gleer, adding in an ambiguous monotone: "He thinks you're a real philosopher."

Dregler gazed at length at Gleer, his long fingers abstractly fiddling with the little card. "Are you telling me that the Medusa is supposed to be a book?" he said.

Gleer stared down at the table-top and then looked up. "I'm not telling you anything I do not know for certain, which is not a great deal. As far as I know, it could still be anything you can imagine, and perhaps already have. Of course you can take this imperfect information however you like, as I'm sure you will. If you want to know more than I do, then pay a visit to this bookstore."

"Who told you to tell me this?" Dregler calmly asked.

"It seems better if I don't say anything about that, Lucian. Might spoil the show, so to speak."

"Very well," said Dregler, pulling out his wallet and inserting the business card into it. He stood up and began putting on his coat. "Is that all, then? I don't mean to be rude but - "

"Why should you be any different from your usual self? But one more thing I should tell you. Please sit down. Now listen to me. We've known each other a long time, Lucian. And I know how much this means to you. So whatever happens, or doesn't happen, I don't want you to hold me responsible. I've only done what I thought you yourself would want me to do. Well, tell me if I was right."

Dregler stood up again and tucked the book under his arm. "Yes, I suppose. But I'm sure we'll be seeing each other. Good night, Joseph."

"One more drink," offered Gleer.

"No, good night," answered Dregler.

As he started away from the table, Dregler, to his embarrassment, nearly rapped his head against a massive wooden beam which hung hazardously low in the darkness. He glanced back to see if Gleer had noticed this clumsy mishap. And after merely a single drink! But Gleer was looking the other way, gazing out the window at the tangled tendrils of the elm and the livid complexion cast upon it by the floodlights fixed high upon the outside wall.

For some time Dregler thoughtlessly observed the wind-blown trees outside before turning away to stretch out on his bed, which was a few steps from the window of his room. Beside him now was a copy of his first book, Meditations on the Medusa. He picked it up and read piecemeal from its pages

The worshipants of the Medusa, including those who clog pages with "insights" and interpretations such as these, are the most hideous citizens of this earth - and the most numerous. But how many of them know themselves as such? Conceivably there may be an inner cult of the Medusa, but then again: who could dwell on the existence of such beings for the length of time necessary to round them up for execution?

It is possible that only the dead are not in league with the Medusa. We, on the other hand, are her allies - but always against ourselves. How does one become her companion... and live?

We are never in danger of beholding the Medusa. For that to happen she needs our consent. But a far greater disaster awaits those who know the Medusa to be gazing at them and long to reciprocate in kind. What better definition of a marked man: one who "has eyes" for the Medusa whose eyes have a will and a fate of their own.

Ah, to be a thing without eyes. What a break to be born a stone!

Dregler closed the book and then replaced it on one of the shelves across the room. On that, same overcrowded shelf, leather and cloth pressing against cloth and leather, was a fat folder stuffed with loose pages. Dregler brought this back to the bed with him and began rummaging through it. Over the years the file had grown enormously, beginning as a few random memoranda - clippings, photographs, miscellaneous references which Dregler copied out by hand - and expanding into a storehouse of infernal serendipity, a testament of terrible coincidence. And the subject of every entry in this inadvertent encyclopaedia was the Medusa herself.

Some of the documents fell into a section marked "Facetious," including a comic book (which Dregler picked off a drugstore rack) that featured the Medusa as a benevolent superheroine who used her hideous powers only on equally hideous foes in a world without beauty. Others belonged under the heading of "Irrelevant," where was placed a three-inch strip from a decades-old sports page lauding the winning season of "Mr (sic) Medusa." There was also a meager division of the file which had no official designation, but which Dregler could not help regarding as items of "True Horror." Prominent among these was a feature article from a British scandal sheet: a photoless chronicle of a man's year-long suspicion that his wife was periodically possessed by the serpent-headed demon, a senseless little guignol which terminated with the wife's decapitation while she lay sleeping one night and the subsequent incarceration of a madman.

One of the least creditable subclasses of the file consisted of pseudo-data taken from the less legitimate propagators of mankind's knowledge: renegade "scientific" journals, occult-anthropology newsletters, and publications of various centers of sundry studies. Contributions to the file from periodicals such as *The Excentaur*, a back issue of which Dregler stumbled across in none other than Brothers' Books, were collectively categorized as "Medusa and Medusans: Sightings and Material Explanations." An early number of this publication included an article which attributed the birth of the Medusa, and of all life on Earth, to one of many extraterrestrial visitors, for whom this planet had been a sort of truckstop or comfort station en route to other locales in other galactic systems.

All such enlightening finds Dregler relished with a surly joy, especially those proclamations from the high priests of the human mind and soul, who invariably relegated the Medusa to a psychic underworld where she served as the image par excellence of romantic panic. But unique among the curiosities he cherished was an outburst of prose whose author seemed to follow in Dregler's own

footsteps: a man after his own heart. "Can we be delivered," this writer rhetorically queried, "from the 'life force' as symbolized by Medusa? Can this energy, if such a thing exists, be put to death, crushed? Can we, in the arena of our being, come stomping out -gladiator-like - net and trident in hand, and, poking and swooping, pricking and swishing, torment this soulless and hideous demon into an excruciating madness, and, finally, annihilate it to the thumbs-down delight of our nerves and to our soul's deafening applause?" Unfortunately, however, these words were written in the meanest spirit of sarcasm by a critic who parodically reviewed Dregler's own Meditations on the Medusa when it first appeared twenty years earlier.

But Dregler never sought out reviews of his books, and the curious thing, the amazing thing, was that this item, like all the other bulletins and ponderings on the Medusa, had merely fallen into his hands unbidden. (In a dentist's office, of all places.) Though he had read widely in the lore of and commentary on the Medusa, none of the material in his rather haphazard file was attained through the normal channels of research. None of it was gained in an official manner, none of it foreseen. In the fewest words, it was all a gift of unforeseen circumstances, strictly unofficial matter.

But what did this prove, exactly, that he continued to be offered these pieces to his puzzle? It proved nothing, exactly or otherwise, and was merely a side-effect of his preoccupation with a single subject. Naturally he would be alert to its intermittent cameos on the stage of daily routine. This was normal. But although these "finds" proved nothing, rationally, they always did suggest more to Dregler's imagination than to his reason, especially when he pored over the collective contents of these archives devoted to his oldest companion.

It was, in fact, a reference to this kind of imagination for which he was now searching as he lay on his bed. And there it was, a paragraph he had once copied in the library from a little yellow book entitled Things Near and Far. "There is nothing in the nature of things," the quotation ran, "to prevent a man from seeing a dragon or a griffin, a gorgon or a unicorn. Nobody as a matter of fact has seen a woman whose hair consisted of snakes, nor a horse from whose forehead a horn projected; though very early man probably did see dragons - known to science as pterodactyls - and monsters more improbable than griffins. At any rate, none of these zoological fancies violates the fundamental laws of the intellect; the monsters of heraldry and mythology do not exist, but there is no reason in the nature of things nor in the laws of the mind why they should not exist."

It was therefore in line with the nature of things that Dregler suspended all judgements until he could pay a visit to a certain bookstore.

II

It was late the following afternoon, after he emerged from daylong doubts and procrastinations, that Dregler entered a little shop squeezed between a gray building and a brown one. Nearly within arm's reach of each other, the opposing walls of the shop were solid with books. The higher shelves were attainable only by means of a very tall ladder, and the highest shelves were apparently not intended for access. Back numbers of old magazines - Blackwood's, The Spectator, the London and American Mercurys - were stacked in plump, orderless piles by the front window, their pulpy covers dying in the sunlight. Missing pages from forgotten novels were stuck forever to a patch of floor or curled up in corners. Dregler noted page two-hundred-and-two of The Second Staircase at his feet, and he could not help feeling a sardonic sympathy for the anonymous pair of eyes confronting an unexpected dead end in the narrative of that old mystery. Then again, he wondered, how many thousands of these volumes

had already been browsed for the last time. This included, of course, the one he held in his own hand and for which he now succumbed to a brief and absurd sense of protectiveness. Dregler blamed his friend Gler for this subtle aspect of what he suspected was a farce of far larger and cruder design.

Sitting behind a low counter in the telescopic distance of the rear of the store, a small and flabby man with wire-rimmed eyeglasses was watching him. When Dregler approached the counter and lay the book upon it, the man - Benjamin Brothers - hopped alertly to his feet.

"Help you?" he asked. The bright tone of his voice was the formal and familiar greeting of an old servant.

Dregler nodded, vaguely recognizing the little man from a previous visit to his store some years ago. He adjusted the book on the counter, simply to draw attention to it, and said: "I don't suppose it was worth my trouble to bring this sort of thing here."

The man smiled politely. "You're correct in that, sir. Old texts like that, worth practically nothing to no one. Now down there in my basement," he said, gesturing toward a narrow doorway, "I've got literally thousands of things like that. Other things too, you know. The Bookseller's Trade called it 'Benny's Treasurehouse.' But maybe you're just interested in selling books today."

"Well, it seems that as long as I'm here..."

"Help yourself, Dr Dregler," the man said warmly as Dregler started toward the stairway. Hearing his name, Dregler paused and nodded back at the bookdealer; then he proceeded down the stairs.

Dregler now recalled this basement repository, along with the three lengthy flights of stairs needed to reach its unusual depths. The bookstore at street-level was no more than a messy little closet in comparison to the expansive disorder down below: a cavern of clutter, all heaps and mounds, with bulging tiers of bookshelves laid out according to no easily observable scheme. It was a universe constructed solely of the softly jagged brickwork of books. But if the Medusa was a book, how would he ever find it in this chaos? And if it was not, what other definite form could he expect to encounter of a phenomenon which he had avoided precisely defining all these years, one whose most nearly exact emblem was a hideous woman with a head of serpents?

For some time he merely wandered around the crooked aisles and deep niches of the basement. Every so often he took down some book whose appearance caught his interest, unwedging it from an indistinct mass of battered spines and rescuing it before years rooted to the same spot caused its words to mingle with others among the ceaseless volumes of "Benny's Treasurehouse," fusing them all into a babble of senseless, unseen pages. Opening the book, he leaned a threadbare shoulder against the towering, filthy stacks. And after spending very little time in the cloistered desolation of that basement, Dregler found himself yawning openly and unconsciously scratching himself, as if he were secluded in some personal sanctum.

But suddenly he became aware of this assumption of privacy which had instilled itself in him, and the feeling instantly perished. Now his sense of a secure isolation was replaced, at all levels of creaturely response, by its opposite. For had he not written that "personal well-being serves solely to excavate within your soul a chasm which waits to be filled by a landslide of dread, an empty mold whose peculiar dimensions will one day manufacture the shape of your unique terror?"

Whether or not it was the case, Dregler felt that he was no longer, or perhaps never was, alone in the chaotic treasure-house. ~~But he continued acting as if he were, omitting only the yawns and the~~ scratchings. Long ago he had discovered that a mild flush of panic was a condition capable of seasoning one's more tedious moments. So he did not immediately attempt to discourage this, probably delusory, sensation. However, like any state dependent upon the play of delicate and unfathomable forces, Dregler's mood or intuition was subject to unexpected metamorphoses.

And when Dregler's mood or intuition passed into a new phase, his surroundings followed close behind: both he and the treasurehouse simultaneously crossed the boundary which divides playful panics from those of a more lethal nature. But this is not to say that one kind of apprehension was more excusable than the other; they were equally opposed to the likings of logic. ("Regarding dread, intensity in itself is no assurance of validity.") So it meant nothing, necessarily, that the twisting aisles of books appeared to be tightening around the suspicious bibliophile, that the shelves now looked more conspicuously swollen with their soft and musty stock, that faint shufflings and shadows seemed to be frolicking like a fugue through the dust and dimness of the underground treasurehouse. Could he, as he turned the next corner, be led to see that which should not be seen?

The next corner, as it happened, was the kind one is trapped in rather than turns - a cul-de-sac of bookshelves forming three walls which nearly reached the rafters of the ceiling. Dregler found himself facing the rear wall like a bad schoolboy in punishment. He gazed up and down its height as if contemplating whether or not it was real, pondering if one could simply pass through it once one had conquered the illusion of its solidity. Just as he was about to turn and abandon this nook, something lightly brushed against his left shoulder. With involuntary suddenness he pivoted in this direction, only to feel the same airy caress now squarely across his back. Continuing counterclockwise, he executed one full revolution until he was standing and staring at someone who was standing and staring back at him from the exact spot where he, a mere moment before, had been standing.

The woman's high-heeled boots put her face at the same level as his, while her turban-like hat made her appear somewhat taller. It was fastened on the right side, Dregler's left, - with a metal clasp studded with watery pink stones. From beneath her hat a few strands of straw-colored hair sprouted onto an unwrinkled forehead. Then a pair of tinted eyeglasses, then a pair of unlipsticked lips, and finally a high-collared coat which descended as a dark, elegant cylinder down to her boots. She calmly withdrew a pad of paper from one of her pockets, tore off the top page, and presented it to Dregler.

"Sorry if I startled you," it said.

After reading the note, Dregler looked up at the woman and saw that she was gently chopping her hair against her neck, but only a few times and merely to indicate some vocal disability. Laryngitis, wondered Dregler, or something chronic? He examined the note once again and observed the name, address, and telephone number of a company that serviced furnaces and air-conditioners. This, of course, told him nothing.

The woman then tore off a second pre-written message from the pad and pressed it into Dregler's already paper-filled palm, smiling at him very deliberately as she did so. (How he wanted to see what her eyes were doing!) She shook his hand a little before taking away hers and making a silent, scentless exit. So what was that reek Dregler detected in the air when he stared down at the note, which simply read: "Regarding M."

And below this word-and-a-half message was an address, and below that was a specified time on the following day. The handwriting was nicely formed, the most attractive Dregler had ever seen.—

In the light of the past few days, Dregler almost expected to find still another note waiting for him when he returned home. It was folded in half and stuffed underneath the door to his apartment. "Dear Lucian," it began, "just when you think things have reached their limit of ridiculousness, they become more ridiculous still. In brief - we've been had! Both of us. And by my wife, no less, along- with a friend of hers. (A blond-haired anthropology prof whom I think you may know, or know of; at any rate she knows you, or at least your writings, maybe both.) I'll explain the whole thing when we meet, which I'm afraid won't be until my wife and I get back from another "jaunt." (Eyeing some more islands, this time in the Pacific.)

"I was thinking that you might be skeptical enough not to go to the bookstore, but after finding you not at home I feared the worst. Hope you didn't have your hopes up, which I don't think has ever happened to you anyway. No harm done, in either case. The girls explained to me that it was a quasi-scientific hoax they were perpetrating, a recondite practical joke. If you think you were taken in, you can't imagine how I was. Unbelievable how real they made the whole ruse seem to me. But if you got as far as the bookstore, you know by now that the punchline to the joke was a pretty weak one. The whole point, as I was told, was merely to stir your interest just enough to get you to perform some mildly ridiculous act. I'm curious to know how Mr B. Bros, reacted when the distinguished author of *Meditations on the Medusa* and other ruminative volumes presented him with a hopelessly worthless old textbook.

"Seriously, I hope it caused you no embarrassment, and both of us, all three of us, apologize for wasting your time. See you soon, tanned and pacified by a South Sea Eden. And we have plans for making the whole thing up to you, that's a promise."

The note was signed, of course, by Joseph Gleer.

But Gleer's confession, though it was evident to Dregler that he himself believed it, was no more convincing than his "lead" on a Bookstore Medusa. Because this lead, which Dregler had not credited for a moment, led further than Gleer, who no longer credited it, had knowledge of. So it seemed that while his friend had now been placated by a false illumination, Dregler was left to suffer alone the effects of a true state of unknowing. And whoever was behind this hoax, be it a true one or false, knew the minds of both men very well.

Dregler took all the notes he had received that day, paper-clipped them together, and put them into a new section of his massive file. He tentatively labelled this section: "Personal Confrontations with the Medusa, Either Real or Apparent."

III

The address given to Dregler the day before was not too far for him to walk, restive peripatetic that he was. But for some reason he felt rather fatigued that morning, so he hired a taxi to speed him across a drizzle-darkened city. Settling into the spacious dilapidation of the taxi's back seat, he took note of a few things. Why, he wondered, were the driver's glasses, which every so often filled the rear-view mirror, even darker than the day? Did she make a practice of thus "admiring" all her passengers? And

was this back-seat debris - the "L"-shaped cigarette butt on the door's armrest, the black apple core on the floor - supposed to serve as objects of his admiration?

Dregler questioned a dozen other things about that routine ride, that drenched day, and the city outside where umbrellas multiplied like mushrooms in the grayness, until he grew satisfied with his lack of a sense of well-being. Earlier he was concerned that his flow of responses that day would not be those of a man who was possibly about to confront the Medusa. He was apprehensive that he might look on the ride and its destination with lively excitement or as an adventure of some kind; in brief, he feared that his attitude would prove, to a certain extent, to be one of insanity. To be sane, he held, was either to be sedated by melancholy or activated by hysteria, two responses which are "always and equally warranted for those of sound insight." All others were irrational, merely symptoms of imaginations left idle, of memories out of work. And above these mundane responses, the only elevation allowable, the only valid transcendence, was a sardonic one: a bliss that annihilated the visible universe with jeers of dark joy, a mindful ecstasy. Anything else in the way of "mysticism" was a sign of deviation or distraction, and a heresy to the obvious.

The taxi turned onto a block of wetted brownstones, stopping before a tiny streetside lawn overhung by the skeletal branches of two baby birch trees. Dregler paid the driver, who expressed no gratitude whatever for the tip, and walked quickly through the drizzle toward a golden-bricked building with black numbers - two-oh-two — above a black door with a brass knob and knocker. Reviewing the information on the crumpled piece of paper he took from his pocket, Dregler pressed the glowing bell button. There was no one else in sight along the street, its trees and pavement fragrantly damp.

The door opened and Dregler stepped swiftly inside. A shabbily dressed man of indefinite age closed the door behind him, then asked in a cordially nondescript voice: "Dregler?" The philosopher nodded in reply. After a few reactionless moments the man moved past Dregler, waving once for him to follow down the ground-floor hallway. They stopped at a door that was directly beneath the main stairway leading to the upper floors. "In here," said the man, placing his hand upon the doorknob. Dregler noticed the ring, its rosewater stone and silver band, and the disjunction between the man's otherwise dour appearance and this comparatively striking piece of jewelry. The man pushed open the door and, without entering the room, flipped a lightswitch on the inside wall.

To all appearances it was an ordinary storeroom cluttered with a variety of objects. "Make yourself comfortable," the man said as he indicated to Dregler the way into the room. "Leave whenever you like, just close the door behind you."

Dregler gave a quick look around the room. "Isn't there anything else?" he asked meekly, as if he were the stupidest student of the class. "This is it, then?" he persisted in a quieter, more dignified voice.

"This is it," the man echoed softly. Then he slowly closed the door, and from inside Dregler could hear footsteps walking back down the hallway.

The room was an average understairs niche, and its ceiling tapered downward into a smooth slant where angular steps ascended upward on the other side. Elsewhere its outline was obscure, confused by bedsheets shaped like lamps or tables or small horses; heaps of rocking chairs and baby-chairs and other items of disused furniture; bandaged hoses that drooped like dead pythons from hooks on the walls; animal cages whose doors hung open on a single hinge; old paint cans and pale turps speckled like an egg; and a dusty light fixture that cast a gray haze over everything.

Somehow there was not a variety of odors in the room, each telling the tale of its origin, but only a single smell pieced like a puzzle out of many: its complete image was dark as the shadows in a cave and writhing in a dozen directions over curving walls. Dregler gazed around the room, picked up some small object and immediately set it down again because his hands were trembling. He found himself an old crate to sit on, kept his eyes open, and waited.

Afterward he could not remember how long he had stayed in the room, though he did manage to store up every nuance of the eventless vigil for later use in his voluntary and involuntary dreams. (They were compiled into that increasingly useful section marked "Personal Confrontations with the Medusa," a section that was fleshing itself out as a zone swirling with red shapes and a hundred hissing voices.) Dregler recalled vividly, however, that he left the room in a state of panic after catching a glimpse of himself in an old mirror that had a hair-line fracture slithering up its center. And on his way out he lost his breath when he felt himself being pulled back into the room. But it was only a loose thread from his overcoat that had gotten caught in the door. It finally snapped cleanly off and he was free to go, his heart livened with dread.

Dregler never let on to his friends what a success that afternoon had been for him, not that he could have explained it to them in any practical way even if he desired to. As promised, they did make up for any inconvenience or embarrassment Dregler might have suffered as a result of, in Gleer's words, the "bookstore incident." The three of them held a party in Dregler's honor, and he finally met Gleer's new wife and her accomplice in the "hoax." (It became apparent to Dregler that no one, least of all himself, would admit it had gone further than that.) Dregler was left alone with this woman only briefly, and in the corner of a crowded room. While each of them knew of the other's work, this seemed to be the first time they had personally met. Nonetheless, they both confessed to a feeling of their prior acquaintance without being able, or willing, to substantiate its origins. And although plenty of mutually known parties were established, they failed to find any direct link between the two of them.

"Maybe you were a student of mine," Dregler suggested.

She smiled and said: "Thank you, Lucian, but I'm not as young as you seem to think."

Then she was jostled from behind ("Whoops," said a tipsy academic), and something she had been fiddling with in her hand ended up in Dregler's drink. It turned the clear bubbling beverage into a glassful of liquid rose-light.

"I'm so sorry. Let me get you another," she said, and then disappeared into the crowd.

Dregler fished the earring out of the glass and stole away with it before she had a chance to return with a fresh drink. Later in his room he placed it in a small box, which he labelled: "Treasures of the Medusa."

But there was nothing he could prove, and he knew it.

IV

It was not many years later that Dregler was out on one of his now famous walks around the city. Since the bookstore incident, he had added several new titles to his works, and these had somehow

gained him the faithful and fascinated audience of readers that had previously eluded him. Prior to his "discovery" he had been accorded only a distant interest in scholarly and popular circles alike, but not every little habit of his, not least of all his daily meanderings, had been turned by commentators into "typifying traits" and "defining quirks." "Dregler's walks," stated one article, "are a constitutional of the modern mind, urban journeys by a tortured Ulysses sans Ithaca." Another article offered this back cover superlative: "the most baroque inheritor of Existentialism's obsessions."

But whatever fatuosities they may have inspired, his recent books - *A Bouquet of Worms*, *Banquet for Spiders*, and *New Meditations on the Medusa* - had enabled him to "grip the minds of a dying generation and pass on to them his pain." These words were written, rather uncharacteristically, by Joseph Gleer in a highly favorable review of *New Meditations* for a philosophical quarterly. He probably thought that this notice would revive his friendship with his old colleague, but Dregler never acknowledged Gleer's effort, nor the repeated invitations to join his wife and him for some get-together or other. What else could Dregler do? Whether Gleer knew it or not, he was now one of them. And so was Dregler, though his saving virtue was an awareness of this disturbing fact. And this was part of his pain.

"We can only live by leaving our 'soul' in the hands of the Medusa," Dregler wrote in *New Meditations*. "Whether she is an angel or a gargoyle is not the point. Each merely allows us a gruesome diversion from some ultimate catastrophe which would turn us to stone; each is a mask hiding the worst visage, a medicine that numbs the mind. And the Medusa will see to it that we are protected, sealing our eyelids closed with the gluey spittle of her snakes, while their bodies elongate and slither past our lips to devour us from the inside. This is what we must never witness, except in the imagination, where it is a charming sight. And in the word, no less than in the mind, the Medusa fascinates much more than she appalls, and haunts us just this side of petrification. On the other side is the unthinkable, the unheard-of, that-which-should-not-be: hence, the Real. This is what throttles our souls with a hundred fingers - somewhere, perhaps in that dim room which caused us to forget ourselves, that place where we left ourselves behind amid shadows and strange sounds - while our minds and words toy, like playful, stupid pets, with diversions of an immeasurable disaster. The tragedy is that we must steer so close in order to avoid this hazard. We may hide from horror only in the heart of horror."

Now Dregler had reached the outermost point of his daily walk, the point at which he usually turned and made his way back to his apartment, that other room. He gazed at the black door with the brass knob and knocker, then glanced down the street at the row of porchlights and bay windows, which were glowing madly in the late dusk. Looking skyward, he saw the bluish domes of streetlamps: inverted halos or open eyes. A light rain began to sprinkle down, nothing very troublesome. But in the next moment Dregler had already sought shelter in the welcoming brownstone.

He soon came to stand before the door of the room, keeping his hands deep in the pockets of his overcoat and away from temptation. Nothing had changed, he noticed, nothing at all. The door had not been opened by anyone since he had last closed it behind him on that hectic day years ago. And there was the proof, as he knew, somehow, it would be: that long thread from his coat still dangled from where it had been caught between door and frame. Now there was no question about what he would do.

It was to be a quick peek through a hand-wide crack, but enough to risk disillusionment and the dispersal of all the charming traumas he had articulated in his brain and books, scattering them like

those peculiar shadows he supposed lingered in that room. And the voices — would he hear that hissing which heralded her presence as much as the flitting red shapes? He kept his eyes fixed upon his hand on the doorknob, turning it gently to nudge open the door. So the first thing he saw was the way it, his hand, took on a rosy dawn-like glow, then a deeper twilight crimson as it was bathed more directly by the odd illumination within the room.

There was no need to reach in and flick the lightswitch just inside. He could see quite enough as his vision, still exceptional, was further aided by the way a certain cracked mirror was positioned, giving his eyes a reflected entrance into the dim depths of the room. And in the depths of the mirror? A split image, something fractured by a thread-like chasm that oozed up a viscous red glow. There was a man in the mirror; no, not a man but a mannikin, or a frozen figure of some kind. It was naked and rigid, leaning against a wall of clutter, its arms outstretching and reaching behind, as if trying to break a backwards fall. Its head was also thrown back, almost broken-necked; its eyes were pressed shut into a pair of well-sealed creases, two ocular wrinkles which had taken the place of the sockets themselves. And its mouth gaped so widely with a soundless scream that all wrinkles had been smoothed away from that part of the old face.

He barely recognized this face, this naked and paralyzed form which he had all but forgotten, except as a lurid figure of speech he once used to describe the uncanny condition of his soul. But it was no longer a charming image of the imagination. Reflection had given it charm, made it acceptable to sanity, just as reflection had made those snakes, and the one who wore them, picturesque and not petrifying. But no amount of reflection could have conceived seeing the thing itself, nor the state of being stone.

The serpents were moving now, coiling themselves about the ankles and wrists, the neck; stealthily entering the screaming man's mouth and prying at his eyes. Deep in the mirror opened another pair of eyes the color of wine-mixed water, and through a dark tangled mass they glared. The eyes met his, but not in a mirror. And the mouth was screaming, but made no sound. Finally, he was reunited, in the worst possible way, with the thing within the room.

Stiff inside of stone now, he heard himself think. Where is the world, my words? No longer any world, any words, there would only be that narrow room and its two inseparable occupants. Nothing other than that would exist for him, could exist, nor, in fact, had ever existed. In its own rose-tinted heart, his horror had at last found him.

Conversations In A Dead Language

Conveniens vitae mors fuit ista suae. - Ovid

I

After changing out of his uniform, he went downstairs to search the kitchen drawers, rattling his way through cutlery and cooking utensils. Finally he found what he wanted. A carving knife, a holiday knife, the traditional blade he'd used over the years. Knifey-wifey.

First he carved out an eye, spearing the triangle with the point of his knife and neatly drawing the pulpy thing from its socket. Pinching the blade, he slid his two fingers along the blunt edge, pushing the eye onto the newspaper he'd carefully placed next to the sink. Another eye, a nose, a howling oval mouth. Done. Except for manually scooping out the seedy and stringy entrails and supplanting them with a squat little candle of the vigil type. Guide them, holy lantern, through darkness and disaster. To me. To meezy-weezy.

He dumped several bags of candy into a large potato chip bowl, fingering pieces here and there: the plump caramels, the tarty sour balls, the chocolate kisses for the kids. A few were test-chewed for taste and texture. A few more. Not too many, for some of his co-workers already called him Fatass, almost behind his back. And he would spoil the holiday dinner he had struggled to prepare in the little time left before dark. Tomorrow he'd start his diet and begin making more austere meals for himself.

At dark he brought the pumpkin out to the porch, placing it on a small but lofty table over which he'd draped a bedsheet no longer in normal use. He scanned the old neighborhood. Beyond the railings of other porches and in picture windows up and down the street glowed a race of new faces in the suburb. Holiday visitors come to stay the night, without a hope of surviving till the next day. All Souls Day. Father Mickiewicz was saying an early morning mass, which there would be just enough time to attend before going to work.

No kids yet. Wait. There we go, bobbing down the street: a scarecrow, a robot, and - what is it? - oh, white-faced clown. Not the skull-faced thing he'd at first thought it was, pale and hollow-eyed as the moon shining frostily on one of the clearest nights he'd ever seen. The stars were a frozen effervescence.

Better get inside. They'll be coming soon. Waiting behind the glass of the front door with the bowl of candy under his arm, he nervously grabbed up palmsful of the sweets and let them fall piece by piece back into the bowl, a buccaneer revelling in his loot... a grizzled-faced pirate, eye-patch over an empty socket, a jolly roger on his cap with "x" marking the spot in bones, running up the front walk, charging up the wooden stairs of the porch, rubber cutlass stuffed in his pants.

"Trick or treat."

"Well, well, well," he said, his voice rising in pitch with each successive "well." "If it isn't Blackbear. Or is it Bluebeard, I always forget. But you don't have a beard at all, do you?" The pirate shook his head shyly to say no. "Maybe we should call you Nobeard, then, at least until you start shaving."

"I have a moustache. Trick or treat, mister," the boy said, impatiently holding up an empty pillow case.

"You do have a nice moustache at that. Here you go, then," he said, tossing a handful of candy into the sack. "And cut a few throats for me," he shouted as the boy turned and ran off.

He didn't have to say those last words so loudly. Neighbors. No, no one heard. The streets are filled with shouters tonight, one the same as another. Listen to the voices all over the neighborhood, music against the sounding board of silence and the chill infinity of autumn.

Here come some more. Goody.

Trick or treat: an obese skeleton, meat bulging under its painted-costume bones. How unfortunate, especially at his age. Fatass of the boneyard and the schoolyard. Give him an extra handful of candy. "Thanks a lot, mister." "Here, have more." Then the skeleton waddled down the porch steps, its image thinning out into the nullity of the darkness, candy-filled paper bag rattling away to a whisper.

Trick or treat: an overgrown baby, bibbed and bootied, with a complexion problem erupting on its pre-adolescent face. "Well, cootchie coo," he said to the infant as he showered its open bunting with candy. Baby sneered as it toddled off, pouchy diapers slipping down its backside, disappearing once again into the black from which it had momentarily emerged.

Trick or treat: midget vampire, couldn't be more than six years old. Wave to Mom waiting on the sidewalk. "Very scary. Your parents must be proud. Did you do all that make-up work yourself," he whispered. The little thing mutely gazed up, its eyes underlidded with kohl-dark smudges. It then used a tiny finger, pointy nail painted black, to indicate the guardian figure near the street. "Mom, huh? Does she like sourballs? Sure she does. Here's some for Mom and some more for yourself, nice red ones to suck on. That's what you scary vampires like, eh?" he finished, winking. Cautiously descending the stairs, the child of the night returned to its parent, and both proceeded to the next house, joining the anonymous ranks of their predecessors.

Others came and went. An extraterrestrial with a runny nose, a smelly pair of ghosts, an asthmatic tube of toothpaste.

The parade thickened as the night wore on. The wind picked up and a torn kite struggled to free itself from the clutches of an elm across the street. Above the trees the October sky remained lucid, as if a glossy veneer had been applied across the night. The moon brightened to a teary gleam, while voices below waned. Fewer and fewer disguises perpetrated deception in the neighborhood. These'll probably be the last ones -coming up the porch. Almost out of candy anyway.

Trick or treat. Trick or treat.

Remarkable, these two. Obviously brother and sister, maybe twins. No, the girl looks older. A winning couple, especially the bride. "Well, congratulations to the gride and broom. I know I said it backward. That's because you're backwards, aren't you? Whose idea was that?" he asked, tossing candy like rice into the bag of the tuxedoed groom. What faces, so clear. Shining stars.

"Hey, you're the mailman," said the boy.

"Very observant. You're marrying a smart one here," he said to the groom.

"I saw you were, too," she replied.

"Course you did. You're sharp kids, both of you. Hey, you guys must be tired, walking around all night." The kids shrugged, unaware of the meaning of fatigue. "I know I am after delivering the mail up and down these streets. And I do that every day, except Sunday of course. Then I go to church. You kids go to church?" It seemed they did; wrong one, though. "You know, at our church we have outings and stuff like that for kids. Hey, I got an idea - "

A car slowed down on the street, its constabulary spotlight scanning between houses on the opposite side. Some missing Halloweeners maybe. "Never mind my idea, kids. Trick or treat," he said abruptly, lavishing candy on the groom, who immediately strode off. Then he turned to the bride, on whom he bestowed the entire remaining contents of the large bowl, conveying a scrupulously neutral expression as he did so. Was the child blushing, or was it just the light from the jack-o-lantern?

"C'mon, Charlie," his sister called from the sidewalk.

"Happy Halloween, Charlie. See you next year." Maybe around the neighborhood.

His thoughts drifted off for a moment. When he regained control the kids were gone, all of them. Except for imaginary ones, ideals of their type. Like that boy and his sister.

He left the candle burning in the jack-o-lantern. Let it make the most of its brief life. Tomorrow it would be defunct and placed out with the other refuse, an extinguished shell pressed affectionately against a garbage bag. Tomorrow... All Souls Day. Pick up Mother for church in the morning. Could count it as a weekly visit, holy day of obligation. Also have to remember to talk to Father M. about taking that kiddie group to the football game.

The kids. Their annual performance was now over, the make-up wiped away and all the costumes back in their boxes. After he turned off the lights downstairs and upstairs, and was lying in bed, he still heard "trick or treat" and saw their faces in the darkness. And when they tried to dissolve into the background of his sleepy mind... he brought them back.

II

"Ttrrick or ttrreat," chattered a trio of hacking, sniffing hoboes. It was much colder this year, and he was wearing the bluish-gray wool overcoat he delivered the mail in. "Some for you, you, and you," he said in a merely efficient tone of voice. The bums were not overly grateful for the handouts. They don't appreciate anything the way they used to. Things change so fast. Forget it, close the door, icy blasts.

Weeks ago the elms and red maples in the neighborhood had been assaulted by unseasonable frigidity and stripped to the bone. Clouds now clotted up the sky, a murky purple ceiling through which no stars shone. Snow was imminent.

Fewer kids observed the holiday this year, and of the ones who did a good number of them evidently took little pride in the imagination or lavishness of their disguises. Many were content to rub a little

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