

HUGO AND NEBULA AWARD WINNER AND BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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AUTHOR OF *DARWIN'S RADIO* AND *EON*



SLEEPSIDE

THE COLLECTED FANTASIES
PREVIOUSLY TITLED BEAR'S FANTASIES

"His wonders are state-of-the-art." —*Newsday*



Sleepside

The Collected Fantasies

Greg Bear



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Introduction: On Losing the Taint of Being a Cannibal

by Greg Bear

I'm reminded of the line delivered by Joseph Bologna in the motion picture comedy, *The Big Bus*. His character, Dan Torrance, once drove a bus through Donner Pass, and of course got snowed in. Desperation quickly set in among the passengers, and some odd recipes were resorted to. Torrance pleads that he did not know what was in the soup, adding, "One lousy foot, and they call you a cannibal for the rest of your life!"

Writing science fiction is one of those odd activities, like being a cannibal, that marks you permanently, even should you later become a vegan.

The odd relationship most people have with science—awed fascination, not infrequently dismay and distrust, and guilty dependence—guarantees a mixed reaction among the reading public: "You actually enjoy science? Writing about it, making it up? How *interesting*."

Their tone of voice tells you that you are now marked forever in their minds.

Science fiction explores the outer limits of the current Western paradigm, science; its playground is all that we know about the universe, and what we imagine we might eventually know.

Many of us, at one time or another, enjoy playing with previous paradigms—mind over matter, magic, dream logic, and so on. Literature does not play favorites; excellent stories have been written in all these areas.

A science fiction writer who writes fantasy, however, is regarded by some as an odd bird indeed. Write science fiction, become well known for it, and—well, your fantasy stories become almost *invisible*. All those times when you *weren't* a cannibal—simply forgotten.

Yet most of the great science fiction writers have written a great deal of fantasy, and I have, as well. But prejudices and snobbery on both sides of the fence have grown in the past ten or fifteen years.

I've never thought of my fantasy stories as dabbling or slumming. They represent an important part of my writing. Some of my very finest work is fantasy. The first novel I ever finished—an early version of what would later be published as *The Infinity Concerto* and *The Serpent Mage*—was fantasy. My second published novel, *Psychlone*, is a ghost story, heavily influenced by Stephen King. In real life I've even gone hunting ghosts in a world-famous hotel, just like Carnacki, though without his spectacular success.

I love fantasy.

Perhaps by gathering some of my fantasy in one volume, I can convince the world that I've had at least a few moments when I was not a cannibal.

But I won't bet on it.

Being a writer of science fiction is just so *odd*.

Thank goodness.

Dry.

It lingered in the air, a dead and sterile word made for whispers. Vultures fanned her hair with feather-duster wings. Up the dictionary's page ran her lean finger, wrapped in skin like parchment, and she found *Andrews, Roy Chapman*, digging in the middle of the Gobi, lifting fossil dinosaur eggs cracked and unhatched from their graves.

She folded the large, heavy book on her finger. The compressed pages gripped it with a firm, familiar pressure.

With her other hand, Miss Abigail Coates explored her face, vacant of any emotion she was willing to reveal. She did not enjoy her life. Her thin body gave no pleasure, provoked no surprise, spurred no uncontrollable passion. She took no joy in the bored pain of people in the streets. She felt imprisoned by the sun that shed a revealing, bleaching light on city walls and pavement, its dust-filled shafts stealing into her small apartment.

Miss Coates was fifty and, my God the needle in her throat when she thought of it, she had never borne a child; not once had she shared her bed with a man.

There had been, long ago, a lonely, lifeless love with a boy five years younger than she. She had hoped he would blunt the needle pain in her throat; he had begged to be given the chance. But she had spurned him. *I shall use my love as bait and let men pay the toll.* That had been her excuse, at any rate, until the first flush of her youth had faded. Even after that, even before she had felt *dry*, she had never found the right man.

"*Pitiful,*" she said with a sigh, and drew herself up from the overstuffed chair in her small apartment, standing straight and lean at five feet seven inches. *I weep inside, then read the dear Bible and the even more dear dictionary. They tell me weeping is a sin. Despair is the meanest of my sins—my few sins.*

She looked around the dry, comfortable room and shielded her eyes from the gloom of the place where she slept, as if blinded by shadow. The place wasn't a bedroom because in a *bedroom* you sleep with a man or men and she had none. Her eyes moved up the door frame, nicked in one corner where clumsy movers had knocked her bed against the wood, twenty years ago; down to the worn carpet that rubbed the bottoms of her feet like raw canvas. To the chair behind her, stuffing poking from its top middle. To the wallpaper, chosen by someone else, stained with water along the cornice from an old rain. And finally she looked down at her feet, toes frozen in loose, frayed nylons, toenails thick and well-manicured; all parts of her body looked after but the core, the soul.

She went into the place where she slept and lay down. The sheets caressed her, as they were obliged to do, wrinkles and folds in blankets rubbing her thighs, her breasts. The pillow accepted her pepper hair, and in the dark, she ordered herself to sleep.

The morning was better. There was a whole day ahead. Something might happen.

Afternoon passed like a dull ache. In the twilight she fixed her pale dinner of potatoes and veal.

In the dark, she sat in her chair with the two books at her feet and listened to the old building crack and groan as it settled in for the night. She stared at the printed flowers on the wallpaper that someone must have once thought pretty.

The morning was fine. The afternoon was hot and sticky and she took a walk, wearing sunglasses. She watched all the young people on this fine Saturday afternoon. *They hold hands and walk in parks. There, on that bench; she'll be in trouble if she keeps that up.*

She went back to the patient apartment that always waited, never judging, ever faithful and

unperturbed.

The evening passed slowly. She became lazy with heat. By midnight a cool breeze fluttered the sun-browned curtains in the window and blew them in like the dingy wings of street birds.

Miss Coates opened her dictionary, looking for comfort, and found words she wanted, but words she didn't need. They jumped from the pages and would not leave her alone. She didn't think them obscene; she was not a prude. She loved the sounds of all words, and these words were marvelous, too, when properly entrained with other words. They could be part of rich stories, rich lives. The sound of them made her tremble and ache.

The evening ended. Again, she could not cry. Sadness was a moist, dark thing, the color of mud.

She had spent her evenings like this, with few variations, for the past five years.

The yellow morning sunlight crept across the ironing board and over her fanciest dress, burgundy shadows, orange in the glare. "I need a lover," she told herself firmly. But one found lovers in offices and she didn't work; in trains going to distant countries, and she never left town. "I need common sense, and self-control. That part of my life is over. I need to stop thinking like a teenager." But the truth was, she had no deficiency of self-control. It was her greatest strength.

It had kept her away from danger so many times.

Her name, Coates, was not in the dictionary. There was *coati*, *coatimundi*, *coat of arms*, *coat of mail*, and then *coauthor*, Miss Coauthor, partner and lover to a handsome writer. They would *collaborate*, *corroborate*, *celebrate*.

Celibate.

She shut the book.

She drew the curtains on the window and slowly tugged the zipper down the back of her dress with the practiced flourish of a crochet hook. Her fingers rubbed the small of her back, nails scraping. She held her chin high, eyes closed to slits.

A lone suitor came through the dark beyond the window to stroke her skin—a stray breeze, neither hot nor cool. Sweat lodged in the cleft between her breasts. She was proud of her breasts; they were small but still did not sag when she removed her bra. She squatted and marched her hands behind her to sit and then lie down on the floor. Spreading her arms against the rough carpet, Miss Coates pressed her chin into her clavicle and peered at her breasts, boyish against the prominent ribs. Untouched. Unspoiled goods.

She cupped them in both hands. She became a thin crucifixion with legs straight and toes together. Her head lay near the window. She looked up to see the curtains fluttering silently like her lips. Mouth open. Tongue rubbing the backs of her teeth. She smoothed her hands to her stomach and let them rest there, curled on the flat warmth.

My stomach doesn't drape. I am not so undesirable. No flab, few wrinkles. My thighs are not dimpled with gross flesh.

She rolled over and propped herself on one elbow to refer to the dictionary, then the Bible.

Abigail Coates mouthing a word: *Lover*.

The dictionary sat tightly noncommittal in buckram, the Bible silent in black leather.

She gently pushed the Bible aside. For all its ancient sex and betrayal and the begetting of desirable progeny, it would do nothing for her. She pulled the dictionary closer. "Help me," she said. "Book of all books, massive thing I can hardly lift, every thought lies in you, all human possibilities. Everything I feel, everything that *can* be felt, lies waiting to be described in combinations of the words you contain. You hold all possible lives, people and places I've never seen, things dead and things unborn. Haven of ghosts, home of tyrants, birthplace of saints."

She knew she would have to be audacious. What she was about to do would be proof of her final crack having cracked, like those dinosaur eggs in the Gobi; dead and sterile and cracked.

“Surely you can make a man. Small word, little effort. You can even *tell* me how to make a man from you.” She could almost imagine a man rising from the open book, spinning like a man-shaped bird cage filled with light.

The curtains puffed.

“Go,” she said. She crossed her legs in a lotus next to the thick book and waited for the dust of each word, the microscopic, homeopathic bits of ink, each charged with the shape of a letter, to sift between the fibers of the paper and combine.

Dry magic. The words smelled sweet in the midnight breeze. *Dead bits of ink, charged with thought arise.*

Veni

Her tongue swelled with the dryness of the ink. She unfolded and lay flat on her stomach to let the rough carpet mold her skin with crossword puzzle lines, upon which the right words could be written and her life solved.

Miss Coates flopped the dictionary around to face her, then threw its clumps of pages open to the middle. Her finger searched randomly on the page and found a word. She gasped. *Man*, it said, clear and could be next to her immaculate, colorless nail. Man! She moved her finger and sucked in her breath.

“There is a man in you!” she told the book and laughed. It was a joke, that’s all; she was not that far gone. Still grinning, she rubbed her finger against the inside of her cheek and pressed the dampness onto the word. “Here,” she said. “A few of my cells.” She was clever, she was scientific, she was brilliant! “Clone *them*.” Then she thought that possibility through and said, “But don’t make him look like me or think like me. Change him with your medical words, *plastic surgery* and *eugenics* and *phenotype*.”

The page darkened under the press of her finger. She swung the dictionary shut and returned to her lotus.

As my trunk rises from the flower of my legs and the seat of my womb, so, man, arise from the bones of all books.

Would it thunder? Only silence. The dictionary trembled and the Bible looked dark and somber. The yellow bulb in the shaded lamp sang like a dying moth. The air grew heavy. *Don’t falter*, she told herself. *Don’t lose faith, don’t drop the flower of your legs and the seat of your womb. A bit of blood. Or milk from unsucked breasts? Catalysts... Or, God forbid, something living, a fly between the pages, the heart of a bird, or—*she shuddered, ill with excitement, with a kind of belief—*the clear seed of a dead man.*

The book almost lifted its cover. It *breathed*.

“That was it,” she whispered in awe. “The words know what to do.”

Frost clung to its brown binding. The dictionary sucked warmth from the air. The cover flew back. The pages riffled, flew by, flapped spasmodically, and two stuck together, struggling, bulging... and then splitting.

A figure flew up, arms spread, and twirled like an ice skater. It sucked in dust and air and heat and sucked sweat from her skin, and turned dry emptiness into damp flesh.

“Handsome!” she cried. “Make him handsome and rugged and kind, and smart as I am, if not smarter. Make him like a father but not my father and like a son and a lover especially a lover, warm and give him breath that melts my lips and softens my hair like steam from jungles. He should like warm dry days and going to lakes and fishing, but no—he should like reading to me more than fishing and he should like cold winter days and ice-skating with me he could if you will allow me to suggest he could be brown-haired with a shadow of red and his cheeks rough with fresh young beard I could watch grow and he should—”

His eyes! They flashed as he spun, molten beacons still undefined. She approved of the roughed-

shape of his nose. His hair danced and gleamed, dark brown with a hint of red. Arms, fingers, legs crawled with words. An ant's nest of dry ink ~~foots~~ crawled over his feet, tangling with ~~heels~~ ankles and ~~toes~~. Arms and legs fought for dominance up the branches and into the trunk, where ~~torso~~ and ~~breasts~~ and other words fought them back. The battle of words went on for minutes, fierce and hot.

Then—what had been a dream, a delusion, suddenly became magic. The words spun, blurred, became real flesh and real bone.

His breasts were firm and square and dark-nippled. The hair on his chest was dark and silky. He was still spinning. She cried out, staring at his groin.

Clothes?

“Yes!” she said. “I have no clothes for men.”

A suit, a pink shirt with cuff links and pearl decorations.

His eyes blinked and his mouth opened and closed. His head drooped and a moan flew out like a whirled weight cut loose from a string.

“Stop!” she shouted. “Please stop, he’s finished!”

The man stood on the dictionary, knees wobbly, threatening to topple. She jumped up from the floor to catch him, but he fell away from her and collapsed on the carpet beside the chair. The book landed, kicked and sprawled by his feet, top pages wrinkled and torn.

Miss Coates stood over the man, hands fluttering at her breasts. He lay on his side, chest heaving, eyes closed. Her wide gaze darted from point to point on his body, lower lip held by tiny white teeth. After a few minutes, she was able to look away from the man. She squinted more closely at the dictionary, frowned, then bent to riffle through the pages. Every page was blank. The dictionary had given everything it had.

“I am naked,” she told herself, stretching out her hands, using the realization to shock herself into sensibility. She went into the place where she slept to put on some clothes. Away from the man, she wondered what she would call him. He probably did not have a name, not a Christian name at any rate. It seemed appropriate to call him by a name like everyone else, even if she had raised him from paper and ink, from a dictionary.

“Webster,” she said, nodding sharply at the obvious. “I’ll call him Webster.”

She returned to the living room and looked at the man. He seemed to be resting peacefully. How could she move him to a more comfortable place? The couch was too small to hold his ungainly body; he was very tall. She measured him with the tape from her sewing kit. Six feet two inches. His eyes were still shut; what color were they? She squatted beside him, face flushed, thinking thoughts she warned herself she must not think, not yet.

She wore her best dress, wrapped in smooth dark burgundy, against which her pale skin showed to her best advantage. It was one o’clock in the morning, however, and she was exhausted. “You seem comfortable where you are,” she told the man, who did not move. “I’ll leave you on the floor.”

Abigail Coates went into her bedroom to sleep. Tired as she was, she could not just close her eyes and drift off. She felt like shouting for joy and tears dampened the pillow and moistened her peppercorn hair.

In the darkness, *he* breathed. Dreaming, did he cause the words to flow through her drowsing thoughts? Or was it simply his breath filling the house with the odor of printer’s ink?

In the night, *he* moved. Shifting an arm, a leg, sending atoms of words up like dust. His eyes flickered open, then closed. He moaned and was still again.

Abigail Coates’s neck hair pricked with the first rays of morning and she awoke with a tiny shriek, little more than a high-pitched gasp. She rolled from her stomach onto her back and pulled up the sheet and bedspread.

Webster stood in the doorway, smiling. She could barely see him in the dawn light. Her eyelids were gummy with sleep. "Good morning, Regina," he said.

Regina Abigail Coates. Everyone had called her Abbie, when there had been friends to call her anything. No one had ever called her Regina.

"Regina," Webster repeated. "It reminds one of queens and Canadian coins."

How well he spoke. How full of class.

"Good morning," she said feebly. "How are you?" She suppressed an urge to giggle. *Why are you?* "How... do you feel?"

A ghost of a smile. He nodded politely, unwilling to complain. "As well as could be expected." He walked into her room and stopped at the foot of her bed, like a ghost her father had once told her about. "I'm well-dressed. Too much so, I think. It's uncomfortable."

Her heart was a little piston in her throat, pushing up the phlegm that threatened to choke her.

He walked around to her side of the bed, just as the ghost once had.

"You brought me out. Why?"

She stared up at his bright green eyes, like drops of water raised from the depths of an ocean trench. His hand touched her shoulder, lingered on the strap of her nightgown. One finger slipped under the strap and tugged it up a quarter of an inch. "This is the distance between OP and OR," he murmured.

She felt the pressure of the cloth beneath her breast.

"Why?" he asked again. His breath sprinkled words over her face and hair. He shook his head and frowned. "Why do I feel so obliged to..." He pulled down the blind and closed the drapes and she heard the soft fall and hiss of rayon dropped onto a chair. In the darkness, a knee pressed the edge of her bed. A finger touched her neck and lips covered hers and parted them. A tongue explored.

He tasted of ink.

In the early morning hours, Regina Abigail Coates gave a tiny, squeezed-in scream.

Webster sat in the overstuffed chair and watched her leave the apartment. She shut the door and leaned against the wall, not knowing what to think or feel. "Of course," she whispered to herself, as if there were no wind or strength left in her. "Of course he doesn't like the sun."

She walked down the hallway, passed the doors of neighbors with whom she had not even a nodding acquaintance, and descended the stairs to the first floor. The street was filled with cars passing endlessly back and forth. Tugging out wrinkles from her dress, she stepped into the sunlight and faced the world, the new Regina Coates, *debutante*.

"*I know* what all you other women know," she said softly, with a shrill triumph. "All of you!" She looked up and noticed the sky, perhaps for the first time in twenty years; rich with clouds scattered across a bright blue sheet, demanding of her, *Breathe deeply*. She was part of the world, the real world.

Webster still sat in the chair when she returned with two bags of groceries. He was reading his Bible. Her face grew hot and she put down the bags and snatched it quickly from his hands. She could not face his querying stare, so she lay the book on a table, out of his reach, and said, "You don't want that."

"Why?" he asked. She picked up the bags again by their doubled and folded paper corners, taking them one in each hand into the kitchen and opening the old refrigerator to stock the perishables.

"When you're gone," Webster said, "I feel as if I fade. Am I real?"

She glanced up at the small mirror over the sink. Her shoulders twitched and a shudder ran up her back. *I am very far gone now.*

Regina brought in the afternoon newspaper and he held his hand out with a pleading expression; she handed it across, letting it waver for a moment above a patch of worn carpet, teasing him with a frightened, uncertain smile. He took it, spread it eagerly, and rubbed his fingers over the pages. He

turned the big sheets slowly, seeming to absorb more than read. She fixed them both a snack but Webster refused to eat. He sat across from her at the small table, face placid, and for the moment, that was more than enough. She sat at her table, ate her small trimmed sandwich and drank her glass of grapefruit juice. Glancing at him from all sides—he did not seem to mind, and it made his outline sharper—she straightened up the tiny kitchen.

What was there to say to a man between morning and night? She had expected that a man made of words would be full of conversation, but Webster had very little experience. While all the right words existed in him, they had yet to be connected. Or so she surmised. Still, his very presence gratified her. He made her as real as she had made him.

He refused dinner, even declining to share a glass of wine with her after (she had only one glass).

“I expect there should be some awkwardness in the early days,” she said. “Don’t you? Quiet times when we can just sit and be with each other. Like today.”

Webster stood by the window, touched a finger to his lips, leaving a smudge, and nodded. He agreed with most things she said.

“Let’s go to bed,” she suggested primly.

In the dark, when her solitude had again been sundered and her brow was sprinkled with salty drops of exertion, he lay next to her, and—

He *moved*.

He *breathed*.

But he did not sleep.

Regina lay with her back to him, eyes wide, staring at the flowers on the ancient wallpaper and the wide trapezoid of streetlight glare transfixing a small table and its vase. She felt ten years—no, twenty!—sliding away from her, and yet she couldn’t tell him how she felt, didn’t dare turn and talk. The air was full of him. Full of words not her own, unorganized, potential. She breathed in a million random thoughts, deep or slight, complex or simple, eloquent or crude. Webster was becoming a generator. Kept in the apartment, his substance was reacting with itself; shut away from experience, he was making up his own patterns and organizations, subtle as smoke.

Even lying still, waiting for the slight movement of air through the window to cool him, he worked inside, and his breath filled the air with potential.

Regina was tired and deliciously filled, and that satisfaction at least was hers. She luxuriated in it and slept.

In the morning, she lay alone in the bed. She flung off the covers and padded into the living room, pulling down her rucked-up nightgown, shivering against the morning chill. He stood by the window again, naked, not caring if people on the streets looked up and saw. She stood beside him and gently enclosed his upper arm with her fingers, leaned her cheek against his shoulder, a motion that came so naturally she surprised herself with her own grace. “What do you want?” she asked.

“No,” he said tightly. “The question is, what do *you* want?”

“I’ll get us some breakfast. You *must* be hungry by now.”

“No. I’m not. I don’t know what I am or how to feel.”

“I’ll get some food,” she continued obstinately, letting go of his arm. “Do you like milk?”

“No. I don’t know.”

“I don’t want you to become ill.”

“I don’t get ill. I don’t get hungry. You haven’t answered my question.”

“I love you,” she said, with much less grace.

“You don’t love me. You need me.”

“Isn’t that the same thing?”

“Not at all.”

“Shall we get out today?” she asked airily, backing away, realizing she was doing a poor imitation of some actress in the movies. *Bette Davis, her voice light, tripping.*

“I can’t. I don’t get sick, I don’t get hungry. I don’t go places.”

“You’re being obtuse,” she said petulantly, hating that tone, tears of frustration rising in her eyes. *How must I behave? Is he mine, or am I his?*

“*Obtuse, acute, equilateral, isosceles, vector, derivative, sequential, psych-integrative, mersenne powers...*” He shook his head, grinning sadly. “That’s the future of mathematics for the next century. It becomes part of psychology. Did you know that? All numbers.”

“Did you think that last night?” she asked. She cared nothing for mathematics; what could a man made of words know about numbers?

“Words mix in blood, my blood is made of words.... I can’t stop thinking, even at night. Words are numbers, too. Signs and portents, measures and relations, variables and qualifiers.”

“You’re flesh,” she said. “I gave you substance.”

“You gave me existence, not substance.”

She laughed harshly, caught herself, forced herself to be demure again. Taking his hand, she led him back to the chair. She kissed him on the cheek, a chaste gesture considering their state of undress, and said she would stay with him all day, to help him orient to his new world. “But tomorrow, we have to go out and buy you some more clothes.”

“Clothes,” he said softly, then smiled as if all was well. She leaned her head forward and smiled back, a fire radiating from her stomach through her legs and arms. With a soft step and a skip she danced on the carpet, hair swinging. Webster watched her, still smiling.

“And while you’re out,” he said, “bring back another dictionary.”

“Of course. We can’t use *that* one anymore, can we? The same kind?”

“Doesn’t matter,” he said, shaking his head.

The uncertainty of Webster’s quiet afternoon hours became a dull, sugarcoated ache for Regina Coates. She tried to disregard her fears—that he found her a disappointment, inadequate; that he was weakening, fading—and reasoned that if she was his *mistress*, she could make him do or be whatever she wished. Unless she did not know what to wish. Could a man’s behavior be wished for, or must it simply be experienced?

At night the words again poured into her, and she smiled in the dark, lying beside the warmth of the shadow that smelled of herself and printer’s ink, wondering if they should be taking precautions. She was a late fader in the biological department and there was a certain risk....

She grinned savagely, thinking about it. All she could imagine was a doctor holding up a dark, bloody thing in his hands and saying, “Miss Coates, you’re the proud mother of an eightounce *Thesaurus*.”

“Abridged?” she asked wickedly.

She shopped carefully, picking for him the best clothes she could afford, in a wide variety of styles, dipping into her savings to pay the bill. For herself she chose a new dress that showed her slim waist to advantage and hid her thin thighs. She looked girlish, summery. That was what she wanted. She purchased the dictionary and looked through gift shops for something else to give him. “Something witty and interesting for us to do.” She settled on a game of Scrabble.

Webster was delighted with the dictionary. He regarded the game dubiously, but played it with her a few times. “An appetizer,” he called it.

“Are you going to eat the book?” she asked, half in jest.

“No,” he said.

She wondered why they didn’t argue. She wondered why they didn’t behave like a normal couple, ignoring her self-derisive inner voice crying out, *Normal!?*

My God, she said to herself after two weeks, staring at the hard edge of the small table in the kitchen. Creating men from dictionaries, making love until the bed is damp—at my age! He stinks like ink. He doesn't sweat and he refuses to go outside. Nobody sees him but me. Me. Who am I to judge whether he's really there?

What would happen to Webster if I were to take a gun and put a hole in his stomach, above the navel? A man with a navel, not born of woman, is an abomination—isn't he?

If he spoke to her simply and without emotion just once more, or twice, she thought she would try that experiment and see.

She bought a gun, furtive as a mouse but a respectable citizen, for protection, a small gray pistol and hid it in her drawer. She thought better of it a few hours after, shuddered in disgust, and removed the bullets, flinging them out of the apartment's rear window into the dead garden in the narrow courtyard below.

On the last day, when she went shopping, she carried the empty gun with her so he wouldn't find it—although he showed no interest in snooping, which would at least have been a sign of caring. The bulge in her purse made her nervous.

She did not return until dinnertime. *The apartment is not my own. It oppresses me. He oppresses me.* She walked quietly through the front door, saw the living room was empty, and heard a small sound from behind the closed bedroom door. The light flop of something stiff hitting the floor.

"Webster?" Silence. She knocked lightly on the door. "Are you ready to talk?"

No reply.

He makes me mad when he doesn't answer. I could scare him, force him react to me in some way. She took out the pistol, fumbling it, pressing its grip into her palm. It felt heavy and formidable.

The door was locked. Outraged that she should be closed out of her own bedroom, she carried the revolver into the kitchen and found a hairpin in a drawer, the same she had used months before when the door had locked accidentally. She knelt before the door and fumbled, teeth clenched, lips tight.

With a small cry, she pushed the door open.

Webster sat with legs crossed on the floor beside the bed. Before him lay the new dictionary, open almost to the back. "Not now," he said, tracing a finger along the rows of words.

Regina's mouth dropped open. "What are you looking at?" she asked, tightening her fingers on the pistol. She stepped closer, looked down, and saw that he was already up to VW.

"I don't know," he said. He found the word he was looking for, reached into his mouth with one finger and scraped his inner cheek. Smears the wetness on the page.

"No," she said. Then, "Why...?"

There were tears on his cheeks. The man of dry ink was crying. Somehow that made her furious.

"I'm not even a human being," he said.

She hated him, hated this weakness; she had never liked weak men. He adjusted his lotus position and gripped the edges of the dictionary with both hands. "Why can't you find a human being for yourself?" he asked, looking up at her. "I'm nothing but a dream."

She held the pistol firmly to her side. "What are you doing?"

"Need," he said. "That's all I am. Your hunger and your need. Do you know what I'm good for, what I can do? No. You'd be afraid if you did. You keep me here like some commodity."

"I wanted you to go out with me," she said tightly.

"What has the world done to you that you'd want to create me?"

"You're going to make a woman from that thing, aren't you?" she asked. "Nothing worthwhile has ever happened to me. Everything gets taken away the moment I ..."

"Need," he said, raising his hands over the book. "You cannot love unless you need. You cannot love the real. You must change the thing you love to please yourself, and damn anyone if he should"

question what hides within you.”

~~“You *thing*,” she breathed, lips curled back. Webster looked at her and at the barrel of the gun she now pointed at him and laughed.~~

“You don’t need that,” he told her. “You don’t need something real to kill a dream. All you need is a little sunlight.”

She lowered the gun, dropped it with a thud on the floor, then lifted her eyebrows and smiled around her gritted teeth. She pointed the index finger of her left hand and her face went lax. Listlessly, she whispered, “Bang.”

The smell of printer’s ink became briefly more intense, then faded on the warm breeze passing through the apartment. She kicked the dictionary shut.

How lonely it was going to be, in the dark with only her own sweat.

The White Horse Child

When I was seven years old, I met an old man by the side of the dusty road between school and farm. The late afternoon sun had cooled, and he was sitting on a rock, hat off, hands held out to the gentle warmth, whistling a pretty song. He nodded at me as I walked past. I nodded back. I was curious, but I knew better than to get involved with strangers. Nameless evils seemed to attach themselves to strangers, as if they might turn into lions when no one but a little kid was around.

“Hello, boy,” he said.

I stopped and shuffled my feet. He looked more like a hawk than a lion. His clothes were brown and gray and russet, and his hands were pink like the flesh of some rabbit a hawk had just plucked up. His face was brown except around the eyes, where he might have worn glasses; around the eyes he was white, and this intensified his gaze. “Hello,” I said.

“Was a hot day. Must have been hot in school,” he said.

“They got air conditioning.”

“So they do, now. How old are you?”

“Seven,” I said. “Well, almost eight.”

“Mother told you never to talk to strangers?”

“And Dad, too.”

“Good advice. But haven’t you seen me around here ?”

I looked him over.”No.”

“Closely. Look at my clothes. What color are ?”

His shirt was gray, like the rock he was sitting on. The cuffs, where they peeped from under a russet jacket, were white. He didn’t smell bad, but he didn’t look particularly clean. He was smooth-shaven though. His hair was white, and his pants were the color of the dirt below the rock. “All kinds of colors,” I said.

“But mostly I partake of the landscape, no?”

“I guess so,” I said.

“That’s because I’m not here. You’re imagining me, at least part of me. Don’t I look like somebody you might have heard of?”

“Who are you supposed to look like?” I asked.

“Well, I’m full of stories,” he said. “Have lots of stories to tell little boys, little girls, even big folks if they’ll listen.”

I started to walk away.

“But only if they’ll listen,” he said. I ran. When I got home, I told my older sister about the man on the road, but she only got a worried look and told me to stay away from strangers. I took her advice. For some time afterward, into my eighth year, I avoided that road and did not speak with strangers more than I had to.

The house that I lived in, with the five other members of my family and two dogs and one beleaguered cat, was white and square and comfortable. The stairs were rich dark wood overlaid with worn carpet. The walls were dark oak paneling up to a foot above my head, then white plaster, with white plaster ceiling. The air was full of smells—bacon when I woke up, bread and soup and dinner when I came home from school, dust on weekends when we helped clean.

Sometimes my parents argued, and not just about money, and those were bad times; but usually we were happy. There was talk about selling the farm and the house and going to Mitchell where Dad

could work in a computerized feed-mixing plant, but it was only talk.

It was early summer when I took to the dirt road again. I'd forgotten about the old man. But in almost the same way, when the sun was cooling and the air was haunted by lazy bees, I saw an old woman. Women strangers are less malevolent than men, and rarer. She was sitting on the gray rock, in a long green skirt summer-dusty, with a daisy-colored shawl and a blouse the precise hue of cottonwood. I'd never seen in a late hazy day's muted light. "Hello, boy," she said.

"I don't recognize you, either," I blurted, and she smiled.

"Of course not. If you didn't recognize him, you'd hardly know me."

"Do you know him?" I asked. She nodded. "Who was he? Who are you?"

"We're both full of stories. Just tell them from different angles. You aren't afraid of us, are you?"

I was, but having a woman ask the question made all the difference. "No," I said. "But what are you doing here? And how do you know—?"

"Ask for a story," she said. "One you've never heard of before." Her eyes were the color of baked chestnuts, and she squinted into the sun so that I couldn't see her whites. When she opened them wide to look at me, she didn't have any whites.

"I don't want to hear stories," I said softly.

"Sure you do. Just ask."

"It's late. I got to be home."

"I knew a man who became a house," she said. "He didn't like it. He stayed quiet for thirty years and watched all the people inside grow up, and be just like their folks, all nasty and dirty and leaving his walls to flake, and the bathrooms were unbearable. So he spit them out one morning, furniture and all, and shut his doors and locked them."

"What?"

"You heard me. Upchucked. The poor house was so disgusted he changed back into a man, but he was older and he had a cancer and his heart was bad because of all the abuse he had lived with. He died soon after."

I laughed, not because the man had died, but because I knew such things were lies. "That's silly," I said.

"Then here's another. There was a cat who wanted to eat butterflies. Nothing finer in the world for a cat than to stalk the grass, waiting for black-and-pumpkin butterflies. It crouches down and wriggles its rump to dig in the hind paws, then it jumps. But a butterfly is no sustenance for a cat. It's practical. There was a little girl about your age—might have been your sister, but she won't admit it—who saw the cat and decided to teach it a lesson. She hid in the taller grass with two old kites under each arm and waited for the cat to come by stalking. When it got real close, she put on her mother's dark glasses, to look all bug-eyed, and she jumped up flapping the kites. Well, it was just a little too real because in a trice she found herself flying, and she was much smaller than she had been, and the cat jumped at her. Almost got her, too. Ask your sister about that sometime. See if she doesn't deny it."

"How'd she get back to be my sister again?"

"She became too scared to fly. She lit on a flower and found herself crushing it. The glasses broke, too."

"My sister did break a pair of Mom's glasses once."

The woman smiled.

"I got to be going home."

"Tomorrow you bring me a story, okay?"

I ran off without answering. But in my head, monsters were already rising. If she thought I was scared, wait until she heard the story I had to tell! When I got home my oldest sister, Barbara, was

fixing lemonade in the kitchen. She was a year older than I but acted as if she were grown-up. She was ~~a good six inches taller, and I could beat her if I got in a lucky punch, but no other way—so her power~~ over me was awesome. But we were usually friendly.

“Where you been?” she asked, like a mother.

“Somebody tattled on you,” I said.

Her eyes went doe-scared, then wizened down to slits. “What’re you talking about?”

“Somebody tattled about what you did to Mom’s sunglasses.”

“I already been whipped for that,” she said nonchalantly. “Not much more to tell.”

“Oh, but I know more.”

“Was *not* playing doctor,” she said. The youngest, Sue-Ann, weakest and most full of guile, had a habit of telling the folks somebody or other was playing doctor. She didn’t know what it meant—I just barely did—but it had been true once, and she held it over everybody as her only vestige of power.

“No,” I said, “but I know what you were doing. And I won’t tell anybody.”

“You don’t know nothing,” she said. Then she accidentally poured half a pitcher of lemonade across the side of my head and down my front. When Mom came in I was screaming and swearing like Dad did when he fixed the cars, and I was put away for life plus ninety years in the bedroom I shared with my younger brother Michael. Dinner smelled better than usual that evening, but I had none of it. Somehow I wasn’t brokenhearted. It gave me time to think of a scary story for the country-colored woman on the rock.

School was the usual mix of hell and purgatory the next day. Then the hot, dry winds cooled and the bells rang and I was on the dirt road again, across the southern hundred acres, walking in the leas and shadows of the big cottonwoods. I carried my Road-Runner lunch pail and my pencil box and one book—a handwriting manual I hated so much I tore pieces out of it at night, to shorten its lifetime and I walked slowly, to give my story time to gel.

She was leaning up against a tree, not far from the rock. Looking back, I can see she was not so old as a boy of eight years thought. Now I see her lissome beauty and grace, despite the dominance of gray in her reddish hair, despite the crow’s-feet around her eyes and the smile-haunts around her lips. But to the eight-year-old she was simply a peculiar crone. And he had a story to tell her, he thought, that would age her unto graveside.

“Hello, boy,” she said.

“Hi.” I sat on the rock.

“I can see you’ve been thinking,” she said.

I squinted into the tree shadow to make her out better. “How’d you know?”

“You have the look of a boy that’s been thinking. Are you here to listen to another story?”

“Got one to tell, this time,” I said.

“Who goes first?”

It was always polite to let the woman go first, so I quelled my haste and told her she could. She motioned me to come by the tree and sit on a smaller rock, half-hidden by grass. And while the crickets in the shadow tuned up for the evening, she said, “Once there was a dog. This dog was a pretty usual dog, like the ones that would chase you around home if they thought they could get away with it—if they didn’t know you or thought you were up to something the big people might disapprove of. But this dog lived in a graveyard. That is, he belonged to the caretaker. You’ve seen a graveyard before, haven’t you?”

“Like where they took Grandpa.”

“Exactly,” she said. “With pretty lawns, and big white-and-gray stones, and for those who’ve died recently, smaller gray stones with names and flowers and years cut into them. And trees in some

places, with a mortuary nearby made of brick, and a garage full of black cars, and a place behind the garage where you wonder what goes on.” She knew the place, all right. “This dog had a pretty good life. It was his job to keep the grounds clear of animals at night. After the gates were locked, he’d be set loose, and he wandered all night long. He was almost white, you see. Anybody human who wasn’t supposed to be there would think he was a ghost, and they’d run away.

“But this dog had a problem. His problem was, there were rats that didn’t pay much attention to him. A whole gang of rats. The leader was a big one, a good yard from nose to tail. These rats made their living by burrowing under the ground in the old section of the cemetery.”

That did it. I didn’t want to hear any more. The air was a lot colder than it should have been, and I wanted to get home in time for dinner and still be able to eat it. But I couldn’t go just then.

“Now the dog didn’t know what the rats did, and just like you and I, probably, he didn’t much care to know. But it was his job to keep them under control. So one day he made a truce with a couple of cats that he normally tormented and told them about the rats. These cats were scrappy old toms, and they’d long since cleared out the competition of other cats, but they were friends themselves. So the dog made them a proposition. He said he’d let them use the cemetery anytime they wanted, to prowl or hunt in or whatever, if they would put the fear of God into a few of the rats. The cats took him up on it. We get to do whatever we want,’ they said, ‘whenever we want, and you won’t bother us.’ The dog agreed.

“That night the dog waited for the sounds of battle. But they never came. Nary a yowl.” She glared at me for emphasis. “Not a claw scratch. Not even a twitch of tail in the wind.” She took a deep breath and so did I. “Round about midnight the dog went out into the graveyard. It was very dark, and there wasn’t wind or bird or speck of star to relieve the quiet and the dismal inside-of-a-box-came blackness. He sniffed his way to the old part of the graveyard and met with the head rat, who was sitting on a slanty, cracked wooden grave marker. Only his eyes and a tip of tail showed in the dark, but the dog could smell him. ‘What happened to the cats?’ he asked. The rat shrugged his haunches. ‘Ain’t seen any cats,’ he said. ‘What did you think--that you could scare us out with a couple of cats? Ha. Listen--if there had been any cats here tonight, they’d have been strung and hung like meat in the shed, and my young’uns would have grown fat on--’”

“No-o-o!” I screamed, and I ran away from the woman and the tree until I couldn’t hear the story anymore.

“What’s the matter?” she called after me. “Aren’t you going to tell me your story?” Her voice followed me as I ran.

It was funny. That night, I wanted to know what happened to the cats. Maybe nothing had happened to them. Not knowing made my visions even worse—and I didn’t sleep well. But my brain worked like it had never worked before.

The next day, a Saturday, I had an ending—not a very good one in retrospect—but it served to frighten Michael so badly he threatened to tell Mom on me.

“What would you want to do that for?” I asked. “Cripes, I won’t ever tell you a story again if you tell Mom!”

Michael was a year younger and didn’t worry about the future. “You never told me stories before,” he said, “and everything was fine. I won’t miss them.”

He ran down the stairs to the living room. Dad was smoking a pipe and reading the paper, relaxing before checking the irrigation on the north thirty. Michael stood at the foot of the stairs, thinking. Dad was almost down to grab him and haul him upstairs when he made his decision and headed for the kitchen. I knew exactly what he was considering—that Dad would probably laugh and call him a little scaredy-cat. But Mom would get upset and do me in proper.

She was putting a paper form over the kitchen table to mark it for fitting a tablecloth. Michael ran up to her and hung on to a pants leg while I halted at the kitchen door, breathing hard, eyes threatening eternal torture if he so much as peeped. But Michael didn't worry about the future much.

"Mom," he said.

"Cripes!" I shouted, high-pitching on the i. Refuge awaited me in the tractor shed. It was an agreeable place upon hiding place. Mom didn't know I'd be there, but Dad did, and he could mediate.

It took him a half hour to get to me. I sat in the dark behind a workbench, practicing my pouts. He stood in the shaft of light falling from the unpatched chink in the roof. Dust motes maypoled around his legs. "Son," he said. "Mom wants to know where you got that story.

Now, this was a peculiar thing to be asked. The question I'd expected had been, "Why did you scare Michael?" or maybe, "What made you think of such a thing?" But no. Somehow she had plumbed the problem, planted the words in Dad's mouth, and impressed upon him that father-son relationships were temporarily suspended.

"I made it up," I said.

"You've never made up that kind of story before."

"I just started."

He took a deep breath. "Son, we get along real good, except when you lie to me. We know better. Who told you that story?"

This was uncanny. There was more going on than I could understand—there was a mysterious adult thing happening. I had no way around the truth. "An old woman," I said.

Dad sighed even deeper. "What was she wearing?"

"Green dress," I said.

"Was there an old man?"

I nodded.

"Christ," he said softly. He turned and walked out of the shed. From outside he called me to come into the house. I dusted off my overalls and followed him. Michael sneered at me.

"Locked them in coffins with old dead bodies," he mimicked. "Phhht! You're going to get it."

The folks closed the folding door to the kitchen with both of us outside. This disturbed Michael who'd expected instant vengeance. I was too curious and worried to take my revenge on him, so I skulked out the screen door and chased the cat around the house. "Lock you in a coffin!" he screamed.

Mom's voice drifted from behind the louvered doors. "Do you hear that? The poor child's going to have nightmares. It'll warp him."

"Don't exaggerate," Dad said.

"Exaggerate what? That those filthy people are back? Ben, they must be a hundred years old now. They're trying to do the same thing to your son that they did to your brother... and just look at *him*. Living in sin, writing for those hell-spawned girlie magazines."

"He ain't living in sin, he's living alone in an apartment in New York City. And he writes for all kinds of places."

"They tried to do it to you, too! Just thank God your aunt saved you."

"Margie, I hope you don't intend—"

"Certainly do. She knows all about them kind of people. She chased them off once, she can sure do it again!"

All hell had broken loose. I didn't understand half of it, but I could feel the presence of Great Aunt Sybil Danser. I could almost hear her crackling voice and the shustle of her satchel of Billy Graham and Zondervans and little tiny pamphlets with shining light in blue offset on their covers.

I knew there was no way to get the full story from the folks short of listening in, but they'd stopped talking and were sitting in that stony kind of silence that indicated Dad's disgust and Mom's

determination. I was mad that nobody was blaming me, as if I were some idiot child not capable of being bad on my own. I was mad at Michael for precipitating the whole mess.

And I was curious. Were the man and woman more than a hundred years old? Why hadn't I seen them before, in town, or heard about them from other kids? Surely I wasn't the only one they'd seen on the road and told stories to. I decided to get to the source. I walked up to the louvered doors and leaned my cheek against them. "Can I go play at George's?"

"Yes," Mom said. "Be back for evening chores."

George lived on the next farm, a mile and a half east. I took my bike and rode down the old dirt road going south.

They were both under the tree, eating a picnic lunch from a wicker basket. I pulled my bike over and leaned it against the gray rock, shading my eyes to see them more clearly.

"Hello, boy," the old man said. "Ain't seen you in a while."

I couldn't think of anything to say. The woman offered me a cookie, and I refused with a muttered "No, thank you, ma'am."

"Well then, perhaps you'd like to tell us your story."

"No, ma'am."

"No story to tell us? That's odd. Meg was sure you had a story in you someplace. Peeking out from behind your ears maybe, thumbing its nose at us."

The woman smiled ingratiatingly. "Tea?"

"There's going to be trouble," I said.

"Already?" The woman smoothed the skirt in her lap and set a plate of nut bread into it. "Well, it comes sooner or later, this time sooner. What do you think of it, boy?"

"I think I got into a lot of trouble for not much being bad," I said. "I don't know why."

"Sit down, then," the old man said. "Listen to a tale, then tell us what's going on."

I sat down, not too keen about hearing another story but out of politeness. I took a piece of nut bread and nibbled on it as the woman sipped her tea and cleared her throat. "Once there was a city on the shore of a broad blue sea. In the city lived five hundred children and nobody else, because the wind from the sea wouldn't let anyone grow old. Well, children don't have kids of their own, of course, so when the wind came up in the first year the city never grew any larger."

"Where'd all the grown-ups go?" I asked. The old man held his fingers to his lips and shook his head.

"The children tried to play all day, but it wasn't enough. They became frightened at night and had bad dreams. There was nobody to comfort them because only grown-ups are really good at making nightmares go away. Now, sometimes nightmares are white horses that come out of the sea, so the children set up guards along the beaches and fought them back with wands made of blackthorn. But there was another kind of nightmare, one that was black and rose out of the ground, and those were impossible to guard against. So the children got together one day and decided to tell all the scary stories there were to tell, to prepare themselves for all the nightmares. They found it was pretty easy to think up scary stories, and every one of them had a story or two to tell. They stayed up all night spinning yarns about ghosts and dead things, and live things that shouldn't have been, and things that were neither. They talked about death and about monsters that suck blood, about things that live way deep in the earth and long, thin things that sneak through cracks in doors to lean over the beds at night and speak in tongues no one could understand. They talked about eyes without heads, and vice versa, and little blue shoes that walk across a cold empty white room, with no one in them, and a bunk bed that creaks when it's empty, and a printing press that produces newspapers from a city that never was. Pretty soon, the next morning, they'd told all the scary stories. When the black horses came out of the ground the next night, and the white horses from the sea, the children greeted them with cakes and ginger ale, and the

held a big party. They also invited the pale sheet-things from the clouds, and everyone ate hearty and had a good time. ~~One white horse let a little boy ride on it and took him wherever he wanted to go. So there were no more bad dreams in the city of children by the sea.~~

I finished the piece of bread and wiped my hands on my crossed legs. "So that's why you tried to scare me," I said.

She shook her head. "No. I never have a reason for telling a story, and neither should you."

"I don't think I'm going to tell stories anymore," I said. "The folks get too upset."

"Philistines," the old man said, looking off across the fields.

"Listen, young man. There is nothing finer in the world than the telling of tales. Split atoms if you wish, but splitting an infinitive--and getting away with it--is far nobler. Lance boils if you wish, but pricking pretensions is often cleaner and always more fun."

"Then why are Mom and Dad so mad?"

The old man shook his head. "An eternal mystery."

"Well, I'm not so sure," I said. "I scared my little brother pretty bad, and that's not nice."

"Being scared is nothing," the old woman said. "Being bored, or ignorant—now that's a crime."

"I still don't know. My folks say you have to be a hundred years old. You did something to my uncle they didn't like, and that was a long time ago. What kind of people are you, anyway?"

The old man smiled. "Old, yes. But not a hundred."

"I just came out here to warn you. Mom and Dad are bringing out my great aunt, and she's no fun for anyone. You better go away." With that said, I ran back to my bike and rode off, pumping for all I was worth. I was between a rock and a hard place. I loved my folks but I itched to hear more stories. Why wasn't it easier to make decisions?

That night I slept restlessly. I didn't have any dreams, but I kept waking up with something pounding at the back of my head, like it wanted to be let in. I scrunched my face up and pressed my hand back.

At Sunday breakfast, Mom looked across the table at me and put on a kind face. "We're going to pick up Auntie Danser this afternoon, at the airport," she said.

My face went like warm butter.

"You'll come with us, won't you?" she asked. "You always did like the airport."

"All the way from where she lives?" I asked.

"From Omaha," Dad said.

I didn't want to go, but it was more a command than a request. I nodded, and Dad smiled at me around his pipe.

"Don't eat too many biscuits," Mom warned him. "You're putting on weight again."

"I'll wear it off come harvest. You cook as if the whole crew was here, anyway."

"Auntie Danser will straighten it all out," Mom said, her mind elsewhere. I caught the suggestion as a grimace on Dad's face, and the pipe wriggled as he bit down on it harder.

The airport was something out of a TV space movie. It went on forever, with stairways going up to restaurants and big smoky windows that looked out on the screaming jets, and crowds of people, all leaving, except for one pear-shaped figure in a cotton print dress with fat ankles and glasses thick as headlamps. I knew her from a hundred yards.

When we met, she shook hands with Mom, hugged Dad as if she didn't want to, then bent down and gave me a smile. Her teeth were yellow and even, sound as a horse's. She was the ugliest woman I ever seen. She smelled of lilacs. To this day lilacs take my appetite away.

She carried a bag. Part of it was filled with knitting, part with books and pamphlets. I always wondered why she never carried a Bible just Billy Grahams and Zondervans. One pamphlet fell out

and Dad bent to pick it up.

“Keep it, read it,” Auntie Danser instructed him. “Do you good.” She turned to Mom and scrutinized her from the bottom of a swimming pool. “You’re looking good. He must be treating you right.”

Dad ushered us out the automatic doors into the dry heat. Her one suitcase was light as a mummy and probably just as empty. I carried it, and it didn’t even bring sweat to my brow. Her life was not in clothes and toiletry but in the plastic knitting bag.

We drove back to the farm in the big white station wagon. I leaned my head against the cool glass of the rear seat window and considered puking. Auntie Danser, I told myself, was like a mental dose of castor oil. Or like a visit to the dentist. Even if nothing was going to happen her smell presaged disaster, and like a horse sniffing a storm, my entrails worried.

Mom looked across the seat at me—Auntie Danser was riding up front with Dad—and asked, “You feeling okay? Did they give you anything to eat? Anything funny?”

I said they’d given me a piece of nut bread. Mom went, “Oh, Lord.”

“Margie, they don’t work like that. They got other ways.” Auntie Danser leaned over the backseat and goggled at me. “Boy’s just worried. I know all about it. These people and I have had it out before.”

Through those murky glasses, her flat eyes knew me to my young pithy core. I didn’t like being known so well. I could see that Auntie Danser’s life was firm and predictable, and I made a sudden commitment I liked the man and woman. They caused trouble, but they were the exact opposite of my great aunt. I felt better, and I gave her a reassuring grin. “Boy will be okay,” she said. “Just a colic of the upset mind.”

Michael and Barbara sat on the front porch as the car drove up. Somehow a visit by Auntie Danser didn’t bother them as much as it did me. They didn’t fawn over her, but they accepted her without complaining—even out of adult earshot. That made me think more carefully about them. I decided I didn’t love them any the less, but I couldn’t trust them, either. The world was taking sides, and so far on my side I was very lonely. I didn’t count the two old people on my side, because I wasn’t sure they were—but they came a lot closer than anybody in my family.

Auntie Danser wanted to read Billy Graham books to us after dinner, but Dad snuck us out before Mom could gather us together—all but Barbara, who stayed to listen. We watched the sunset from the loft of the old wood barn, then tried to catch the little birds that lived in the rafters. By dark and bedtime I was hungry, but not for food. I asked Dad if he’d tell me a story before bed.

“You know your mom doesn’t approve of all that fairy-tale stuff,” he said.

“Then no fairy tales. Just a story.”

“I’m out of practice, son,” he confided. He looked very sad. “Your mom says we should concentrate on things that are real and not waste our time with make-believe. Life’s hard. I may have to sell the farm, you know, and work for that feed-mixer in Mitchell.”

I went to bed and felt like crying. A whole lot of my family had died that night, I didn’t know exactly how, or why. But I was mad.

I didn’t go to school the next day. During the night I’d had a dream, which came so true and whole to me that I had to rush to the stand of cottonwoods and tell the old people. I took my lunch box and walked rapidly down the road.

They weren’t there. On a piece of wire bradded to the biggest tree they’d left a note on faded brown paper. It was in a strong feminine hand, sepia-inked, delicately scribed with what could have been a goose-quill pen. It said: “We’re at the old Hauskopf farm. Come if you must.”

Not “Come if you can.” I felt a twinge. The Hauskopf farm, abandoned fifteen years ago and never sold, was three miles farther down the road and left on a deep-rutted fork. It took me an hour to g

there.

The house still looked deserted. All the white paint was flaking, leaving dead gray wood. The windows stared. I walked up the porch steps and knocked on the heavy oak door. For a moment I thought no one was going to answer. Then I heard what sounded like a gust of wind, but inside the house, and the old woman opened the door. "Hello, boy," she said. "Come for more stories?"

She invited me in. Wildflowers were growing along the baseboards, and tiny roses peered from the brambles that covered the walls. A quail led her train of inch-and-a-half fluffball chicks from under the stairs, into the living room. The floor was carpeted, but the flowers in the weave seemed more than patterns. I could stare down and keep picking out detail for minutes. "This way, boy," the woman said. She took my hand. Hers was smooth and warm, but I had the impression it was also hard as wood.

A tree stood in the living room, growing out of the floor and sending its branches up to support the ceiling. Rabbits and quail and a lazy-looking brindle cat stared at me from tangles of roots. A wooden bench surrounded the base of the tree. On the side away from us, I heard someone breathing. The old man poked his head around and smiled at me, lifting his long pipe in greeting. "Hello, boy," he said.

"The boy looks like he's ready to tell us a story, this time," the woman said.

"Of course, Meg. Have a seat, boy. Cup of cider for you? Tea? Herb biscuit?"

"Cider, please," I said.

The old man stood and went down the hall to the kitchen. He came back with a wooden tray and three steaming cups of mulled cider. The cinnamon tickled my nose as I sipped.

"Now. What's your story?"

"It's about two hawks," I said, and then hesitated.

"Go on."

"Brother hawks. Never did like each other. Fought for a strip of land where they could hunt."

"Yes?"

"Finally, one hawk met an old crippled bobcat that had set up a place for itself in a rockpile. The bobcat was learning itself magic so it wouldn't have to go out and catch dinner, which was awful hard for it now. The hawk landed near the bobcat and told it about his brother, and how cruel he was. So the bobcat said, 'Why not give him the land for the day? Here's what you can do.' The bobcat told him how he could turn into a rabbit, but a very strong rabbit no hawk could hurt."

"Wily bobcat," the old man said, smiling.

"'You mean, my brother wouldn't be able to catch me?' the hawk asked. 'Course not,' the bobcat said. 'And you can teach him a lesson. You'll tussle with him, scare him real bad—show him what tough animals there are on the land he wants. Then he'll go away and hunt somewheres else.' The hawk thought that sounded like a fine idea. So he let the bobcat turn him into a rabbit, and he hopped back to the land and waited in a patch of grass. Sure enough, his brother's shadow passed by soon, and then he heard a swoop and saw the claws held out. So he filled himself with being mad and jumped up and practically bit all the tail feathers off his brother. The hawk just flapped up and rolled over on the ground, blinking and gawking with his beak wide. 'Rabbit,' he said, 'that's not natural. Rabbits don't act that way.'

"'Round here they do,' the hawk-rabbit said. 'This is a tough old land, and all the animals here know the tricks of escaping from bad birds like you.' This scared the brother hawk, and he flew away as best he could and never came back again. The hawk-rabbit hopped to the rockpile and stood up before the bobcat, saying, 'It worked real fine. I thank you. Now turn me back, and I'll go hunt my land.' But the bobcat only grinned and reached out with a paw and broke the rabbit's neck. Then he ate him, and said, 'Now the land's mine and no hawks can take away the easy game.' And that's how the greed of two hawks turned their land over to a bobcat."

The old woman looked at me with wide baked-chestnut eyes and smiled. "You've got it," she said.

“Just like your uncle. Hasn’t he got it Jack?” The old man nodded and took his pipe from his mouth. “He’s got it fine. He’ll make a good one.”

“Now, boy, why did you make up that story?”

I thought for a moment, then shook my head. “I don’t know,” I said. “It just came up.”

“What are you going to do with the story?”

I didn’t have an answer for that question, either.

“Got any other stories in you?”

I considered, then said, “Think so.”

A car drove up outside, and Mom called my name. The old woman stood and straightened her dress. “Follow me,” she said. “Go out the back door, walk around the house. Return home with them. Tomorrow, go to school like you’re supposed to do. Next Saturday, come back, and we’ll talk some more.”

“Son? You in there?”

I walked out the back and came around to the front of the house. Mom and Auntie Danser waited by the station wagon. “You aren’t allowed out here. Were you in that house?” Mom asked. I shook my head.

My great aunt looked at me with her glassed-in flat eyes and lifted the corners of her lips a little. “Margie,” she said, “go have a look in the windows.”

Mom got out of the car and walked up the porch to peer through the dusty panes. “It’s empty, Sybil.”

“Empty, boy, right?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I wasn’t inside.”

“I could hear you, boy,” she said. “Last night. Talking in your sleep. Rabbits and hawks don’t behave that way. You know it, and I know it. So it ain’t no good thinking about them that way, is it?”

“I don’t remember talking in my sleep,” I said.

“Margie, let’s go home. This boy needs some pamphlets read into him.”

Mom got into the car and looked back at me before starting the engine. “You ever skip school again? I’ll strap you black and blue. It’s real embarrassing having the school call, and not knowing where you are. Hear me?”

I nodded.

Everything was quiet that week. I went to school and tried not to dream at night and did everything boys are supposed to do. But I didn’t feel like a boy. I felt something big inside, and no amount of Billy Grahams and Zondervans read at me could change that feeling.

I made one mistake, though. I asked Auntie Danser why she never read the Bible. This was in the parlor one evening after dinner and cleaning up the dishes. “Why do you want to know, boy?” she asked.

“Well, the Bible seems to be full of fine stories, but you don’t carry it around with you. I just wondered why.”

“Bible is a good book,” she said. “The only good book. But it’s difficult. It has lots of camouflage. Sometimes—” She stopped. “Who put you up to asking that question?”

“Nobody,” I said.

“I heard that question before, you know,” she said. “Ain’t the first time I been asked. Somebody else asked me, once.”

I sat in my chair, stiff as a ham.

“Your father’s brother asked me that once. But we won’t talk about him, will we?”

I shook my head.

Next Saturday I waited until it was dark and everyone was in bed. The night air was warm, but I was sweating more than the warm could cause as I rode my bike down the dirt road, lamp beam swinging back and forth. The sky was crawling with stars, all of them looking at me. The Milky Way seemed to touch down just beyond the road, like I might ride straight up it if I went far enough.

I knocked on the heavy door. There were no lights in the windows and it was late for old folks to be up, but I knew these two didn't behave like normal people. And I knew that just because the house looked empty from the outside didn't mean it was empty within. The wind rose up and beat against the door, making me shiver. Then it opened. It was dark for a moment, and the breath went out of me. Two pairs of eyes stared from the black. They seemed a lot taller this time. "Come in, boy," Jack whispered.

Fireflies lit up the tree in the living room. The brambles and wildflowers glowed like weeds on a sunny floor. The carpet crawled, but not to my feet. I was shivering in earnest now, and my teeth chattered.

I only saw their shadows as they sat on the bench in front of me. "Sit," Meg said. "Listen closely. You've taken the fire, and it glows bright. You're only a boy, but you're just like a pregnant woman now. For the rest of your life you'll be cursed with the worst affliction known to humans. Your skin will twitch at night. Your eyes will see things in the dark. Beasts will come to you and beg to be ridden. You'll never know one truth from another. You might starve, because few will want to encourage you. And if you do make good in this world, you might lose the gift and search forever after, in vain. Some will say the gift isn't special. Beware them. Some will say it is special, and beware them, too. And some—"

There was a scratching at the door. I thought it was an animal for a moment. Then it cleared its throat. It was my great aunt.

"Some will say you're damned. Perhaps they're right. But you're also enthused. Carry it lightly and responsibly."

"Listen in there. This is Sybil Danser. You know me. Open up."

"Now stand by the stairs, in the dark where she can't see," Jack said. I did as I was told. One of the doors—I couldn't tell which—opened the door, and the lights went out in the tree, the carpet stilled, and the brambles were snuffed. Auntie Danser stood in the doorway, outlined by star glow, carrying her knitting bag. "Boy?" she asked. I held my breath.

"And you others, too."

The wind in the house seemed to answer. "I'm not too late," she said. "Damn you, in truth, damn you to hell! You come to our towns, and you plague us with thoughts no decent person wants to think. Not just fairy stories, but telling the way people live and why they shouldn't live that way! Your very breath is tainted! Hear me?" She walked slowly into the empty living room, feet clonking on the wooden floor. "You make them write about us and make others laugh at us. Question the way we think. Condemn our deepest prides. Pull out our mistakes and amplify them beyond all truth. What right do you have to take young children and twist their minds?"

The wind sang through the cracks in the walls. I tried to see if Jack or Meg was there, but only shadows remained.

"I know where you come from, don't forget that! Out of the ground! Out of the bones of old wicked Indians! Shamans and pagan dances and worshiping dirt and filth! I heard about you from the old squaws on the reservation. Frost and Spring, they called you, signs of the turning year. Well, now you got a different name! Death and demons, I call you, hear me?"

She seemed to jump at a sound, but I couldn't hear it. "Don't you argue with me!" she shrieked. She took her glasses off and held out both hands. "Think I'm a weak old woman, do you? You don't know how deep I run in these communities! I'm the one who had them books taken off the shelves. Remember me? Oh, you hated it--not being able to fill young minds with your pestilence. Took the

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