

The image shows a handprint on a dark, textured surface, possibly wood or stone. The handprint is a light, almost white color, contrasting sharply with the dark background. The fingers are spread out, and the palm is visible. The texture of the surface is rough and uneven, with some lighter and darker patches. The title 'The Cipher' is written in a white, serif font, centered over the handprint. The word 'The' is smaller and positioned above 'Cipher'.

The
Cipher

KATHE
KOJA



**PRAISE FOR
KATHE KOJA'S
THE CIPHER**

Winner of the Horror Writers of America Bram Stoker Award and the *Locus* Award for Best First Novel

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Please turn the page for more extraordinary acclaim ...

**PRAISE FOR
KATHE KOJA'S
"Masterpiece"*
SKIN**

"CUTTING EDGE HORROR! SKIN SLICES SO DEEPLY INTO THE TISSUE OF MODERN SUB-CULTURES, DON'T BE SURPRISED IF IT LEAVES SCARS."

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AND KATHE KOJA—**

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Also by Kathe Koja
STRANGE ANGELS
SKIN
BAD BRAINS

THE CIPHER

Kathe Koja

THE CIPHER

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Never never never: The rebirth of *The Cipher*
by Kathe Koja

It's been twenty years, and we've still not gotten to the bottom of the Funhole—this novel's original title—that singular object, or process, or abyss; whatever it was, or is.

Never seen anything like that before.

It was my first novel, the first release in the Dell Abyss line. At book signings, people asked me, "Where do you get your ideas?" I didn't know how to answer them then, and I still don't. The Funhole's origin is in the id, the construct it most resembles; the word itself came from Rick Lieder, my partner then, my partner now.

Other novels followed, 15 as I write this, but *The Cipher* continued to have a singular presence in that roster. People either loved it or despised it; people know the dark is there. One person wrote to me to say the book had made him illogically afraid of his kitchen cabinets. Another said she was certain she knew how that room with the hole would smell. *Everybody* said that they disliked Nakota, and that they knew someone exactly, just exactly, like her.

Never saw it coming.

Never meant to hurt you.

What would it be like, to stumble into something you truly can't explain? Something that stands in opposition to reality, yet is the realest fucking thing you've ever seen? Death can be like that. Love can be like that. And fear attends them both.

"Never" is like "always," an absolute. And in absolute darkness, when you can't see your hand in front of your face—is that your hand?—you may find that you can see other things, things that have always been there. And what is there can see you, too.

Welcome, or welcome back, to the Funhole and *The Cipher*.

Conscious or unconscious, it doesn't matter in the real world.
Rick Lieder

Nakota, who saw it first: long spider legs drawn up beneath her ugly skirt, wise mouth pursed into nothing like a smile. Sitting in my dreary third-floor flat, on a dreary thrift shop chair, the window light behind her dull and gray as dirty fur and she alive, giving off her dark continuous sparks. Around us the remains of this day's argument, squashed beer cans, stolen bar ashtray sloped full. "You know it," she said, "the black-hole thing, right? In space? Big dark butthole," and she laughed, showing those tiny teeth, fox teeth, not white and not ivory yellow either like most people's, almost bluish as with some undreamed-of decay beneath them. Nakota would rot differently from other people; she would be the first to admit it.

She lit a cigarette. She was the only one of my friends who still smoked, without defiance or guilty flourish, smoked like she breathed but not as often. Black cigarettes, and sweetened mineral water. "So. You gonna touch it today?"

"No."

Another unsmile. "Wiener." I shrugged. "Not really." "Nicholas Wiener."

So I didn't answer her. Back to the kitchen. Get your own mineral water. The beer was almost too cold, it hurt going down. When I came back to the living room, what passed for it—big windows, small floor space, couch, bed and bad chair—she smiled at me, the real thing this time. Sometimes I thought I was the only one who ever saw that she was beautiful, who ever had. God knows there wasn't much, but I had eyes for it all.

"Let's go look at it," she said.

The one argument there was no resisting. Quietly, we had learned to do it quietly, down the stairs, turn right on the first landing (second floor to you), past the new graffiti that advised LEESA I A HORE (no phone number, naturally; thanks a lot assholes) and the unhealthy patina of aging slurs, down the hall to what seemed, might be, some sort of storage room. Detergent bottles, tools, when you opened the door, jumble of crap on the floor, and beyond that a place, a space, the dust around it pale and easily dispersed.

Behold the Funhole.

"Shit," Nakota said, as she always did, her prayer of wonder. She knelt, bending low and supporting herself on straight-stiff arms, closer than I ever did, staring at it. Into it. It was as if she could kneel there all day, painful position but you knew she didn't feel it, looking and looking. I took my spot, a little behind her, to the left, my own prayer silence: what to say before the unspeakable?

Black. Not darkness, not the absence of light but living black. Maybe a foot in diameter, maybe a little more. Pure black and the sense of pulsation, especially when you looked at it too closely, the sense of something not living but alive, not even *something* but some—process. Rabbithole, some strange motherfucking wonderland, you bet. Get somebody named Alice, tie a string to her.... We'd discussed it all, would discuss it again, probably tonight, and Nakota would sit as she always did, straight-backed as a priestess, me getting ripped and ripping into poetry, writing shit that was worse than unreadable in the morning, when I would wake—more properly afternoon, and she long gone, off to her job, unsmiling barmaid at Club 22 and me late again for the video store. She might not come again for days, or a day, one day maybe never. I knew: friends, yeah, but it was the Funhole she wanted. You can know something and never think about it, if you're any good at it. Me, now, I've been avoiding so much for so long that the real trick becomes thinking straight.

Beside me, her whisper: “Look at it.”

— I sometimes thought it had a smell, that negative place, we’d made the expected nervous fart jokes, the name itself—well, you can guess. But there was some kind of smell, not bad, not even remotely identifiable, but there, oh my yes. I would know that smell forever, know it in the dark (ho-ho) from a city block away. I couldn’t forget something that weird.

For the millionth time: “Wouldn’t it be *wild* to go *down* there?”

And me, on cue and by rote, “Yeah. But we’re not.”

Its edges were downhill and smooth. They asked for touch. Not me, said the little red hen, the little chicken, uh-uh. Smell rising around me, it did that sometimes, Nakota insisted she could almost catch the scent at its strongest (which meant nothing, she was a nose-drop addict, she couldn’t smell her own shit which she claimed didn’t stink anyway) rising humid as a steam cloud but who knew from what fluid, what wetness, its humidity had birth? A moist center? Things, inside? That was Nakota’s guess, but I knew, absolutely knew that it was the Funhole itself, the black fact of it, sending up that tangible liquidy smell.

How long, tonight? An hour? Twenty minutes? No telling till we got back to my flat, checked the clock; it was time to do that. Rising, more reluctant, her hair in the dusty half-dark as black as the Funhole, short chop swinging around those fierce cheekbones, elbows bending as she sat straight and then stood; my knees cracked, we both jumped, then smiled on a breath, got out.

Up the stairs, down my hall. “You coming in?”

Stopping before we reached my door, her headshake. “No.”

“Got your smokes?”

She patted her skirt pocket, she liked those stupid ugly resale-shop skirts, fake fifties poodle skirts with poodles that she restitched into gargoyles, fanged lizards worthy of the most hideous touristy fake kimonos. That, and T-shirts of bands so obscure even I’d never heard of them. God. Half the time she looked like a bag of rags someone’d left out for the Salvation Army. Or the garbage man.

“How ’bout your nose drops?” You know, you should shut up, I advised myself, but not fast enough to miss her scorn: “My mother’s dead, thanks, I look after myself now.” Then a grave glance, the closest she came to kindly. “I’ll see you,” she said, squeezed my elbow—her signature good-bye—and left, that graceful trudge, puke-colored skirt swinging around thin hips. What, me disappointed?

I used to know those hips, yeah, felt the pointy midge of those bones, bony back, small small tits, I once compared them to SuperBalls and she laughed through her fury; she couldn’t help it, she always did like my jokes. The last time we’d made love, measure it in years, it had been at my drunken insistence and bad, oh, was it bad? It was so bad that halfway into it, and her, I knew in sudden bright horror that she was actually being *nice* to me. This was so disorienting that I crawled off her, away, into the bathroom where I sat hunched among the towels heaped wet and dirty on the wet and dirty floor, close by the toilet, shaking my head. She appeared, naked and thin as a ruler, stood in the diffused light of the bedroom and observed that she had never actually made a man sick before. I think it was her smile, all teeth, that made me finally barf.

But: that cold grin, Nakota, I wanted her still, always, in the dreamy way you want to dive the Marianas trench, or walk in space: you know you never will, so it’s okay to moon over it. Like mooning over the Funhole, only not quite. Long ago she had made it plain that those days were over, her deliberate graft of a scab over the ridiculous wound of my love, or something equally stupid but just as painful; a romantic, me, in my own sick wistful way. I can take a hint, but I can’t live with it.

Inside I cranked shut the windows I’d opened for her cigarette stink, leaving the one by the couchbed open; I’d always liked night air, especially when I was a kid and was told it was bad for me. Shut that window! You’ll get pneumonia! Very cool outside tonight, maybe even kissing forty; stupid Nakota, no jacket. You’ll get pneumonia.

Hunger headache, in the mirror my sallow face pale. Okay, what's to eat. I hated to shop, it a turned into shit eventually anyway, so as a result there was usually very little to eat and none of it very good. Or fresh, but I was inured to mold, I could eat anything and keep it down. Beer kills the germs, told people. Tonight it was cracker-and-peanut-butter sandwiches, the peanut butter cheap and thick, the consistency, I told myself as the crackers broke and crumbled, of actual shit. Though of course I had never eaten any, not that I remembered, and that's the sort of thing you would remember, isn't it? What would happen if you stuck food down the Funhole?

"God, stop it," mumbling aloud around a mouthful of sludge like some derelict in the park, shut up, shut up, drink some beer, read the paper. Ann Landers, my boyfriend wants to secrete stuff in my root cellar, I'm only eleven so what the hell? CITY FUNDS NEW SEWAGE PLANT. Imagine that. Two new movies opening, one about sex and one not. Won't see either, I get enough movies at work. Video Hut, Assistant Manager speaking, may I help you? The screens going every open hour of the day, pushing this movie, that movie, trailer after trailer until we can all, even the dumbest of us, recite them word for word. Once in despair I tried to melt my Video Hut name badge in the microwave: stylized red popcorn box, kernels round as breasts popping voluptuously free above my misspelled name, the whole lurid thing nearly three inches wide. Wouldn't melt, either. I don't know what it did to the microwave.

I took a beer to bed with me, along with a new old copy of *Wise Blood*. Flannery O'Connor, God I love her. She died before I was born. I have everything she's ever written. That night, knees up under the fraying red quilt, I didn't read so much as flip, skipping around to my favorite parts, I could recite them but at least they were worth recitation. I was feeling okay from the beer, halfway reading and halfway thinking of Nakota, flabby little halfway erection, cool night air turning cold on my cheek. Was the air from the Funhole cool, too, if you put your face by it? Directly above it, say? nice and close? Would there be a sensation of vacuum? suction, gentle pull like a lover's tug to bed?

"Stop it," alarmed, pulling myself upright, scared, yeah, wouldn't anyone be? No. Nakota wouldn't. She'd go like a zombie, sleepwalking down into the lip, so soft, opened like a kiss, black kiss to suck you down, suck you off, *yeah* stupid tentpole dick and where are *you* going, you fucking dummy? I was shaking, I put everything down, got up fast and turned on the stereo, loud, rude-boy reggae. I did not like this, I did not like any of this at all, do they call it a siren song because it cuts through everything else?

Beer. Beer cures everything, maybe even this.

Standing at the refrigerator, oblivious of its stored-cooler scent, can burning cold into my hand, I do not want to go in there, in the dark, I don't even want to think about seeing the, seeing it, drink, drink and fall asleep, and I did.

. Woke up with a headache that moved immediately to my stomach in a slow barrel roll of nausea as soon as I sat up, but there were no voices in my head but my own and I was glad, glad as I cursed my way into the shower, glad as I drove breakfastless to work beneath trees bare as telephone poles and signs for things I never did or would. In my pocket, hasty hidden crush like pornography, the bad poem (poems?) I had written in my fear; I would not read them, I was ashamed to throw them away.

At a red light I dared to pull one out, unroll it: the first thing I saw was the word "nacht," and next to it something scribbled out so ferociously the paper was bent outward. Or inward. Depending on your bent.

Long spin of the workday, coworkers joking in humors I never felt, dreaming over my register, watching customers thread the aisles like rats in a maze: good rat, here's your titty video. I had started

there, Video Hut, some months before, and by virtue of being the employee least likely to say no became assistant manager. Shitty pay but I bet you knew that; really, my needs were even smaller than my check. Making no living as a card-carrying poet had accustomed me to a philosophy that made minimalism seem lavish, I had lived like a cockroach for so long that a full tank, a full refrigerator were no longer even desirable: I mean, what would I do with it all?

So: my squalor: third-floor flat, one small room and two smaller, couchbed and shitty furniture, real good stereo and even better prints—Klee and Bacon and Bosch predominant, the best ones clipped from back issues of *Smithsonian* that I got free from the throwaway pile at the library—and my favorite, a black-and-white photograph of Nakota, wrapped in rags like cerements, rising from the tomb of my bathtub, in my other, seedier place, though God knows this one was pretty seedy. At least I never cared when it got wrecked during a party.

It was at one of my parties that we found the Funhole, not, I think now, by accident but by secret true design; I understand why they call it looking for trouble. Did I say wrecked? Especially that night: detritus smeared all over, puddles of spilled beer and toppled ashtrays and some crusted cheeselike stain on the shower curtain that even I, drunk as I was (and I was), couldn't bear to look at. Nobody was left but me and Nakota, and some girl whose name I still don't know, she openmouthed, as dead-looking as any live person can be, her skin a special color and her wingback hair stiff with gel and still sprightly, as if, ignoring its comatose platform, it was ready for more fun.

"Any more beer left?" I could hardly talk, but I was skimming, yeah, I felt *good*. Nakota, snorting some weird concoction she got from this guy in Southfield, nostrils rimmed in alarming pink, shook her head to let me know she disapproved of my addiction while coddling hers.

I don't know, now, how we got into the second-floor hall, but I recall the still, dank basement air, the way it smelled; I have a thing for smells, you must have noticed. Nakota was the one who opened the door: I definitely remember that, and her hand as she pulled me inside. Terrier instinct for the Big Bad, that's what I think now, but then? who knows, maybe I thought I was going to get laid or something. Lucky me.

Dark inside, and so drunk I almost fell—can you imagine?—right across it, right *into* it maybe; she grabbed my sleeve, ripped it to the cuff. Her voice, her *growl*: "*Look,*" pointing me, "look at that."

Just as it is, no bigger or smaller, and we stood there so long I began to believe I was hallucinating, not only the Funhole but everything around me; it was that strange. The coarse dark of the room itself, the mashed cleanser boxes and the coiled piles of rags, Nakota's breathing like a runaway train, and that, it, before me, defying disbelief. You always think you'd like it if the Twilight Zone came true. You can forget that shit.

"*Shit,*" said Nakota.

I don't remember getting back to my flat, don't remember anything though I would love to now. Waking to the urgent need to piss and vomit, with luck not simultaneously, noticing in passing that the passed-out hair-girl was gone and Nakota, sitting up, awake, yeah, probably hadn't even been to sleep yet. She gave me a nod as I stumbled past her, another on my slower, more painful way back.

"Let's go," she said, for the first time, "look at it."

She named it, of course, it was the kind of thing she was best at. Named it and claimed it, although I wasn't about to fight her for mineral rights. Frankly I was scared of it, not as much then as I am now, but scared as any reasonably normal person would be.

"Who knows what the hell it is?" arguing over instant coffee (me) and sluggish mineral water (her). The flat reeked of smoke; we'd been fighting, slow and tense, for hours already. Never questioning it, even then, never a shred of doubt, just the birth of the eternal disagreement. Because how could we, how could anyone deny that calm black fact, stationed there on the floor in a crummy

unused storage room in a crummier building on a street no developer would ever claim? No romance about this, not at least to me: is romance possible, with a cast, a slant, this painfully oblique?—

Speculation, sure. Where'd it come from, where—Nakota's first, still most passionate conce—
—did it lead to? “If you went *down* there,” her eyes all shine.

“If *you* went down there.”

“Oh *yeah*.”

“That's what I'm afraid of.” Wouldn't you be?

Had someone somehow put it there? She scoffed, and I had to agree; it was of no one's making, not a thing like that. Did it just grow there? She, enamored, proffered that theory and had it embellished past baroque before I could even say yes or no: what strange seed, she came back to that idea over and over, what could have the beginnings necessary for the making of something like that?

“It's alive.” Her ominous smile.

“It is not,” knowing we were both wrong but not able to say how. “It's not even an it, Nakota it's a, it's—”

“A what? A place? A condition?” What a sneer, exquisite as a skeleton's bony glare, cigarette hanging out of her thin mouth, black-against her sallow skin. “You don't know any more than I do.”

She was right about that, though we did our best to find out. Strange that I never went without her, never checked it out on my own. Was I afraid? Sure, but not for the reasons you'd think. From the first she was first, me hanging a little behind, her idea to wield the flashlight (no good), her idea to throw something down it (an asphalt rock plucked from the parking lot, not too big and not too small it made no sound, no sound at all, can you imagine how spooky that is?). An empty glass: nothing, though the glass was warm when it came back, the heavy string that held it warm too. A camera, my single idea, but we never did, couldn't figure out how to make it work, and we couldn't afford one that would shoot by itself. A piece of paper, her idea (that should have been mine, some poet I am) but nothing still.

Talking it over, and over and over, theories abundant, her eyes slitted and hands not so much expressive as martial, me with my hesitancy and my beer, building fences for her to jump.

Just like now, today, the phone with its irritable little buzz: “Video Hut, howmaylhelphyou.”

“Hey Nicholas.” Over the phone she sounded colder than normal, but for her that *was* normal just her phone voice, she would have made a great Inquisitor. “I'm coming over tonight.”

“Yeah?” She wasn't coming to savor my presence, which gave me the right to fuck with her, little and in a joshing way. “I was planning on going out tonight. Maybe tomorrow.”

“I'll be there after work.”

She was, too, still in her barmaid outfit, which looked better than her regular clothes; at least everything was the same color, a decent black. She had something in a medium-sized paper bag; she held it like it was heavy. Seeing it made me nervous, I didn't know why, but with Nakota you never knew anyway, you never got any warning. “What's that?” I said.

“You'll see. Ready?” She was. In fact almost jittery, which made me more nervous still. But I'm stupid. I go along with stuff.

“Let's go,” I said.

Careful and quiet as always; still it was a wonder no one ever saw us, or that we never saw anyone. Maybe everybody in the building was in on our little secret. It wasn't the kind of thing you'd talk about, none of us ever talked to each other anyway, I couldn't identify half of my neighbors by sight. I only knew the ones who were close by or obnoxious. Just like life itself.

When we got into the room Nakota did a weird thing: she looked for a lock, swore when there was none. Carefully she set the bag down. “What're you going to do?” I said, standing a little farther back than usual. “Tie me up and throw me in?”

She looked almost sorry she hadn't thought of that herself. "Good thinking, but no. It is an experiment, though," and she reached for the bag, pulled it down and away. "Something we haven't tried before."

A big pickle jar, gallon jar, filled with bugs.

All kinds of bugs: flies and roaches and beetles and mosquitoes, even a couple of dragonflies. It was beautiful, kind of, and kind of nauseating too. "Why aren't they eating each other?" I asked, and realized I was whispering.

Nakota whispered too. "I sprayed some shit in there," and, declining to elaborate, pushed the jar, nearer and nearer the Funhole, till it sat at the lip itself, far closer than we had ever dared to go.

"Now what?"

"Now we wait awhile." Her voice was shaking, she was so excited. "See what happens."

We waited quite a while, there in the dark, my back against the unlocked door, Nakota for once at my side. Her scent was higher, her breath never slowed; she tried to smoke but I told her no, not in that airless firetrap, firm whisper, as firm as I ever got with her anyway, and she gave in. The insects jumbled, up and down, fighting the barrier they couldn't see, then, "Look," her sharp whisper but I was looking already, staring, watching as the bugs, one by one, began to drop, dying, to the floor of the jar, to whirl in minute contortions, to, oh Jesus, to *change*: an extra pair of wings, a spare head, two spare heads, colors beyond the real, Nakota was breathing like a steam engine, I heard that hoarseness in my ear, smelled her hot stale-cigarette breath, saw a roach grow legs like a spider's, saw a dragonfly split down the middle and turn into something else that was no kind of insect at all.

Finally they were all dead, stayed dead for a long time, or maybe it only felt long. I got courage enough to reach for the jar but Nakota cut me off: what instinct told her that?

"Wait," she said, hand on my arm, voice very very dry.

And they boiled up, glass-bound airborne convulsion of wings and legs and shiny bodies and dead colors, mashed together like food in a blender, round and round so fast that the jar rocked on the floor, tiny polka till it finally spun still and stayed. My mouth was open. It took effort to shut it.

Nakota said, "Now."

I did not want to touch that jar.

It was hot, I snatched my hand away, more cautiously used the front of my T-shirt to twist off the lid. "Aw *shit*," and just looking made me miserable, I had to turn my head away. Nakota took the jar carefully into her lap and, to my disgust, began picking through its contents.

"Nakota—"

"Shut up," mildly, then, "Look at this."

"No." I sat back down, head canted back against the door, eyes closed as she went through her nauseating autopsy, listening to her small murmurs of surprise. Finally I heard the lid screw on, felt her hand on my shoulder.

"Nicholas. Look. It's not that bad."

"I don't want to." But of course I did.

It really wasn't that bad, if you had a strong stomach. She had handpicked the best pieces, the strangest I should say: tiniest heads on double-jointed necks, a little splay of wings, four to the bunch, the half-intact body of the cockroach with the long spiderlegs. Her trophies, plucked from the underworld, displayed on a dusty floor. She was smiling, she touched my arm.

"Aren't they beautiful?"

"No," I said, and they weren't, not to me. I had no desire to touch them but I did: to please her, yeah. Stupid reason, I know. Chances are she couldn't have cared less. Balancing the least objectionable, the four-leaf-clover wings, admiring despite myself their crazed patterning, so delicately etched and slanted glyphs in a language I could never hope to master. All at once I had a horrifying

urge to eat those wings, stick them in my mouth, crunch their altered sweetness and I thrust them away, literally, pushed my arms out at Nakota; the wings fell gently to the floor.

“Take it easy,” angrily, rescuing them in one cradling hand. After a moment she said, “I need a bag or something.”

All the way upstairs I fought the image, mutant bodies whirling in blind hurricane, came back with an empty plastic bread bag that said “Nature’s Wheat.” She filled it with her prizes, all the care of a researcher with difficult data, knotted the bag with meticulous ease.

“So.” I wouldn’t look at it, nodding to indicate the horrible mess in the jar. “What’re you going to do with that?”

She shrugged. “Throw it away, I guess.”

“In the Dumpster?”

“Why not?”

Why not? I insisted on wrapping it back in its paper bag, I wanted to make her carry it but I knew she wouldn’t. Careful down the stairs, holding it as far away from me as I could.

“I have never,” I said, “understood the word ‘gruesome’ before.”

“It’s not that bad.”

Lots of trash in the Dumpster. Worried, I perched on the shaky ledge of a rusty black Toyota, rearranging junk, slick snotty-feeling trash bags, the better to stuff you into oblivion my dear. I made a joke about disposing the bodies, turned and saw no one. Bitch. Took her bugs and went home. The Toyota creaked, I jumped down, went upstairs. No chance of eating, uh-uh, and when I slept it was to dreams of pain, infestation of tiny vengeance and no matter how frantically I waved my arms, they found a way in anyway.

Early, and hot, and inexplicably crowded, me jammed ass to belly with, my luck, not Nakota: an opening, the Incubus Gallery, some friends of hers had a show. Metalworker, and everything looked like crucified clowns.

“They make money off this shit?”

“You used to sell your poems,” Nakota hissed back, nasty, but technically she was wrong: they were printed, my poems, my terrible American haiku, but no one ever actually paid me for them. Would I be working at Video Hut if there was any other way? Still I suppose I deserved to fail: with the black towering inspiration like the Funhole before me, what was I making of it?

All through the opening, as we drank cheap bad wine out of little plastic cups that smelled like mold, Nakota kept one hand in her jacket pocket: you could see her fingers moving in there, gently, as she talked. She had them with her, she whispered, the bugs in a new heavy plastic envelope; her eyes were shiny, she was wearing a T-shirt that read, in dripping shock-show letters, “Ant Farm.” “Joke,” she said, smugly patting her tits.

“Stop playing with yourself,” I told her, “it’s not worth it.”

When the wine was gone I made her leave; she didn’t want to but she did want to show me the bugs. We drove to a coffee shop down the street from Club 22, she had to be to work later, sat in an orange laminate booth and drank coffee worse than the wine, her spindly legs jittering, insect dance; tried not to think that.

“Runes,” she said.

“Runes my ass. What do you mean, runes?”

“I’m serious. I think they’re some kind of language.”

I had had somewhat the same idea, but hearing her say it pissed me off, made me somehow nervous too; Nakota’s notions had taken me places that I had never dreamed of going, but the places

were rarely good ones. “You’ve been reading too much Weekly World News,” I said, looking down into my cup. “‘Giant Baby Born to Dead Man,’ all that shit.”

Like handling filigree, fresh plastic parting to show me her remnant pets, and “Come on, not here,” and she ignored me, and again I looked. This time I saw the beauty, if there is beauty in death, little weird corpses I didn’t want to touch.

“Can’t you see them? Look,” her stubby chewed nail a breath above one wing, slow limn of intricate traceries. “Look at that.”

“Greek to me,” I said, as coldly as I could, sitting deliberately back, the booth my temporary limit. “Maybe it helps to be crazy,” but it was really no use, and a small part of me even enjoyed seeing that shine to her again, a glow like the makeup I knew she never wore, her hands gentle as a mother’s as she put them back, musing tilt as she lifted the coffee cup in those newly nurturing hands.

“I thought, what about a mouse,” she said.

At first I didn’t understand, then when I did felt sick. “Oh come on,” pushing my own cup away, “aren’t the bugs bad enough? How gross do you want to get, anyway?”

“Who’re you, the Humane Society? It would just be a fucking *mouse*, Nicholas.”

She was serious. The mad scientist. And a part of me wondered, too, with an ugly curiosity, just what might happen to one of our furry friends dangled down that gaping blackness, what it might look like if it survived the trip; watch that first step, it’s an asskicker. My wonder drove me out of the booth, to sit grimly in the car while she finished—and she took her fucking time about it, you may be sure—and I said nothing until we sat idling outside Club 22, rhythmic slow cough of the exhaust, desultory rain on the windshield and reggae very softly on the radio.

“Come on, Nakota,” and I touched her, something I rarely did anymore, my fingers as gentle on her wrist as hers had been on the insects. “You don’t really want to do that, do you? Do you?”

Swiveling on the seat, hair swinging with the motion, mouth small and meaner than I had ever seen it: “You’re so stupid, Nicholas. You’ll always be stupid, and you know why? Do you want to know why you’ll always be stupid? It’s because you’re afraid to be anything but.” She didn’t bang the door—she had never been a door slammer—but I drove away as if she had.

No call, nothing, for two, three days. Fine. I could live the rest of my life without seeing what happens to a mouse when it kisses death, especially weird death; but her words hurt me, irritated me like a splinter growing up to be a sore. Afraid. Don’t be a stupid macho bastard, I told myself, and meant it, but it wasn’t so much the accusation of fear as the implication that she was somehow—it sounds ridiculous—intellectually braver than I, that she had the guts to push a thing past its limits, to turn it upside down and shake it with all her might, when I was frightened to handle it at all. Maybe it really was as petty-simple as who’s the better man; I’d like to think I’m smarter than that, but who knows. At least my own stupidity can’t surprise me much anymore.

It was stupid to miss her, but I did that too, and felt not bad at all but even justified: she was pain in the ass like none other, bossy and reckless and careless of my objections and especially my feelings, but she was my partner in this, she had been there from the start, she *knew*. Most of all, she was Nakota, and that was changeless as the Funhole itself.

Guess who called who.

“I can come over right now,” she said, and, I thought to her credit, there was no triumph in her voice. When she arrived, I knew why: box in her hand, tiny scramblings inside, the sound of scared little feet.

My face did something that even felt ugly, but surprised? No. Not really. She knew it, too. She set the box down on the kitchen table, moved across the room to sit, smoking, on the edge of the closed couchbed.

“Come on, admit it,” she said. “You want to know too.”

“Yeah, just like I want to know how I’ll look when I’m dead, but I’m not in a hurry for that either. For God’s sake, Nakota! What’s next, a baby?”

“A shitty little pet-store rat is hardly a human being,” but there was something there I didn’t like at all, maybe the too obvious disgust at my words, the shifty overplay. Maybe she knew it too, heard a greed even she didn’t want to know she had. Whatever, she turned away, profile hidden by the clean swing of her hair, and an illogic memory came to me: she in my arms in some ice-cold bedroom red print sleeping bag pulled half around us, me near sleep and chewing with my lips a piece of her hair as it lay across my face. I put my hand up, hiding or warding, I didn’t want to see her just then. When I looked up she was looking right at me.

“You don’t have to go with me,” she said.

Do you even have to ask?

Crouching beside her, hating my own excitement, her fingers blunt and steady as she knotted handmade fishing-line harness around the mouse’s chest and back, and I said something, nervous stupid whisper about nice job and she looked at me, very seriously, and said, “I always think things through.” The mouse, nose going a mile a minute, squirming in a terror that reached crescendo as Nakota’s firm dangle brought it over the maw of the Funhole: to the mouse it must have looked like Armageddon, deeper than death, and its back arched in a spasm so fierce that I thought the harness would snap and the mouse fall to an unexplored death, but Nakota’s work was good and the fishing line held.

“Now,” she said.

I looked, then, not at the mouse descending, but at her, so close to the edge, the slow untremored movement of her hand, the calm track of her eyes as she watched the process she had started move relentlessly to fruition, but there was a cool frustration there too, unsatisfied, and would be until she made that trek herself; not as long as I’m alive. As the mouse went deeper I snatched a glance, its whiteness a living shock against the Funhole, its claws seeking purchase on what could not be climbed, and I thought, Something bad will happen now, worse than the bugs.

But nothing did. The mouse went deeper still, deep until we could barely see its color, and Nakota said, without turning her head, “Maybe you were—”

and a blast of fur and fluid hit her right in the face, she cried out, made as if to scrape crookedly at her fouled eyes and I saw her knee move, heedless, horrifyingly close and I grabbed her and hauled her sideways as a puff of sweet air came out of the Funhole, heaven’s air might smell so good. Shaking, so hard I could barely sit up, but my grip on Nakota was strong enough to hurt.

“Ow,” she said, and I let her go, to wipe twohanded at herself, T-shirt up like a towel, and I stared at her breasts as if I had never seen them before. The T-shirt came away gummy. She reached fingers like feelers into her hair, gave her head a gentle shake which dislodged something, some piece and “Fucking A,” she said, and incredibly she laughed, holding up a tail, part of a tail, that had turned to bright primary mosaic and was firm as a rock; she waved it to demonstrate, shook her head again and found a foot. The toes had split and splayed, the claws gone bigger than the foot itself, enormous distended and humped and hideous and she laughed again, really delighted, and I saw a shred of something slick and red stuck to the side of her mouth, etched laugh line of horrible mirth, and I scrambled past her, pushing her nearly as hard as I had held her, out out out of my way.

When she at last emerged I was sitting on the landing, as far away from the door as I could go without actually deserting her. Nothing could have forced me back, maybe not even a scream, her scream, who knows. Anyway, anything that would make Nakota scream would probably scare me into catatonia. I still felt sick, all over. “Get what you came for?” I asked her as she stopped before me, not clean but cleansed. This kind of adventure was not only her climate, it was maybe the only climate in which she was meant to live. She had her little specimen, or what fragments she had been able to

collect, clutched loosely in her right hand; with her left she reached to raise me up. She looked like she could do it, too, strength without effort, toothpick arms infused like Atlas.

“I want to wash up,” she said. “This shirt is fucked too.”

The water ran a long time. I sat on the couchbed, drinking beer, my glance a nervous walk from her mouse pieces and back, there and back, wanting not to want to touch them. They were so incredibly *weird*, though. You almost had to touch them, if only to assure yourself that they were really there. Hard rock tail, its shimmer under my dim-bulb lamps, the monstrous foot, and part, maybe, of a head, what had once been a head. Lying there on the fake wood of the coffee table, artifacts of a place whose climate and architecture were enough to warp the fabric of the visitor, tourist or not, go on, idiot, pick up the damned head already! So I did.

Squeamish, but then the sheer steamroller exhilaration of the bizarre came over me; I felt as had when I, we, first discovered the Funhole: my God, this is so *strange*. Gently I fingered the strained skull, its half-flayed muzzle, the eye socket now elongated upward, shaped to a sloping triangle, stretched like old rubber and like old rubber crumbling too, its limits delicate, frost pictures drawn by the terrible dark.

Nakota, humid shower smell and murmuring over my shoulder: “It’s so beautiful, Nicholas, isn’t it,” her last words not inviting agreement but laying down a challenge, and for once I rose to it, reached behind to fondle her hip as I fondled the head, feeling both to be equally strange, equally desirable. Her wet hair dribbling down, fluid on her almost skeletal collarbones, one drop above her breast a slow prised tremble of light as some freakish angle caught it, jeweled it as I half turned to rise, put my tongue on that wayward drop, imagining as I did that it was the source of the scent given off tonight by the Funhole, black nectar and I bit at her nipple, the half head still safe in my thoughtful grasp. Now her murmur was approval, I was pleasing her at last, pulling her with one hand, nipple still between my teeth and I bit harder, releasing only to lay her down and kneel between her damp and narrow thighs. To guide myself inside I set down the head, and consumed by her wetness I forgot it, or rather disremembered for my thoughts then were unlike the fleshy dreams that usually partnered sex; instead they were explicit, sharp and detailed as the best hallucinations: myself fucking the Funhole, thrusting with all my might, its subtle pull become a vacuum so stark and demanding that I felt myself coming, far more quickly than I wanted, for either me or Nakota. Looking down I saw her, eyes closed, mouth working, the gruesome little half head pressed and lolling at her nipple, and in that sight was my orgasm, stretched and distorted like the head itself.

Slow panting sighs as I lay down, the sweat on my chest cooling as I pressed against her. Eyes still shut, a graven smile beginning as she raised the head, aiming that twisted muzzle not at her lips but mine.

“Kiss me,” she said.

And I did.

The next morning my lips still held that bitter kiss; I could not, did not want to believe that I had actually touched the misshapen mouse mouth with my own. Scrubbing the skin from my mouth with the flattened bristles of my toothbrush, rubbing and rubbing till I had a clown’s smile of abrasion, thinking of the mouse head at Nakota’s tiny nipple, strange nursling; she would never wake disgusted at what she’d done the night before.

Gone, of course, when I woke up; how she managed those noiseless exits baffled me, I was a pretty light sleeper but her movements hadn’t roused me, nor the sound of the closing door. To hope for any kind of note was out of the question. The only indication she had been there at all was the damp coiled towel on the tiny bathroom floor.

More than usually surly at work, a surprise because I should have been happy, shouldn't I, more than happy, Nakota and I were lovers again, weren't we? Were we? Not really. Not me. It was the Funhole we'd been screwing, not each other; even the memory as it made me shudder made me hard. Styrofoam cup poised at my mouth, the heat of the coffee soothing my sore skin, I closed my eyes and tried not to think of Nakota's next experiment, or my possible part in it. What did they use to say? "Just say no"?

Why did I waste my time waffling, of course I would say yes to it, I had an incurable problem saying no to Nakota. Why? Simply a lover's reluctance to piss off the beloved, especially one as nuclear-irritable as Nakota? Or maybe my own reluctance to stop this process, my own near-genetic laziness that found her as easy a tool as any and handier than most? The question exhausted me; I refused to try to understand. Skid and drift, that was me and the way I lived my life, foolish, hopeless, irredeemable, a broom-closet hellhole my epiphany, my one true love a woman who had never come close to loving me, even on my best days, her best days, this woman my lover now again in what was at most a terminal waste of time. Ah God, the happy hells I can create, you too, all of us. Even Nakota. We are all our worst best friends. Don't agree? Go fuck yourself.

My disgust bred the same in others, increased as the day waned, as if it were a worsening virus and me Typhoid Nicholas and pretty damned glad about it too. Fat women in "Damn I'm Good" T-shirts and men with bald heads and tit videos and teenagers with shitty attitudes, all of them leaning across the counter, slapping their plastic cards and nails drumming, impatient with my lack of speed. I could have gone slower, was tempted to, realized it would just keep them there that much longer. So I rushed, pissed and uncaring, grabbing their money and slamming the register drawer with a rote fillip as patienceless as their stares, responding to their rudeness with my own point-blank fuck-you glare.

When my shift was over, without even counting out my drawer I left, into a growing rain, complement to my mood but making it worse. Rain leaked down the inside of my window; I tried to crank it all the way closed but the last sullen half inch defeated me. The whole car smelled like a wet dog.

So did my flat: I'd left the night's window open a crack, or maybe Nakota had. Sure, blame it on her. I sat at the kitchen table, on the one chair that didn't teeter, scooping salsa from the jar with saltines, reading the paper, trying to ignore my mail, trying to ignore the almost certain knowledge that the phone would ring, she would call with a bright new atrocity. And what would I say? Why ask when you know?

She didn't call.

Working, I told myself, but I knew Thursday wasn't one of her nights. Where then? Lots of places, the Incubus Gallery, maybe another shitty opening, maybe anything with her. Maybe sitting hunched up over her mouse head, trying to tease out its secrets, to decipher from its deformities the specifics of its journey, telling over the new abnormalities like a rosary for a special new religion; high priestess, she was made for it. The cult of the Funhole. Step right up, we can't offer you salvation or forgive your sins but we can give you one hell of a ride, just check out Mr. Mouse here, or his pioneering compatriots, the Flying Bug Brothers. Let me especially draw your attention to the one with two heads.

When I slept it was a surfacing, uneasy sleep, no question of rest. Dreams instead, plenty of them, dreams of frustration that rose, froze into fear, mild at first then so rich with terror that I woke over and over again, my mouth dry enough to be painful, afraid to get up and get a drink of water. Worse yet, my dick was inexplicably hard. I refused to acknowledge it, I didn't want to begin to think why. It took forever to get back to sleep.

Leaving for work, running late and damn, the phone, her? It was. "How about tonight?" blunt, no niceness in her, my sweet Nakota, and me smiling, her tame asshole, yup uh-huh.

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