

Where There's Smoke

By Brett Roe



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For Akiko.

1.

After each daiquiri, I'd look at the text message again and decide if I needed another one. I'd just finished my third.

4th in time slot. 3 share. WFF had 4!!!

WFF referred to "World's Funniest Failures," a micro-budget TV reality series based on ignominy and pain. The exclamation marks were not meant as a condemnation of the show or its genre, but of me and my fellow art-by-committee members. Kevin, the designated network hack, was emphasizing how we'd returned from a mid-season break with the finale of a 2-part cliffhanger and more 18-to-49-year-olds had chosen to watch crude videos of ordinary people being hurt and humiliated. I decided to order something with a more bitter aftertaste.

I was sitting at a small table in a bar a few blocks from my ex-husband's apartment in New York. Anthony had offered me the use of his place while he was away on a book tour. I'd been holed up there for most of our hiatus, trying to get some respite from the manic ratings obsession that had come to dominate my life in LA. But then the episode had finally aired, the data had been released, and I'd received the text. It'd felt as if a part of me had been mugged in a back alley and left for dead.

I'd spent years paying my dues and jumping through institutional hoops to get a shot at being a showrunner for a prime time drama series. It had become the driving goal of my professional life – one that had cost me a marriage, some of my loftier ethical and artistic standards, and quite possibly my long-term health with all the stress it had put me through. Now, it seemed, it had all been for nothing.

I blanked the screen again, put my phone back in my purse, and looked around for the waiter. The place was one of those timeless taverns scattered around Manhattan, the kind with long wooden bars, dim recesses, and décor harkening back to the end of Prohibition. It was early evening, and there were only about a dozen other customers sitting alone or in pairs. Glancing over my left shoulder, I saw the waiter (early 20s, thin, short black hair, wannabe model or actor type) taking the order of a middle-aged couple who looked like professional drinkers. They were probably regulars. It was that kind of bar. I calculated that his most likely path would bring him to my table next.

By this point, I was balanced almost equally between grief, anger and fear: grief for the show I and the rest of my team had worked so hard on having been mortally wounded and probably doomed; anger that our best efforts had been sabotaged by idiots who'd kept us from making it half as good as it could have been; and fear for my professional future now that my name would be indelibly linked to a flop. Perhaps, I mused, there'll be a video about it on WFF.

I felt a presence behind me at about the moment I expected the waiter to arrive, and started talking before I looked around. "Excuse me, could I have a..."

And then a stream of cigarette smoke blew over my right shoulder – so unexpected and noxious that I recoiled from it as if it were a miniature gas attack – and a glass of amber liquid was set down in front of me.

"Here, luv, try this. It's on me."

My eyes locked onto him as he walked around to the other side of the table and sat down. I was seized by that kind of perfect disorientation you only experience in certain very vivid dreams – the ones where you suddenly realize that you're dreaming; or in those moments of life when something so incomprehensible happens that your sense of reality pops like a soap bubble.

It was him. The real him (meaning that he *wasn't real*). Not any of the several actors I'd seen audition for the part, or the quite good one we'd cast, or any other conceivable simulacrum I felt uniquely qualified to spot in a heartbeat. This was John Constantine.* The real one. In all his scruffy, trench-coated, blond-haired, British glory. And he was sitting at my table. Smoking. In a New York City bar.

For some stupid reason, that was the first thing out of my mouth. "You can't smoke in here."

He smirked. "Oh, let's not go there, luv. A bit more real smoking would only have done your show some good. Besides, it's useful right now. No one else notices it, and it's shrouding us from unwanted attention. That's why the waiter just passed by you to the next table." He gave a nod to where the young drink-jockey was bending down to hear the whispery voice of a hunched-over, elderly man gesturing in the air with an empty shot glass.

"O-kay," I said, trying to pretend I had a grasp on the situation. "So, either this is a dream ... or I've lost my mind... or, some smart-ass imposter is exposing me to a class A carcinogen." To underline the last point, I gave in to the itch in my lungs and coughed. I really can't stand cigarette smoke.

He smiled (and despite his tobacco-yellowed, British teeth, it was a charming smile). "None of the above. And this fag's only as real as you believe it to be. You and I aren't quite in the same reality, if you get my drift. Imagine the smoke's just a dry ice effect, with no smell or bother. See what happens."

I didn't even have to try very hard. From that moment on, it was as if nothing but a stream of fog was coming off his "fag."

"Will that work on you too? I mean, how real are you?"

He looked straight at me with those blue eyes of his, and something sad and angry flickered in them. "I'm as real as I need to be." Then he shrugged and added, "More or less. It's sort of a work in progress." He lifted a glass of what looked like whiskey and offered as a toast, "'Go, go, go, said the bird.'"

I picked up the drink he'd set in front of me and finished the T. S. Eliot quote. "'Human kind cannot bear very much reality.'"

Then we both drank, and the liquor I poured into my mouth was of some type I'd never had before. But it was *good*. Dry, nutty, with a slightly minty aftertaste that was a perfect antidote to the cloying sweetness of the daiquiris. And its effect, which came up like a breeze through my mind, cleared my thoughts and brought on a warm, tingly sense of well-being.

"My. What is this?"

"It's a kind of distilled nectar." He took another drag from his cigarette, so his next words came out fuming from his lips. "An old mate of mine gave me a few bottles of it a while back. He claimed he'd lifted a whole case of the stuff when he was posing as an acolyte with one of the hidden orders. According to him, if you were to drink a shot of the undiluted stuff, you'd get a dose of wisdom and tranquility so intense you'd be happily contemplating higher truths until you bloody well starved to death. But no worries: in this form, you could probably drink a whole bottle and still make it into work tomorrow."

"Now *there's* a lovely thought," I said sardonically. "I can't wait to fly back to LA in the morning and start pitching ideas about next season to a bunch of head-up-their-asses network goons."

*[Author's note: John Constantine is a character originally created by writer Alan Moore, illustrator Stephen R. Bissette, and inker John Totleben for DC Comics in the mid-1980s. He subsequently appeared in a number of storylines in the DC Comics universe in the hands of various writers & artists, and was the main character of the long-running DC/Vertigo title *Hellblazer*. He's been described as a British, working class sorcerer, "occult detective," and con artist. In 2014-15, NBC presented a TV series called "Constantine" that ran for one season. I have absolutely no knowledge of what went on behind the scenes of that production. – BR (John Constantine is the property of DC Comics.)]

Especially since they've probably already decided to cancel us. Or are you here to cast some kind of spell that's going to magically save the show?"

Constantine seemed to weigh his next words carefully, and then said gently, "Truth is, Daniella, I already did some spells to make sure the show *wouldn't* be renewed. That's why everything turned out so bollocksed. I thought you deserved to know that."

I felt a wave of shock and anger trying to push past the damn sense of well-being in my head.

"You did *what*? You're telling me you sabotaged the show? That *you're* responsible for ruining it?"

He glanced away for a moment, the way guys do when they're about to come clean about something, and then met my eyes again. "Actually, I was playing both sides on this one. It took me quite a bit of doing to get the show made in the first place – behind the scenes stuff. And then I had to make sure it would attract the right creative types – people like you – so that it would connect with what I suppose you'd call 'my target audience.' But, on the other hand, I couldn't risk letting it become a bloody hit. That's why I worked it so you'd have the kinds of problems you did, the ones that kept the show from coming together the way you wanted it to. In the long run, I needed it to be only vaguely memorable."

"You unreal, selfish bastard!" I sputtered as angrily as I could, which was about a third as much as I wanted to. "Do you know how hard we worked on it? Do you have any idea what this will do to people's careers? To their lives?"

His face hardened a little, and his voice took on a rather patronizing edge. "For what it's worth," he said, curtly, "I apologize for setting you up for a fall – you and your mates. But when all's said and done, you'll live. You were all well-paid for your efforts, and the world's full of opportunities for people like you. Fact is, you're a lot luckier than most. This was just something I had to do."

"*Why*?" I struck my glass down on the table for emphasis, splashing a few drops of the "satori juice" on my fingers.

"Why do you think, Dani?" he said, leaning forward onto the elbow beneath his cigarette, its trail of smoke waving like a banner with each gesture of his hand. "Come on, use that high-powered imagination of yours. You've come up with insights about me that are right up there with the best of 'em – deep-and-dirty glimpses into the piss and fire of my soul. So, tell me, why *would* I do all this?"

As I stared back at him, the wafting clarity in my head coalesced around those mental skills I've spent most of my life developing as a writer. I felt my mind shift into "the zone" – that state where characters, scenes and plots start to reveal themselves to me like lovers disrobing or drunk friends sharing secrets.

"This is some kind of con," I said, looking into his eyes and feeling almost telepathic. "Or no, not exactly a con. A dodge. It's about camouflage, isn't it? Being present, but unseen. Or barely seen. *Glimpsed*."

He took another sip of his drink and nodded. "Out of the corners of many, many eyes. On many different planes of reality. From lots of bloody angles. And I can't afford to be seen too clearly by any of them."

"But if there aren't *enough* glimpses of you –?"

His eyes lowered to the table in front of him. "What do you think happens to something that doesn't leave a trace of itself in any reality?"

I thought about it. Then I nodded and said, "The Great Smoky Dragon."

"The great fucking what?"

"Something in an article I read when I was doing research for a science fiction show. It's a term some physicist came up with to try to explain quantum mechanics. The idea is that the dragon's tail is where a particle gets emitted, and the head is where it interacts with something else. Those are the only

times when it can be detected. But in between, the dragon's body is like indeterminate smoke. Completely uncertain. Its reality is undefined. So, I guess you're kind of like Schrödinger's cat in the box. Except that you keep scratching at the inside to make it clear that you're still alive in there. It's something like that, isn't it?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Only, imagine there's a whole room filled with boxes, and the cat is hiding in one of them. He has to hide because there're a bunch of other animals looking for him. Some of 'em are powerful beasts who want to tear him to pieces for all the ways he's pissed them off over the years. And then there are others who consider themselves friends of the cat and want to help him – but the cat knows that if they do, they'll just end up getting ripped apart as well. So, he hides – sometimes in one box, sometimes in another. He even puts decoys – other versions of himself – in some of those boxes. But it turns out that in every box, just like that smart-arse Austrian imagined, there's a booby trap that could end his existence if he hides too well. So, he has to keep letting the animals know he's somewhere in the room. But he can't be too obvious about it, or they'll find him."

"Sounds like a pretty stressed out cat."

"It's a fucking nightmare," he sighed, shaking his head. "And I brought it all on myself. Even when I was just a daft kid, I should have seen that magic is a sucker's game. The worst kind of gambling. Because with magic, the house doesn't just always win, it *consumes* – win *or* lose. It makes the players play themselves, piece by piece, with every spell they cast, until they're too far in to get out. And it just goes on and on like that, because there're always short-sighted gits who'll do anything to feel special and powerful."

He emptied his glass, put it down on the table, and stared at it as if there was nothing left to say. Somehow, his resignation bothered me more than anything he'd just told me.

"Oka-ay. So, you're stuck in a kind of metaphysical whack-a-mole, and it totally sucks. But you must be working on an exit strategy."

"Says who?"

"Says the woman who's glimpsed the 'piss and fire' of your soul. You're *John Constantine*. You may get knocked down, do the whole despair and regret thing – but then you pull yourself together and come up with some brilliant scheme to get yourself out of whatever fix you're in. Sooner or later, one way or another, it's what you do."

He smiled as if I were a child who'd just said something naively amusing. "I think you've got me mixed up with that posh wanker on 'Doctor Who.' Truth is, luv, I don't always find a way out. And even when I do, with magic, there's always a price to pay. I'm way overdrawn and've got nothing left to hock. All I have now are some clever ways to hide, a bunch of memories and impressions of myself I have to keep posting like missing person notices so I don't disappear, and a few fond habits to keep me from crawling out of my skin. I'm all out of strategies. I'm down to the inertia of surviving. That's it."

He gave a slight, ironic eyebrow raise, and then just looked tired and defeated. The cigarette between his fingers had burned down to a short stub, and the smoke spiraling off its smoldering tip made me think of his cocky, rebellious nature spinning off the embers of his Hell-blazing past. I reached across the table and placed my hand on his where it rested beside his empty glass. He looked up, surprised.

"Knowing as much about you as I do, I won't say that you don't deserve any of this, but I sincerely hope you get out of it. I really want for you to be okay in the end."

He seemed embarrassed by my concern and pulled his hand away. "Thanks, Dani, but I'm afraid pity's just as useless in magic as it is in the rest of life."

The satori juice was still having its effects, and I smiled with a strange confidence. "I'm not talking about pity, John, or magic. I think I'm talking about something a lot more powerful."

"Like what?"

“Grace.”

He snorted. “Oh, right. I forgot about your Catholic upbringing. Guess you’re not as lapsed as you pretend to be.”

I was undeterred. “There’re things I don’t accept about it, and things I doubt, but at this point in my life, I’m pretty sure there’s at least *some* truth in it. And your being here only tends to confirm that.”

“Alright. So, what’s your take on grace? A happy ending to a fairy tale? An Omnipotent Banker who cancels your debts? Or how ‘bout a great shag when you’re really hard up?”

“It’s the hand that pulls you up out of the shit you’re drowning in when you’ve reached the end of yourself. And I’m not talking theology, John, I’m talking personal experience.”

He at least seemed to take me seriously for a moment then, but after a final drag off his cigarette, he shook his head. “Don’t find much of that sort of thing in my world, luv – other than the rare piece of dumb luck that gets you out of one jam just so you can go stumbling off to another. I guess magic and grace don’t mix. Or maybe I’m just immune.”

2.

After he’d left, I sat there for a while in the dwindling glow of my nectar buzz, thinking about our conversation. As I finally started to rouse myself to go and had begun scanning for the waiter to ask for my check, the tabletop in front of me was shaken by the impact of a body bumping into it. Then the elderly man from the table to my right dropped down into the chair where John had been sitting. I had the impression that he’d moved in a peculiarly quick manner from that seat to this one – impossibly quick. He was glaring at me with something like fury in his eyes. His voice came out sharp and raspy.

“*I didn’t notice you!*” He made it sound like a terrible accusation.

“Excuse me?” I replied with as much indignation as my dissipating tranquility would allow.

“*I didn’t notice you!*” he repeated. “I noticed you when I came in. But then, I *didn’t*. I *always* notice those around me. But I didn’t notice *you* again until just now.”

“Well, maybe you’ve had too much to drink,” I said pointedly. I was surprised by how much hostility I was feeling towards him – a kind of instinctive, from-the-core-of-my-being reaction. Everything about him seemed overwhelmingly obnoxious and, in some seedy, abnormal way, malevolent.

“Drink?” he said, and his eyes widened. “Your drink!” He looked down at the spot in front of me where the glass of amber liquid had been. It was gone, but the residue of the small amount that’d spilled had left a faint ring on the tabletop. He made a hissing sound that I didn’t think a human being could make, and a really horrible smell enveloped us – like body odor and flatulence amped up with spite. I started to gag just as his hand shot out, fast as a snake, and clamped onto my jaw. Then he leaned forward and pulled me towards him until we were eyeball to eyeball over the middle of the table. Squeezing harder, he forced me to open my mouth, and proceeded to sniff my breath. His grip was too strong for me to break, so I began yelling and waving my arms, trying to summon help from the other people in the bar, but none of them seemed to notice that anything was happening. I gathered that his stench must work something like John’s smoke.

“*Aqua verum,*” he snorted. “Mixed with Thames water. So, the mage was here. Constantine. *Where did he go?*” He snarled the last part as both question and ultimatum.

And then, through all the pain, revulsion, and fear of that moment, something else rose up in me that over-topped all of them: a determined defiance. It surged up from my childhood, where it had been honed and hardened in the years after I’d stopped being somebody’s daughter and become just a problem to be dealt with, or discarded property to be made use of.

I slammed both my hands down on the table, glared at him with all the seething “attitude” I’d perfected during puberty, and mumbled some unintelligible gibberish to demonstrate the idiocy of expecting me to answer when my mouth was in a vice grip. I saw a flicker of surprise and confusion in his eyes, which emboldened me further, and when he loosened his hold, I pulled back from his grasp and settled down on my chair with as much feigned composure as I could muster.

Ignoring my throbbing cheeks, I spoke firmly. “*I said –*” adopting the body-language I use in tough negotiations, and speaking with exaggerated enunciation, “‘I. Don’t. Know. Ass-hole.’” He started to sputter a threat, but I jabbed my index finger to within an inch of his left eye and cut him off. “*Hold it!* Do you really think that a famously clever wizard, who knows he’s being hunted, would just walk into a bar, blurt out to somebody like me where he was going to hide, and then be off on his merry way? If he was that careless, even a grubby little scumbag like you could have found him by now. Oh, and by the way, you really stink.”

He stared at me for a moment, and I willed myself to meet his gaze without blinking. Then his mouth formed a grotesque sneer.

“Your insolence is just the false face of your fear.”

“No,” I replied evenly, “It’s actually the true face of my contempt. Scaring me doesn’t make you anything better than an overgrown cockroach. And acting the bully makes you even more loathsome than that.”

Perhaps I blinked then, because in the next instant the chair in front of me was empty, and he was standing behind me, pinning my arms to my sides.

He brought his mouth next to my ear and hissed, “I’ll show you *exactly* what I am. And then, I’ll notice you *completely*.”

His hands slid up to my shoulders, and for a moment it felt like he was placing a heavy cloak across the back of my neck – but then my skin identified the texture as something liquid and viscous. I tried to bolt out of my chair, but only got half-way up before I was stuck. The mucousy stuff flowed over me, thickening as it ran, like some kind of quick-drying cement. Within seconds, I found myself bundled up as tightly as a papoose, with everything covered except for my eyes and nose. I was tilted forward at an angle, looking at the ground a few feet in front of me, unable to move.

He made a grunting sound, and I felt myself heaved into motion. And then I realized my head was sticking out of his chest. Somehow, I was mostly inside him now. As he started walking toward the exit, I felt my feet dragging across the floor, and it occurred to me that my legs sticking out like that must have looked like a ridiculous tail. But no one paid any attention to us as we left the bar.

My mind split into three parts then: one, overwhelmed by the absurdity of the situation, was spiraling through mad humor toward outright hysteria; another was teetering on the edge of a claustrophobic panic attack; and the third, in which defiance now meant staying calm, was desperately trying to rein in the other two. As my abductor made our way down increasingly desolate streets and alleys, I discovered just how mentally taxing it is to try and keep your sanity when you’re trapped in an impossible nightmare. Like running for your life or clinging to a ledge, you know you’ll reach your limits eventually. And then, you’ll be lost.

3.

My last trip to Hell had been about fifteen years earlier.

It was pretty much as Dante described it: a dark wood, dreary and oppressive. There was a haze in the air that made my eyes water and stung my sinuses with the mordant smell of decomposition. Everything was black or grey, and the trees looked like scorched skeletons in postures of pleading,

agony, or despair. The only sound was the sandpaper sighs of an indifferent breeze scraping across their charcoal trunks. It was life reduced to its ruins – just the place for someone who’d abandoned hope.

I’d hiked all morning to get there, carrying just a few items in a daypack. I had no plans to ever leave.

Before the wildfire that had swept through this part of Arizona, my boyfriend Trey and I had camped in this canyon. Then, it had contained a lush forest of pine, cottonwood and sycamore, and the air had been filled with their scents and the chatter of birdsong. It was overwhelmingly beautiful, and intensely romantic. It had been one of the happiest times of my life.

But then I’d gotten pregnant (a 1-to-9% improbability since I was on the pill). After my (literally) WTF! reaction to the two lines that appeared on the test strip, something even more unexpected had happened: I’d been overcome by a profound sense of attachment for the potential being taking form inside me. Despite my staunchly pro-choice views, I just couldn’t bring myself to consider an abortion, or even adoption. When I told this to Trey, he went from shock to anger in a few sputtered pronouncements, and finally ended up accusing me of getting pregnant on purpose “to trap” him. That resulted in a hideous fight, during which he seemed to go through a kind of metamorphosis – sloughing off his role as my first love like an old skin that no longer fit him, and becoming just a selfish, egotistical douchebag. In the end, he packed up his stuff and headed off to California, disappearing into whatever obscure destiny he and his singer-songwriter shtick found there. I never heard from him again. (But sometimes, I’d catch myself singing one of his tunes.)

So, I was on my own again. I was a sophomore creative writing major at Arizona State University surviving on minimum wage jobs, and the few casual friends I had couldn’t offer much more than perfunctory moral support. That meant the daunting challenges of single motherhood were something I was going to have to face pretty much by myself. It thrust me back into that desolate sense of being rootless and unconnected in the world that I’d only escaped, for a short while, with Trey. And I found myself wishing, as I hadn’t for many years, that I could reach out to my mother. Once upon a time, we’d been close.

My father had died of a heart attack when I was eight. He was an English professor at Carnegie Mellon and quite a few years older than my mother. They’d met when he first moved to Pittsburgh and had enlisted her services as a real estate broker/interior decorator. After she’d steered him to a house in the suburbs she especially liked, he’d given her free rein to turn it into her dream home. That had made his subsequent proposal (my mother used to say) essentially redundant. (Sitting next to him when he’d read to me, my father had seemed the burly, deep-voiced source of all stories to my mind, and my memories of him always contain the smell of his books. After his death, I took refuge in them, immersing myself in their intoxicating words and the fictional lives they evoked.)

In our shared grief, my mom and I turned to each other, and became an us-against-the-world team as we faced our new reality. My mother was determined to keep our house, so that became the main challenge now that there was only her commission-based income (and some insurance money for my father) to rely on. Mom began working longer hours, so I took on most of the cleaning, shopping, and cooking. In the mornings, she’d drop me off at Sacred Heart Academy on her way to the office, and in the afternoon, I’d take the bus back by myself. (I tried to hide, as best as I could, the loss of my faith, which had been shattered by the incomprehensible betrayal of childhood bereavement. But some of the nuns seemed to sense it anyway: the kind ones looked at me with pity, the mean ones, with disapproval.)

For a while, we made a go of it. But then the insurance money ran out, and after that, there was a downturn in the real estate market. My mother began to change. Her moods became more volatile and extreme – snapping at me sometimes, sobbing on my shoulder at others – her sharp mind grew

forgetful and uncertain, and her professional persona (which I'd observe whenever she was on the phone with a client or colleague) deteriorated into a painful caricature of a driven saleswoman – overly mannered, garishly cheerful, manic with desperation. And she kept getting worse.

Then, one night, when I was twelve, long after I'd gone to bed, she came into my room and woke me up. Her face was frightening – wide-eyed, with a stricken expression. I noticed a heavy, unpleasant smell in the air that made my chest clench up. She kept telling me to hurry and started grabbing clothes out of my dresser – but then just threw them all down, saying we didn't have time. I asked her what was wrong, but she just kept saying that we had to go *now*. She pulled me out to the second-floor landing with my robe half on, and that's when I saw all the smoke downstairs. It looked like a writhing darkness feeding on the light coming through the living room curtains from the streetlamp outside. I had to hold my breath as she bundled me down the stairs into it. Somehow, she got us out the front door.

By the time the sun came up, I'd watched our house burn to a blackened shell while a crew of firefighters doused it with high-pressure hoses. And I'd seen my mother put in handcuffs and driven away in the back of a police car. Adults in uniforms kept saying things to me, but I didn't listen or speak to them. I just kept thinking, over and over, that at any moment I was going to come loose from the earth and, like smoke, float away into nothing. I was no longer attached to anything. Nothing felt real anymore.

In foster care, my first social worker told me that my mother had been charged with arson, endangering me, and use of the “controlled substances” they'd found in her system. She'd admitted setting the fire – the authorities believed it was done out of spite because we were about to lose our house, but my mother claimed she didn't know the reason, she'd just watched herself do it. She was facing a possible sentence of 2 to 3 years in a state prison, but it would depend on the judge and how effective a case her lawyer could make for “diminished capacity.” The social worker said it was uncertain if my mom could ever regain custody of me.

When I was fourteen, my fifth social worker introduced himself by slamming my bulging file down on the metal table between us, and announcing, “I read through this last night. Seems you used to attend a Catholic school and made pretty good grades. So, I'm going to put this in terms you should understand: what the *hell* is wrong with you!”

I'd just screwed up my latest placement – my seventh, I think. They'd been of varying lengths and unpleasantness. In the bad ones, I'd developed methods of active defiance; in the worst ones, I'd learned the passive forms. The occasional good ones were also hard because then I had to sabotage the efforts of nice, caring people so they wouldn't try to adopt me. In between, I'd be sent to some purgatorial group home with an ever-changing, underpaid staff who acted for the most part like zoo keepers, and the volatile company of kids just as scared and angry as I was. My only sanctuary during that time was my own imagination, and my daydreams became as immersive as a drug. Sometimes, when a situation got too bad, I'd “go meta” (as I later heard it called in a psyche class): I'd detach myself from the experience and just observe myself going through it, viewing the suffering me as if she was a character in a movie I was watching. I often wrote down alternate versions of those scenes later on, letting the plots and language run wild. By then, I was already determined to become a writer.

“I don't want to be adopted,” I told the social worker. “I want to go back with my mom. I know she'll do whatever she has to to make that happen. I'm going to hold out until she does.”

He was a short, pudgy man who seemed worn out and annoyed by his job. He took off his glasses for a moment, rubbed his eyes, and shook his bald head. “Oh, for god's sake.” He let out an exasperated sigh. “No, Dani. That's not going to happen. I can't believe nobody told you this before.” He looked at me as if I were a math problem someone had gotten ludicrously wrong, and then leafed through my file until he found the few stapled pages he was looking for. He tossed them in front of me.

“Look at these. Your mother signed away her custody rights to you. Voluntarily. She has no intention of taking you back.”

I scanned through the legalese and saw my mother’s signature at each indicated place on the form. It was dated almost a year earlier. By the time the social worker had called in two more staff members to help him restrain me, my file was scattered all over the room.

I was adopted several months later, when I was fifteen. Paul and Stacy Meyers were a childless, middle-aged couple living in Greensburg. They were both music teachers – Stacy taught piano and Paul had taught clarinet and oboe before he’d been forced to retire because of early onset Alzheimer’s. Basically, I was a live-in aide for Paul. He’d become too dependent for Stacy to care for by herself any more, especially as she’d started developing health problems of her own, and they’d had a bad experience with their previous home health agency. So, it was a symbiotic relationship. (Not that there wasn’t any affection between us, but it never grew beyond a polite, formal friendship.) I finally had a stable home, a chance to finish high school at one location, and promises of some financial assistance when I went to college.

A year or so after my adoption went through, I got a call from my sixth social worker. She told me that my birth mother was trying to contact me. The agency wouldn’t give out any details about my location to her unless the Meyers and I agreed to it. (Stacy had already given her consent.) My response: “My mother is dead. I saw her death certificate in my file when I was fourteen. I know it was authentic because she signed it herself.”

Just after my eighteenth birthday, I said good-bye to Stacy (by then, she’d finally placed Paul in a nursing home, where she visited him almost daily), and headed west. I wanted to put as much distance as I could between me and my life in Pennsylvania. I’d intended to go all the way to LA or San Francisco, but in Arizona, I met Trey. He convinced me to say there for a year or two, pointing out that costs were cheaper, so we could save up a stash before “we” tried to make it in California. When we broke up, there were still another two months left on our apartment lease. He claimed that he’d send me the money for his share, but I was so angry by then that I (stupidly) shouted, “Don’t bother! It might make you feel *trapped!*”

When I was seven weeks pregnant, I had a miscarriage. By then, I’d had almost a month to fret over labor complications and the costs of raising a child, and to imagine myself holding my baby, nursing it, loving it with all my heart, and watching her or him grow into an amazing adult. The physical pain was beyond all imagining, but the hollowed out void it left behind was infinitely worse.

I was desperate to turn to someone. So, I finally set aside my grudge and began trying to find a way to contact my mom. I racked up a hefty long distance bill I really couldn’t afford languishing on hold while bureaucrats passed me around from one unhelpful voice to another. And I called a bunch of old numbers that now belonged to strangers. But eventually, I managed to get hold of Mom’s old priest, now retired. He spoke very kindly and non-judgmentally as he demolished everything left inside me.

My mother had died of cancer five months earlier. No one had known how to reach me, and my mother had asked them not to in any case, saying that there was no point in intruding into whatever life I’d made for myself. The priest told me that while she was incarcerated, different psychologists and psychiatrists kept giving her different diagnoses. One of them was schizophrenia, and they’d used that to convince her that she’d always be a danger to me and got her to sign away her custody rights. Later, after she was released from prison, she was re-diagnosed as bi-polar and put on meds and counselling that actually helped her. She got a job doing secretarial work in the office of the diocese she used to belong to, and that’s when she’d tried to contact me. She’d never remarried, but had a number of close friends. The priest insisted that in her final years, “God granted her peace.”

In a hopeless place, I opened up my daypack and pulled out a bottle of blackberry brandy and a sandwich bag holding a bunch of pills. There were two types, small, yellow tablets and blue-and-red

capsules, and their dosage and combination, especially mixed with alcohol, would, according to my research, be absolutely fatal. I sat there with the pills in one hand and the opened bottle in the other, and let my pain and self-reproach swell to their full magnitude and have their final say. I intended to answer them with a couple of swallows that said, “You’re right.”

But then I heard a sound from off to one side – the rustling and scrambling of some animal scurrying through the ruined forest, headed in my direction. My first thought was that it might be a bear, and I envisioned the prospect of being mauled to death. I had to consider for a moment whether it would be hypocritical of me to try to escape, all things considered. A moment later, the creature scampered out of the burned-out trees about fifty feet from me. It was a young golden retriever, beaming with the joy of its exploration. Its thick fur was smudged with charcoal, but it was still beautiful, and it was wide-eyed and frisky and full of life. It saw me and gave a short bark, and then stood panting and wagging its shaggy tail. Its unexpected arrival, and its contrast to the surroundings – and to my mood – made it seem like an apparition. But I couldn’t help being delighted by it. I’d always loved big, furry dogs; always wanted one; but my mother had been horrified by the thought of what one might do to her floors.

The golden retriever seemed intently interested in me, and its expression changed slightly from full-on exuberance to one tinged with curiosity, as if it were asking, “What are you doing?” And any answer I could make seemed already refuted by its lively presence. It was a being, experiencing life in its own unique way, not knowing what would come next. What could be more interesting? As if sensing the shift in my resolve, it yipped a couple of times (“Now you’re getting it!”), and then abruptly took off again, dashing back the way it had come. (I figured it had probably heard its owner.)

And then it all seemed so stupid. And I realized that I really didn’t want to die. All of the hurt and the remorse were still there, and all of my problems, but suddenly *I* was different. I felt like I could face them now. As I tried to make sense of what had just happened, it seemed to me I caught a subtle scent mixed into the acrid haze. In a kind of Proustian flash, I recalled it as the incense at a church service I’d been to with my father when I was maybe six or seven. I’d been kneeling, trying to think what to pray, when that musky odor had given me this visceral sense of – something. I didn’t really have a word for it. The closest I could come up with was “holy”. Or so it seemed to me then. But my very young self regarded that moment as meaningful and important. And I felt her assurance sweep through me all over again, along with the (virtually) unquestioning faith I’d given up so long ago.

And I found that I still really loved her. I didn’t want her to end up this way. She deserved better. So, I packed up my things and made the long hike back to my life.

4.

The thing from the bar had shown it could move incredibly fast when it wanted to, but for some reason it walked with an unhurried, shambling gait as it bore me along, block after block. I’d have thought it was trying to be inconspicuous if it weren’t for its total lack of concern over my legs sticking out of its butt. My only guess was that its stinky camouflage couldn’t conceal it at a full gallop out in the open.

Eventually, it turned into an alley just past a shuttered storefront and followed it to where it split off to either side at the back of a large building. There, it stopped in front of a grey metal door and pressed its fingers against it. The door slid open to one side with a shrill, rusty complaint, like a sleepy maniac being roughly awakened. Inside was complete darkness. My abductor took us into it.

During the long, plodding trip to this place, I’d tried to yell for help a few times, but my muffled voice had attracted no attention, and its harsh resonance inside my head had only chafed

against my already tenuous self-control. But now, as my last link to normalcy – the familiar, mundane appearances of sidewalks, gutters and building façades – was replaced by an abyss, I finally gave in to the terror and began screaming my head off. After that, I guess I just went mad for a while.

EXT. WAREHOUSE - BACK ENTRANCE - NIGHT

A derelict, four-story building. A sliding metal DOOR has been pulled OPEN, revealing DARKNESS inside. From within comes the sound of a woman's muffled SCREAMING.

CLOSE ON the open doorway. The screaming GROWS FAINTER as it moves away from this entrance. The metal door SLIDES CLOSED by itself with a harsh, grating sound. SILENCE.

INT. WAREHOUSE - HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

DARKNESS. The sounds of heavy, methodical FOOTSTEPS on a hard floor, a soft SLIDING sound, and the same woman's muffled voice, now worn down to a plaintive WHIMPERING, like a frightened child after it's cried itself to exhaustion.

UNKNOWN POV: FLUORESCENT LIGHTS begin to flicker on. The woman GASPS in relief -- release from the darkness! The fluorescents produce a BUZZING drone as they come fully on. The unknown is walking forward between dingy white walls and occasional closed doors on a dusty, bare floor. Overhead, pipes run along the ceiling beside the fluorescents.

CLOSE ON the unknown walker's HEAD: a grim-faced OLD MAN staring blankly ahead. Off-screen, the woman's BREATHING makes a shaky effort to slow down as she tries to calm herself.

The WOMAN'S POV: Looking down and forward at the floor, with the bottoms of the walls on either side, moving forward. The fluorescent's buzzing is now MUFFLED by whatever's covering her ears, but the sound of her breathing is LOUDER, resonating inside her head.

VARIOUS ANGLES of an unnaturally CONJOINED PAIR: the slightly hunched Old Man in an unbuttoned coat, impaled through his torso by the body of a young woman wrapped up in some kind of cocoon -- her head sticking up and forward from his chest, face down, and her legs extending down and back from his pelvis, with her swaddled feet dragging on the floor behind him. The woman's eyes and nose are the only parts of her not covered by the cocoon.

The Old Man reaches a DOUBLE DOOR with horizontal push bars and goes through it to...

INT. WAREHOUSE - LARGE ROOM - CONTINUOUS

A dark, shadowy space with an ILLUMINATED AREA, about ten feet in diameter.

The Old Man walks into the illuminated area and stops. A beat later, there's a RIPPING sound, and then the woman suddenly FALLS out of the cocoon straight down on the cement floor.

The woman is DANI: 30s, medium-build, with short, wavy, dark hair, dressed casually in slacks and a blouse. She winces from the impact of the fall.

The Old Man walks forward a few more steps, trailing fibrous remnants of the cocoon, stops, and turns to face her. Realizing she's no longer constrained, Dani notices fragments of the cocoon still draped over her and frantically brushes them off. She stands up, stiffly.

Dani glares at the Old Man, her body trembling and tense, as if one part of her is wary and holding her back while the rest of her wants to rip him to pieces with her bare hands. She's so focused on the Old Man she doesn't notice the end of a long, dark TENDRIL snaking across the floor from the shadows to her right, headed toward the space between the two of them. She lets out a wordless scream of intense rage. Then, after catching her breath --

DANI
(shouting)
You fucking piece of -- !

The tendril suddenly RISES UP in front of her, like a cobra, cutting her off with the shock of its appearance. Moving with intelligence, it brings its end up level with her face. Dani takes a step back.

CLOSE ON Dani, staring at the tendril.

DANI (CONT'D)
(flatly)
Shit.

The end of the tendril THRUSTS forward assertively, close to Dani's face, causing her to flinch.

DANI'S POV: The END OF THE TENDRIL is about two inches in diameter and resembles the mouth of a lamprey, with menacing sharp teeth around its circumference. It SWAYS slightly from side to side, in a manner that's inquisitive, taunting, and threatening. Then, it draws back, preparing to strike...

But instead of hitting Dani, it dives down, back, and up in a rapid spiral, and STRIKES the Old Man in his stomach. His body jerks with the impact, but his face remains blank.

With the tendril attached to his belly, the Old Man perks up: He straightens up taller and his expression comes alive. He smiles. When he speaks, his voice is clear and vigorous.

OLD MAN

Ah, that's better! The old geezer wore himself out bringing you here. Used up all the vitality I gave him. So, I'll take over now.

Dani tries to make a break for the exit, but before she can take more than a step or two, ANOTHER TENDRIL surges out of the darkness to block her path.

OLD MAN (CONT'D)

No, no, no! We have to get to know each other. This "grubby, little scumbag," as you called him, noticed the stench of failure on you. And then it turned out you're somehow connected to John Constantine. That makes you doubly interesting to me! I want to know all about you.

He reaches into a pocket of his coat, pulls out a woman's purse, extracts the wallet, and looks at the driver's license.

OLD MAN (CONT'D)

"Daniella Judith Gates." From California.

(nods)

Pleased to meet you. Allow me to introduce myself...

The whole ROOM BRIGHTENS into a patchwork of light and shadows revealing a cavernous space.

Surrounding Dani, there are a MULTITUDE OF BODIES, all standing, each with a tendril attached to its front or back. Then MORE BODIES DESCEND from above, each lowered by its tendril, to join the others. They form a kind of haphazard maze with narrow spaces between groups of them. Dani is trapped inside it.

Dani slowly turns 360°, her gaze sweeping across the diverse bodies: men and women of various ages, ethnicities, cultures, social strata - - all facing her with lowered heads, blank eyes, and grim expressions. When her gaze returns to the Old Man, he slumps again into the same attitude, dropping her purse and wallet.

Behind Dani, the body of a BITTER WOMAN perks up, her face filled with a lifetime of grievances. She startles Dani as she steps forward and addresses her.

BITTER WOMAN

All of these were losers when I found them. Every single one. Each in their own pathetic way.

(indicating the Old Man)

Like him. You wanna know his story?

CLOSE ON the Old Man.

BITTER WOMAN (CONT'D)

He outlived anybody who ever gave a damn about him, and then got sick and disgusting. So nobody wanted to be around him. So, he started going out and watching people. He'd drink, and he'd watch, and just stew in all his envy and bitterness and self-pity. And that was his whole, stinking life.

The body of a stocky BUSINESSMAN perks up, his features hardened by years of greed and competition. He takes up a position uncomfortably close to Dani, sandwiching her between him and the Bitter Woman, gesturing in the manner of a sales presentation.

BUSINESSMAN

But I recognized his potential. Just like I did with all these other losers. See, that's how I grow.

Dani tries to step away, but he grabs her arm and pulls her back.

BUSINESSMAN (CONT'D)

'Cause I've got the balls to take charge, to shape things to my advantage. See, sweetheart, no one misses a loser. They're like garbage you can just pick off the street. The big movers and shakers out there, they only care about their assets. So, I snatch up the failed beings they have no use for, make them part of me, and, right under their noses...

(lewdly grabs his crotch)

...I keep getting bigger and bigger.

Dani angrily jerks herself away from him, but then she's confronted by the perked-up body of a skinny TEENAGE GIRL affecting a tough, hip-hop style.

TEENAGE GIRL

You feel me, bitch? I'm talkin' 'bout all the peepers and the creepers, all the gabbers and the grabbers, the obsessives and depressives, all the takers and the fakers, and the loners and the droners -- all the fuck-ups! They all just be chillin' in me now, workin' it like my fingers.

She wiggles her fingers in front of Dani's face, makes hip-hop hand gestures, and then flips her off with both hands.

Dani brushes past her only to be confronted by the perked-up body of a portly, pompous college PROFESSOR.

PROFESSOR

Your miniscule mind can't even begin to comprehend what I've become. All that you see here is but a mere homunculus of my total being. I've stitched myself across a vast swathe of worlds and dimensions. I am "Sartor Resartus," so to speak -- a self-made quilt of living scraps culled from dozens of sentient realms. And my whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

The Bitter Woman grabs Dani's arm and pulls Dani around to face her. Dani makes to fight back, but the Businessman and the Professor grab her arms, restraining her. The Teenage Girl takes a position just beyond them, swaying to some groove in her head.

BITTER WOMAN

But let's talk about you now, Daniella, with all your insolence and contempt. You think you're better than any of these? Well you're not. You're just like them. You reek of failure.

BUSINESSMAN

And on top of that, babe, you seem to have a line on Constantine. Now he'd be a big catch. The only loser with any real street value. There're bounties on him from some of the major bad-asses. I'm talking demons, avatars, elementals. Lotta juice coming to the one who puts him in a bag!

The Bitter Woman holds up her hand, palm up. The end of a TENDRIL places itself there.

BITTER WOMAN

And you insulted part of me. That makes this personal.

TEENAGE GIRL

So, I'm gonna bind you, grind you, waste you, taste you all over in my deepest place, where you'll be stewin' and brewin' and mewlin' and feulin' me up -- 'Cause I'm on a chase, with my game face, to get that wizard's ass in my embrace!

CLOSE ON Dani and the Bitter Woman. The Bitter Woman selects a target on Dani with her eyes and, with a cruel smile, starts to move the tendril towards it. The tendril's mouth opens wider, baring its teeth.

BITTER WOMAN

Now, this is going to hurt...

MAN'S VOICE (O.S.)

Bet your arse it is.

From behind the Bitter Woman, a man's hand suddenly grabs hers and the tendril, and then his other hand drives a lit cigarette into the tendril's mouth. It makes a SIZZLING sound.

The Bitter Woman, the Businessman, the Professor, and the Teenage Girl all spasm and cry out in pain -- which frees Dani from their grasp -- as all of the dormant bodies shudder with the shared sensation. The Bitter Woman jumps back from the attacker as she swipes away the cigarette and cradles the end of the tendril protectively.

JOHN CONSTANTINE stands there, clad in his customary trench coat, with a satisfied smirk on his face. He pulls a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and starts to extract one.

CONSTANTINE

Thought that might be a sensitive spot.

The Bitter Woman, the Businessman, the Professor, and the Teenage Girl all address him simultaneously in astonishment and anger.

BITTER WOMAN, BUSINESSMAN, & PROFESSOR

Constantine!

TEENAGE GIRL

Mothafucka!

CONSTANTINE

(lighting the cigarette)

Looks like I messed up your little initiation ceremony. But I don't think the young lady here fancies joining your club. So, how's about you let her go, and then me and you can have a nice private chat.

The Professor and the Businessman square off directly in front of Constantine, with the Bitter Woman and the Teenage Girl taking positions to either side of them. Behind Constantine, MORE TENDRILS appear, doing their cobra dance.

PROFESSOR

Is this supposed to be some kind of beau geste -- giving yourself up in exchange for the damsel in distress?

(MORE)

PROFESSOR (CONT'D)

If so, demi-mage, you've grossly miscalculated. There'll be no quid pro quo here.

BUSINESSMAN

See, I'm not giving up anything, dipshit. You've got nothing to bargain with. Squat. The way I see it, she's mine, you're mine, and it sucks to be both of you.

CONSTANTINE

Fair warning, pondlife: you're about to bite off more than you can chew.

Dani is watching this from behind the active bodies -- fearful, concerned for Constantine, uncertain what to do. Now, she also begins to guess what he's planning, and it's not a pleasant thought.

BUSINESSMAN

Don't try to bluff me, you has-been piece of crap! You're just a broken down relic of what you used to be. Your limp magic couldn't get it up against me if you were on ten IV's full of Viagra!

PROFESSOR

And don't think you can fool me with any of your tricks or cons. My mind is far superior to yours -- it draws on a network that spans the multiverse.

TEENAGE GIRL

So, you just be all frontin' or trippin' now, trench coat.

BITTER WOMAN

I'm going to break you down, sort through all your nasty bits, and put you back together any way I want. And then, I'm going to do the same thing to your little friend here.

Constantine glances across their four faces.

CONSTANTINE

You certain about that?

The Bitter Woman, the Businessman, the Professor, and the Teenage Girl respond simultaneously.

BITTER WOMAN

Yes!

BUSINESSMAN

Oh yeah!

PROFESSOR

Absolutely.

TEENAGE GIRL

Straight up.

CONSTANTINE

(smiles slyly, but with a sense of resignation)
 Funny thing about certainty -- it only has two possibilities: either it's right, or it's wrong. But uncertainty, now that has all kinds of possibilities.

Constantine and Dani exchange a quick, meaningful look.

CONSTANTINE (CONT'D)

It's like freedom. Or creativity.
 But I wouldn't expect you to appreciate that seeing as you're just a...
 (emphatically)
gormless, lowlife wankstain.

Constantine FLICKS HIS CIGARETTE contemptuously so that it strikes the head of the Businessman with a flurry of sparks and bounces off.

CLOSE ON the still smoldering cigarette where it lands on the floor. TILT UP to reveal that it's just a few feet in front of Dani. She looks down at it.

A single TENDRIL STRIKES CONSTANTINE. He yells in intense pain as all four of the active bodies give a shout of triumphant rage.

Dani watches, stricken by what she sees.

ANOTHER TENDRIL STRIKES him, and he cries out again. Then MORE TENDRILS JOIN THE ATTACK. Constantine writhes in agony and then finally succumbs. He takes on the same slouched posture and blank-eyed, grim expression as the other inactive bodies.

Dani sinks to her knees crying. After a few moments, from behind her, a woman's hand lays itself on her shoulder. Dani shoots an angry, tearful look back at the person.

A hard-faced NUN is standing behind her.

NUN

He's gone, Daniella. He couldn't save himself. Or you. So, whatever faith you had in him was a lie. Now, his essence is filling my being -- just as hopelessness is filling yours.

Dani stands up, brushing aside the nun's hand. She's now calm, angry, and defiant. She looks the nun in the eyes, then turns and scans the other animated bodies who have all turned to face her. She smiles contemptuously. Then, she laughs.

Surprised and annoyed, the nun starts to grab her arm.

NUN

What are you...

Dani evades the nun's hand and pokes her finger close to the nun's eye.

DANI

Hold it, "sister"!

(off all the active bodies)

Do you actually believe that John Constantine walked in here with nothing more than a really lame bluff, and then got bested by the likes of you? Are you that stupid?

The active bodies regard her with indignation.

PROFESSOR

What are you implying, young lady?

DANI

He played you. And you fell for it. And it was classic Constantine. He went up against a more powerful being, poked its pride and vanity, and got it to do exactly what he wanted it to do.

BUSINESSMAN

I devoured him!

DANI

After he'd turned himself into poison, you moron! And he even warned you about it!

BITTER WOMAN

He was just being insolent. Stalling for time. Just like you.

DANI

No. He was goading you. John had reached the end of his rope.

CLOSE ON the smoke spiraling off the end of the cigarette on the floor.

DANI (CONT'D)

His identity -- his life -- was clinging to a single point of reality that he had to keep hiding from all the things that were after him. He was sick of it.

As Dani addresses the active bodies, she positions herself strategically close to the cigarette.

DANI (CONT'D)

So, he decided to escape the only way he could: to give up being real. To just let go and disperse into... possibilities. And now, he's inside you.

The five active bodies take up more imposing positions toward Dani.

PROFESSOR

You're talking nonsense.

BUSINESSMAN

'Cause I'm really here, sweetheart, and he's not.

NUN

So, his scheme failed. And in his failure, he abandoned you to me.

DANI

No. He was just being a gentleman -- giving me the pleasure of finishing you off.

TEENAGE GIRL

Ooh, now you gone fuckin' crazy, girl!

DANI

Really? Why don't you ask him yourself? All that he knew is inside you now, right?

BITTER WOMAN

He's taking a little longer to digest than most, but I've almost reached his deepest layers. All of his secrets are...

Suddenly, horrified looks of realization appear on the faces of all the active bodies.

BITTER WOMAN (CONT'D)

No!

They all start to move to seize Dani.

ACTIVE BODIES

(simultaneously)

Stop!

Dani quickly steps on the cigarette.

CLOSE ON Dani's foot as she crushes it.

DANI

Loser.

ALL OF THE BODIES REACT, the active and the previously inactive: they spasm as if they're being electrocuted and let out a sustained shout.

Dani drops to her knees and covers her ears.

Each of the bodies begins to flicker like a kaleidoscope, with rapid, multiple forms, one after another, as they erupt through all the possible versions of themselves.

As the effect grows more intense, Dani adopts a protective duck-and-cover position.

The bodies start to lose their coherent forms, breaking up into the flickering images. The chaos crescendos until they DISINTEGRATE -- first, one at a time, then a few at a time, and then whole sections of the multitude. Finally, the last and biggest group of them vanishes. Silence.

Dani slowly and cautiously looks up, uncovers her ears, and stands. She looks around.

She's alone in the large room. She sees her purse and wallet lying on the floor several feet away.

REVERSE ANGLE: Dani walks over and picks up her belongings. From off in the distance, there are faint sounds of something THRASHING and WHINING. Dani hears it and pauses. She tracks the source of the sound.

Across the room from her, mostly concealed behind some old metal BARRELS, something is writhing on the floor, making the agitated sounds.

Dani walks toward the barrels.

DANI'S POV: Walking steadily, as she gets close to the barrels, she sees stunted versions of a few TENDRILS whipping through the air, causing the thrashing sound when they hit a barrel or the floor. She continues around the barrels to see what the tendrils are all connected to...

Dani looks at what's behind the barrels with a mild mix of surprise and disgust.

DANI
So, there you are.

The CREATURE wielding the tendrils is lying on the floor. It is a small, ugly, pulpy mass, like writhing grey clay, with several tendrils -- some stunted, some injured -- sticking out of it. It's making the whining sound as it convulses in obvious distress.

Dani looks at it dispassionately.

DANI (CONT'D)

Your puppets are all gone now. John freed them, along with himself. You trapped them when they were at their worst, and their most vulnerable. Kept them that way. Made them your slaves. But now, they're gone. And you're back to being what you must have started out as.

The creature tries to lash out at Dani with one of its tendrils, but she easily steps back out of reach.

DANI (CONT'D)

No, I don't think so. And even if you could manage to drag yourself out of here, find some poor slob at their lowest point, and start over, how far do you think you'd get? You made yourself conspicuous. I'm betting that the powers that be are on to you now. They've probably taken precautions. Set up barriers to you. So, you're never going to be very much more than you are right now. You'll just have to live with that.

The creature's whining and thrashing intensifies. Then, it starts stabbing itself with its tendrils. In a SELF-DESTRUCTIVE FRENZY, it proceeds to tear itself apart.

Dani watches for a moment. Then she turns and walks away.

Dani walks across the large room, ignoring the thrashing, dying creature behind her. She's on her way out.

FADE TO BLACK

5.

After I left the warehouse, I had to walk a couple blocks before I was able to flag down a taxi. Then I went back to Anthony's place. I took a long, hot shower, ate a minimal dinner I barely tasted, and drank some chamomile tea. Sitting on the queen size bed, I reviewed the texts and voicemails I'd received over the past few hours, most of them from co-workers and professional friends expressing sympathy and support – "Call me if you need to talk...", etc. But I didn't feel in the right frame of mind to talk to any normal person right then. I was just about to turn my phone off when it buzzed to life with an incoming call from Anthony. Something shifted in me, and I decided to take it.

"Hi A."

"Hi D. I just heard about the ratings. I'm so sorry. How are you?"

"Okay. More or less. It's just been – a strange day. Where are you?"

"Still in Seattle. I have one more night here. So, how many daiquiris did you have?"

"Three."

"Ooh!"

"And then I moved on to something else."

"Mixing drinks? Wow – for you that's like shooting heroin. Are you in the apartment now?"

"Yeah. I'm just sitting here on your lumpy bed contemplating deep philosophical questions. Like, why doesn't Anthony ever get a new mattress? This thing's ancient."

"Well, it has sentimental value."

"I'll bet. Pervert."

"Yeah, I like to invite all my readers over for orgies. You should join us sometime – there's always lots of room."

"Spare me the false modesty. I read that piece in *Kirkus*. The reviewer sounded like she was ready to hand you a Pulitzer and bear your children."

"Overall, though, the reactions have been pretty mixed. As usual."

"Well, you can always count me as a fan."

"Right back at you. Dani, you know this wasn't your fault, right? You're very talented. You came up with great ideas, they just wouldn't let you do most of them. And then there was all that crap about changing your time slot..."

"As an SR, I was supposed to rise above those difficulties. Anyway, it's over now."

"Is that for sure? Is the show definitely going to be cancelled?"

"I have it from a reliable source that we're doomed. We're not coming back from a hit like this."

"I'm really sorry. I know how much it means to you. If I was there, I'd offer you a hug."

"If you were here, I'd accept it. You were always good at them."

"Well, you sound pretty tired. I guess you probably want to get some sleep..."

"Wait." I heard myself say it even though I hadn't intended to. But, having cracked the door, I figured I might as well open it a little. "Just one more thing... Anthony, do you think it's possible I'm losing my mind? I mean... I had some very strange experiences today..."

I had to stop to keep from breaking down crying. After a pause, he said, "Dani, you've been under a lot of stress for a long period of time. And then you got hit with some really bad news. You're an extremely creative person – maybe your imagination is just finding its own ways to cope with things. I mean, it's not the rational part of our mind that needs to grieve, is it? It seems to me that with grief, if you don't let yourself go a little mad with it, you're not doing it right. Do you want to tell me what happened?"

"No. Not now. I'm too tired. Maybe later. I don't know. Let me see if it turns into an odd memory or a progressive dementia. But thank you for the offer."

“Anytime. Take care of yourself. Call me tomorrow if you want.”

“Alright. Thank you. Bye.”

“Bye.”

I turned the phone off, plugged in the recharger, and set it on the nightstand next to the bed. I felt the makings of a storm inside me, and a gaping darkness waiting for me to turn off the light.

“Sounded like a nice bloke.”

I slid down under the covers and rolled onto my side.

“He is. He’s probably the nicest man I’ve ever known.”

“Oh, well, no wonder you got divorced.”

He was sitting propped up against the headboard wearing a yellow, long-sleeve shirt with a loosened brown tie, brown slacks, and dark grey socks, and in his hand was a cigarette spewing smoke. I was determinedly not believing in.

I sighed. “Yeah. It’s complicated. I guess he and I put so much of ourselves into making our fantasies come to life that we didn’t have enough left over to put life into our marriage.”

“As one of the main culprits in that, I suppose I should feel guilty – but as you said, I’m just a fantasy.”

“No John. I think you’re much more than that. Do you remember what I said about grace?”

“Uh, you mean the bit about Lassie saving you from Hell?”

“God, you’re a smartass,” I said wearily. “But if you can just please turn off the adolescent irreverence for a moment, I’d like to be serious. I think that grace is what restores us to our true selves. The self we’re meant to be. When it somehow gets too distorted, or overwhelmed, or sucked into some black hole, grace is what brings us back when nothing else can.”

“And where do you think it comes from?”

“My best guess is some higher being who loves us for some reason.”

“If you’re talking about the big G, you know I’ve never been a fan. Been an outspoken critic, in fact.”

“The ‘big G’ you’ve always opposed is the one invoked of by self-righteous control freaks and narrow-minded bigots. That G has nothing to do with compassion, mercy, or grace. I’m talking about the one who does. And I think that grace can extend even to you.”

“But I’m not real, Dani. Not anymore. You know that. Not even in the dodgy, kinda-sorta way I used to be. John Constantine is just whatever people imagine about him now. Including you.”

“John, I have a relationship with you. A significant one. That makes you real – to me. Maybe that’s the only thing that makes any of us real – the relationships we’re in – the ways we affect others, and that others affect us. That’s when we become the head of the dragon. And think about it: sometimes, when we fall in love, we turn real people into our ideas and feelings about them. And by a reverse alchemy, the best writers can turn their ideas and feelings into people who become as real to their readers as anyone they’ve ever known.”

“So, what – are you saying you’re in love with me?”

“John, I’m not a child; I’m an irrational adult. One who’s just lost her hold on – well, pretty much everything. So, right now, I need to hold onto *something*. Something I care about. I need you to be real for me. To just – be here with me for a while.”

He gave me a long look filled with thoughts I couldn’t guess. Then the edges of his expression softened, and his voice took on some tenderness.

“Sure thing, luv. I can do that. I’ll be as real as you need me to be. No worries.”

He crushed out what was left of his cigarette in an ashtray that had somehow appeared on the opposite nightstand, slid down onto his side, and put his arm over me. He was warm, and I could feel his breathing and his heartbeat. After a moment, he reached over me to the lamp on the nightstand

behind me and flicked it off. His presence soothed the darkness. I closed my eyes and felt something in me start to unclench. Then, I felt his hand stroke my hair and my cheek, and his body shifting slightly on the bed. I opened my eyes just as he brought his face toward mine for a kiss. I pulled back and put my hand on his chest.

“No, John.”

“Oh. Sorry luv. I thought – ”

“First of all, my dear, your breath smells like an ashtray. I mean, it’s *real* bad – but I mean that in a good way. And second, we’re in my ex-husband’s bed. Which used to be his and my bed. It would just be too weird for me. So, I’d just like you to hold me. Okay?”

He made a lovely sigh. “Alright Dani. No shenanigans. Mr. Chivalry, that’s me. We’re just a couple’a chums sharing a space.”

He held me again. I closed my eyes.

“But if you change your mind...”

“Shhh.”

Then it was dark and still again. And warm and safe. And I began to drift in the pleasantness of it all.

INT. LONDON FLAT - BEDROOM - NIGHT

The room is dark except for the outside LUMINANCE of the city glowing THROUGH A CLOSED SHADE on a window, and a line of LIGHT at the bottom edge of the closed bathroom door.

Dani is in bed, sitting up, with a pillow behind her back. She has her knees up under the covers, and her bare arms are clasped around them. She’s serene and thoughtful.

From inside the bathroom, there’s the sound of WATER RUNNING and a man BRUSHING HIS TEETH. He finishes, and the water is TURNED OFF. A moment later, the bathroom door opens.

Constantine, wearing boxers, starts to exit the bathroom, but then stops as he suddenly becomes aware of the incongruity of his situation. He stares at his hands for a moment, then looks around and sees Dani. His confusion changes to an “oh, so that explains it” expression.

She smiles and raises one hand as a wave.

CONSTANTINE

Nice of you to drop by. Don’t recall givin’ the invite, but I’m glad you made yourself at home. Mind explainin’ how we ended up in my flat?

DANI

You have your magic, I have mine. And as I said, it was just too weird for me back at Anthony's place.

He flips off the bathroom light and crosses to the bed. As he slides in under the covers next to Dani --

CONSTANTINE

Funny way to unwind, ennit? Travelin' all the way to bloody London.

DANI

It's about being in the right place with the right person. And I thought you'd feel more real here.

They start to cuddle.

CONSTANTINE

It's still a work in progress...

DANI

Then we can work on it together.

They kiss.

And everything turns out well.

End.

