

The Unknown Plague

1

It was the early 90's. A mythical time when vcrs were still big and clunky, cell phones huge, digital cameras unknown, computers expensive and slow, and cities still had night.

City nights are rarely, if ever dark. It is true they are never quite as bright as during the day, but there is always, even when there is no moon, and the fog hangs over the lake shore, some light from a nearby street lamp, a window or two that does not have its shade drawn and the all-night liquor store down the block adding its glare along with the ever-present derelict lying in its doorway. The lights of cars and buses, moving in straight lines down straight streets, even those that are not called straight, casts a glow of incredible regularity. At night, in any city, light is the one thing that is consistently reliable. It is as certain as death.

It is also as discomfoting.

There is an honesty to the darkness that is robbed by this incessant illumination, a comfort that reminds the soul of the womb. The very unnaturalness of it all creates crime.

Jimmy Joe knew all about crime, but little about light. The only light he experienced now was the artificial light of the city. He was a man of the night, a prowler in the electric shadows. Jimmy Joe knew how to prey on the fear of the preternatural that existed in such surroundings. He had robbed a hundred people and never one had offered the slightest resistance. It was as if his presence had the same effect on his victims as the stare of a python on the rat.

Jimmy Joe walked with a beat, a poetry. His every step had a rhythm to it that could be danced to. It was his dance of death, not his own, he was certain of that, but death for anyone who chanced on his way, unless the person had the means to pay him off. He bounced along the sidewalk to an unheard tune, his right hand stuffed into the pocket of his jacket, a fashionable item among the local adolescents and one he found some satisfaction in stealing, holding the butterfly knife. He was proud of his skill with the blade, his way of opening and closing it with a smooth, musical motion. He should have been a dancer, this Jimmy Joe.

He walked past the liquor store, his mouth widening in an obscene grin, revealing the whites of his teeth in his black face, chuckling to himself at the thought of the store owner reaching for the revolver he kept under the counter. Jimmy Joe never robbed stores, too dangerous, too much chance of getting shot. With his reputation, he knew that the moment he walked in, every weapon in the place would be ready for him. He was not that stupid. People on the street, those were his targets, stupid, vulnerable, unarmed people.

Oh he was a smart one, this Jimmy Joe. He could tell a man with a gun in his pocket from a half-mile away. He took no chances.

Thinking that maybe he should have given the drunk a good kick, just to remind him that he was alive, Jimmy Joe rounded the corner. He was almost tempted to go back, but that was never a very good idea. Not smart. It was best to keep moving, never to give a stationary target, at least not where he could be seen. No, he knew where he was going, to a spot between a street light and an alley, where he could stay in the darkest of dark shadows, invisible, a hunter in a human blind.

There was a dumpster, painted dark green with the usual graffiti sprayed on it. In the dark, it was a black blob sticking out from the landscape. A barrier to hide behind when the cops came by and played hide-and-seeek with their spotlights. The alley entrance acted as a large ear, magnifying the sounds of footsteps. All Jimmy Joe had to do was crouch in his blind and wait. The sound of a single pair of shoes was all he needed to hear.

That night it was a long wait. Jimmy Joe took an extra snort from the bag of white powder in his left pocket. A couple of men had walked by, but Jimmy Joe had let them pass. He recognized the footfalls. They were known to him as men not to be bothered with, men with large barreled revolvers under their jackets. As he heard them, he crouched a little lower and held his breath. They were fellow manhunters, and he had no desire to be their prey.

It was then that he heard it, the distinct sound of a pair of men's shoes, leather, hitting the sidewalk. The adrenalin began to move in his system and he stood up from behind the dumpster and walked out of the alley. He turned into the direction of the sound and saw a figure of a man in a dark sportcoat walking towards him. He was not a tall man and from his dress probably not young. He did not appear to be armed. Jimmy Joe walked briskly towards him, the rhythm in his steps different from that earlier. He focused the man like a gunsight and walked straight at him, stopping a few feet in front of him and pulling the butterfly knife from inside his pocket, opened it with a flourish.

"The money, man. Give me the money," Jimmy Joe said with his best street voice, the voice that had never failed before.

"No," said the man, not even stopping, not missing a beat in his walk.

Jimmy Joe stopped for a second. He was amazed, astonished. He was insulted. Then he ran after the man, catching up to him with an almost breathless shout "What do you mean no, Honkie?"

The man stepped back a step and chuckled. "Just what I said, Nigger."

Jimmy Joe, the smart, the careful, lost all smarts and care and rushed the man, waving the knife. He tripped, or was tripped, and the arm holding the knife was broken above the

wrist. Jimmy Joe, in agony from the break was held up by the throat and looked into the deep brown eyes opposite his. He could not move his eyes away. He was paralyzed, quadriplegic, immobile.

The man spoke, softly but quickly, leaving no room between words for Jimmy Joe to think of anything but the man and his words. "You're going to sleep, you cannot stay awake, sleep, sleep, as I let my hand from your neck, you will be standing but you will be in a deep sleep. And as I leave, you will remain asleep and when you wake up you will remember nothing of what I am going to say. But tomorrow night at nine, you will take your knife in your left hand and use it to remove a growth inside your throat. You will feel that growth throughout the day tomorrow and by nine you will not be able to stand it anymore and you will want to remove it yourself and you will take your knife and cut here," tracing a line across Jimmy Joe's carotid arteries. "Now you will forget everything I have said until tomorrow night at nine when you will remove the growth from your neck. Now sleep."

As Jimmy Joe stood sleeping against the wall, his broken arm hanging useless, the man returned to the shadows.

At the clinic, the doctor who set Jimmy Joe's arm was curious. "You say you fell and broke it?"

"Like I said, doc. I fell and when I woke up, my arm was broke."

"Must have been a strange fall to break it at that angle. Well, don't play with the cast and see me in a week for some more x-rays. Is your neck all right?"

Jimmy Joe was feeling around his throat. "I don't know. Feels like a lump or something."

The doctor did a quick examination. "I don't feel anything. If it's still there when you come back about the arm, we'll x-ray that as well."

2

Captain Slovino was a busy man as well as a fat one, pushing his almost three hundred pounds around the old station. His precinct had a crime rate that refused to change no matter what he and his men did and, in spite of their apparent laziness, they actually did quite a bit. He stood behind his desk and looked at the street map on the wall, running his puffy hand over a balding scalp, wondering if he could talk the city into building a wall around the bad part of his district. Then he could just let the natives kill each other in peace and he and his men could write parking tickets and divvy up the bribes. With a grin, he reminded himself that one of local bookies was overdue on this month's payment. Perhaps a small bust was in order. Good for business and kept the rest up to date.

There was knock on his office door. "Come in," he grumbled, with the sure knowledge that disaster was awaiting.

The smiling face of his tall, dark haired sergeant filled the crack of the door way. "Dumbrowski and Martinez are back, Cap."

"Wonderful. Well, send in the Bobsie Twins."

Captain Slovino barely had time to sit behind his desk when two officers, a tall Hispanic man in his early thirties and an even taller blond woman of indeterminate age, somewhere between twenty five and forty, walked in, both looking a bit embarrassed, like small children caught looting the candy bin.

The Captain gave a small grunt as they stood before his desk and putting on his best school-principle-facing-the-class-morons face, sighed and said, "I hope you realize that your little stunt this morning could have cost the city a bundle in lawsuits."

The male officer grunted and shifted his shoulders. "We had probable cause."

The captain leaned forward and held a pen at a menacing angle. "Probable cause my ass, Martinez. I heard that one before, like the time in the tenth precinct when they found the cattle prod. You answer a call from an obvious nut case about some ridiculous claim that some poor woman was hanging her daughter in a closet and beating her and you threaten to break down the door, without identifying yourselves properly or having a warrant. You then attempt to conduct a warrantless search even though the claim by the neighbor was obviously false as the woman and her daughter were sitting in their living room sorting old magazines. On top of that, the woman has a friend who writes books for a living! I don't have enough trouble in this precinct without a bunch of parent's rights groups crawling up my ass with TV cameras surrounding the station. Next time you get a call like this, you get someone from social services to go with you."

The woman officer snorted. "It was two in the morning, Captain."

Captain Slovino threw down the pen. "Then get one out of bed!" he roared. "No more of this stupidity or I'll take you off traffic."

The threat of lost bribe money was more than enough to sober the most incompetent of his people and even the Captain, in spite of the bad day he was having, (did he ever have good days anymore?) would admit that this pair was far from the worst.

As the two officers went back out the door, Slovino shook his head and muttered under his breath, "Idiots." He found that he was muttering a lot lately.

There was the usual activity in the squadroom as the Captain went around checking to make sure everyone was working and not spending too much time on the sports pools. Most of his people were still out, so the station was not too crowded, but in a couple of

hours, they would start coming back with the usual collection of prostitutes, druggies, muggers and drunk drivers. The Captain looked around and noticed that the familiar face of Mrs. Gunski was not present. He missed her and her nightly complaints of Martians broadcasting secret radio signals into her head. Maybe she had a cold or something. The Captain chuckled softly. This had turned into one hell of a job, when he looked forward to seeing the neighborhood nut case. Oh well. At least she lived in a house and not in a shopping cart.

He looked up to the clock. It was just striking nine in the evening.

Five minutes later, the sergeant picked up his phone, noted an address and said to the room in general "Vitello and Baccala, you got a call."

The detective Vitello, a man of medium height with longish brown hair and a grey topcoat, went over to the desk and picked up the address. The sergeant shook his head and said, "Your buddy Jimmy Joe..."

Vitello made a grunting noise, like a dog trying to cough. "No buddy of mine. I've been trying to bust that animal for a year."

The sergeant ignored his extraneous noises. "Well, he just killed himself. Go do the suicide thing and bring me back a pastrami."

An hour later, Vitello and Baccala were back, with a bag of sandwiches, several Styrofoam cups of coffee, and a pair of broad smiles. As Baccala carried the packages, Vitello copped a feel off a handcuffed prostitute who seemed to enjoy the attention and they both went up to the sergeant, deposited the bags on his desk and began to divvy up the food. The laughter from the squad room brought out Captain Slovino, who could have used a good laugh at that moment. The Mayor's son-in-law had just gotten off the phone about Dumbrowski and Martinez. It seemed that the woman's writer friend had called some friends of his and three congressmen were flying back to conduct hearings in his precinct, as if he did not have enough paper work already without some useless politicians digging their dirty noses into his business.

"Okay you clowns," he grumbled with mock seriousness. "What's funny?"

Baccala laughed as he reached into the bag and brought forth a handful of greasy french fries which dripped on his shirt as he stuffed a few into his mouth. "You remember Jimmy Joe Washington, Cap?"

"The Mayor's nephew?"

Baccala spoke with a mouth full of potato. "Funny, Cap, funny. Anyway, he killed himself tonight."

"Thank heaven for small favors. Saved you the trouble, Vitello, didn't he?"

Vitello wiped bits of bread away from his mouth with a paper napkin and nodded. "Yeah. His girlfriend said he'd been acting strange all day, saying he had a lump in his throat and then about nine he just sort of went nuts and tried to operate on himself. Anyway, she tried to stop him and he cut her up pretty good at the same time."

Captain Slovino put his hand to his forehead and shook his head in disbelief. It was amazing how he never managed to get used to the strange things his job involved. "Tried to operate on himself?" he gasped at the thought.

Vitello shook his head, still laughing. "Yeah. Craziest thing I ever heard. He took his knife and jammed it into his own neck and twisted it around until he bled to death."

Baccala swallowed the last of his handful of fries and laughed. It was a deep laugh. "What a mess! You think he could've just od'd or something. No. He has to get blood all over the place. Even one of the EMTs got sick looking at it."

Captain Slovino felt that he was getting a little sick himself watching his two officers stuff themselves as he looked around the room and then asked, "How's the girl?"

"Well, she ain't likely to attract many customers now, with her face being what it is. But she'll live."

"Don't be so sure of that, Bak. Some men like that sort of thing."

Baccala shook his head. "Can't go by me Cap. I like blonds, myself."

Slovino was not going to let that one pass. He'd already heard the story from his sergeant. "I know. I don't suppose you'd like to tell me how last night went with Dumbrowski?"

Vitello had his turn to laugh. "No, he wouldn't!"

Baccala turned a strange shade of red and looked deadly at his partner.

"This dumb wop got me out of bed in the middle of the morning."

"You?"

Baccala growled, "I'm going to get you for this, Vic."

"This idiot lost the keys to his handcuffs. I had to get up and go to his place with mine so he could get Zelda off the bed. She'd still be there and Martinez would be very unhappy."

Captain Slovino laughed. "But not his wife, I'd say."

Baccala was working very hard to hide his embarrassment. "Hey, look at it this way. If she's getting humped by me, Martinez wife's got no complaints."

With a nod, the Captain agreed. "True. Saves me the trouble of breaking up a domestic dispute involving my own people. That can be very embarrassing. And those two have me in enough of a shit pile as it is."

Vitello wanted to laugh, but couldn't with a mouthful of sandwich and so merely grunted, "That call the other night?"

"It's a federal case now. Three congressmen, all looking for votes. Here!"

"Wonderful!"

"Yeah. Wonderful. Next time try to lock them together and leave them where they can't get me into any trouble."

"Yeah and there's a problem with Jimmy Joe."

"What problem. He's dead."

"The EPA won't let him be buried. Something about toxic waste..."

Laughing at that, the Captain went back into his office. Closing the door behind him, he sat at his desk and noticed for the first time that it was probably the only wooden desk left in the entire department. It had character, as well as carving and cigarette burns on the top, not a few of which he had left before he quit the year before. With his weight being what it was and the doctor and his wife yelling at him, it seemed like a good idea. He wondered just how old it was. It could have been brought in when the building was first put up and that was maybe just after the big fire. Hell, there were still jets for gaslight in the basement. "A police station should never be a landmark," he thought as he looked around at the barracks-green walls. "It gets in the way of remodeling."

The Captain's thoughts turned to a movie he rented a couple of days ago. The police station in that was all modern and well lighted. "Movies!" he grunted. Hell, it was almost

as dark in the station as it was outside and sometimes it got so crowded you couldn't move around the squad room even if you did not weigh three hundred pounds. "Serve and protect, bullshit! The only thing we protect is our pensions."

At the point where Captain Slovino's depression seemed to get the darkest, he heard the familiar sound of Mrs. Gunski coming from the squad room. He smiled and went to his door, trying to look uninterested as he watched the old woman. She looked like a large leaf bag somebody had filled and then stuck a red ball on top, and was trying once more, as she had done for so many nights in the last few months, to get the sergeant to believe her story. She would have had as much chance of making the sun stand still in the heavens.

"I'm not crazy. I tell you these Martians are beaming signals right into my brain. No sooner do I put out my lights, and you know I go to bed early, I start getting these weird things going in my head. They keep telling me that they are the voices of the Martian Secret Service and I can't sleep."

The sergeant leaned over the desk at her and tried to be patient. "Now Mrs. Gunski," he said in the gentlest voice he could muster without laughing, "You and I both know that there aren't any Martians."

"I know that. I want you to find out who's pretending to be and bust 'em."

Slovino could hardly keep from laughing. It was bad enough when she really thought that she was getting messages from Mars, but now she was convinced that she was the victim of some bizarre practical joke. As if anyone could broadcast directly into somebody's brain and hers at that! One quick look around the squad room and it was obvious that his entire watch felt as he did. The room was virtually silent as the old woman continued her tirade, mixing her English with some barbarous Eastern European tongue of indeterminate origin. Even the black prostitute with the blond wig standing next to Officer Jimenez's desk with her hands still locked behind her trying to push her breasts into his face, who normally laughed so loud that the windows on the station rattled, was quiet.

What made the situation even stranger was that Mrs. Gunski, for all of her apparent weirdness, was normally a very nice person. Her little house was the neatest on the block and if it had a few more religious statues in the yard, well, that was her business. It was nicer looking than her artist neighbor with the multicolored flamingos, whatever his name was. Slovino knew that she worked as a sort of maintenance person in an office out in the suburbs and she had to get up early to catch a bus and then the train. She had never bothered anyone in her life and even the kids in the neighborhood liked her, or used to until she went nuts on them.

The case had bothered the Captain so much that the week before he had paid one of his rare visits to the local Catholic priest, Father Skroudas, and asked him if he could help. The priest, a youngish looking man in his mid-fifties, had offered the Captain a brandy and they both sat in the living room of the parsonage while the priest's housekeeper, who

looked like a clone of Mrs. Gunski, swept out the kitchen and kept peering through the door wondering what gossip she could collect.

The priest sipped from his own glass and shook his head as he spoke. His voice had the quality of gravel, even though it was not low pitched and the Captain wondered if he had a cold. "I've known Sophie for ten years, Captain, and I've never known her to have any mental problems before. It's very strange. The whole parish is talking about it and some of the people are starting to hide their children when she comes to mass."

The Captain put his glass down and nodded. "We've never had a single call or complaint either from or about her. That's why I wanted to talk to you. We'd like to get her some help, but we don't want those idiots in social services to get ahold of her. She's too nice a lady to get turned into a drug addict."

The priest shook his head again. "I agree. I suggested to her that maybe she needed to seek some medical help last time I talked to her, but she insists that she's healthy as a horse."

Captain Slovino took another sip of brandy. "Physically, Father. But do you know if she's had anything happen to her that might have set this off, something in her family, maybe?"

"No. Her children are grown and live out of state. To my knowledge they still communicate on a more or less regular basis. Her husband died about six months ago."

"I remember. He used to bring coffee and donuts to the station every once in a while. Half my men went to the funeral."

"That can unhinge someone. But, well, it doesn't seem likely."

"It is, well, an unusual case."

"By the way, Captain, when do I get to see you in church?"

"On Christmas and Easter, Father, like you always do. Anyway, I think I should visit her myself. Maybe at home she might be a little less upset than when she comes to the station."

"That might be worth a try." The priest showed the officer to the door, with the housekeeper still staring from behind the kitchen.

Captain Slovino walked back to his car, noticing as he did that the streets were not as clean as they used to be, or was it only his memory playing tricks on him. He had, after all, been a captain for a number of years now and it seemed like he was never going to advance higher. Promotion seemed to always pass him by now and he tended to look at the world through gray-colored glasses. He chuckled to himself as he slid behind the wheel. "Getting old, getting old. Just marking time to retirement," he muttered as he

fumbled with the keys. Even his car was old, but that, at least, was by choice. He hated the new cars, with all their electronic gewgaws and gadgets that he could never figure out and he was sure that they had no purpose other than to give the makers excuses to raise the price. The captain was, in the end, a man of simple tastes and simple desires--a good dinner, a warm bed and a warm wife to share it with and as few hassles as possible. When he was young, he had joined the force looking for a bit of excitement. Now he was convinced that the less excitement the better. There was no point in chasing criminals in a world that really did not care if the criminal was caught or not.

The steering wheel seemed a little closer to his belly than when he first got into the car that morning and he grunted. It was not possible to gain weight that quickly, though there seemed times when even looking at dinner would add pounds, but the captain shrugged it off as a figment of his imagination. "Getting as bad as Mrs. Gunski," he thought with a grin and a shake of the head.



The house with the many flamingos was an old brownstone bungalow which had seen better days. It had been renovated by a shrewd developer who had then been caught selling drugs, which proved that he was not as shrewd as everyone thought. It was thanks to the government that it was now the property of Basil Johnson, an artist noted for his attempts to recreate the more desperate moods of the surrealists, though at least one critic was convinced that it was his own frustration at not being desperate that was driving his work.

Inside, two of the small bedrooms on the second floor had been gutted and been turned into one large studio, covered with canvasses of completed paintings for Basil's next showing at a small, but at the moment highly fashionable, gallery near the lake. His model, a tall blond, at least six feet, was standing nude with her arms resting on a straight-backed, wooden chair in front of her. Basil was sitting behind an easel, with his pencil working as best he could on a large sheet of paper. He was a short man, barely five feet tall with a bald head, naturally bald, not shaved and he had the disconcerting habit of working with no shirt on, a habit he had acquired when young after seeing a picture of a bare-chested Picasso at work. His chest was shallow and moved with his breathing which seemed heavy at times and which made his friends, of whom he had many, worry about the state of his health, physical as well as mental.

Behind Basil was an old couch, reholstered a number of times through the years and on it was a man in a semi-reclining posture, holding a magazine which he pretended to thumb through. The man, Arthur Malacoda, was in his forties, a writer and dabbler in many things, some of them rarely mentioned outside a very select circle. He was physically almost the opposite of Basil. While not extremely tall (he was shorter than the model by several inches) his robust frame and lack of a neck made him look taller than he was. His hair was thick and black, black as the leather he was wearing in honor of his new

motorcycle, a Kaswaski, which was heavily locked behind the house. He was wearing a pair of sunglasses, a habit he had acquired years before and had never eliminated. He looked at the model with a certain twist to his lips which indicated something more than mere lust. Basil was working very hard trying to ignore him, not in order to draw better, but to annoy his visitor, whom he knew hated to be ignored more than anything else in the world.

"I really think you should do something other just paint her," he was saying as Basil made some minor touches to his drawing.

Basil looked up from his paper at the model and chuckled softly. "Such as?"

"Oh, something interesting, with clothespins or electricity."

The model did not look shocked or surprised. She had worked for Basil before and had long since become used to Malacoda, and his sense of humor, such as it was. A slight chuckle escaped from the painter. "I'm afraid, my friend, that I don't share your taste for torture."

The writer affected boredom in his voice. "It's a pity, Basil. There are few art forms higher than the causing of human pain. The human species is made to suffer."

Basil sighed, shook his head and put down his pencil. "And the human spirit is made for breaking. I know, Arthur, I know. One of these days your misanthropy is going to get you into trouble."

"Oh, it does, Basil, it does. You should have seen the look on my poor mother's face every time I laughed at the latest famines on the news, Lord rest her soul."

Basil sighed again, took a second deep breath and turned away from the paper. Shaking his head he said, "That's enough, Mary. Our friend here is having another fit of philosophy and that means no more work for a while."

Arthur laughed. "Are you implying that I disturb you?"

"You know you do, and you enjoy it."

"Of course. I was made to disturb people. You saw the reviews from my last book."

Now Basil laughed and turned in his chair as Mary sat on the floor without bothering to put her clothes on. "You were unfavorably compared to DeSade, if I remember."

"It was the best review I ever got. Made me a best seller."

"You see the kind of friends I've got, Mary."

The model grinned. "I never read it, Art."

Malacoda attempted to sound pained that his great talents were so little appreciated. "You should read more often, my dear. It's good for the mind. Your body needs no improvement and the soul is hardly my province."

Basil smiled. "So how would you pose Mary. Without hurting her too much, that is."

Arthur leaned back and looked at the model. "Something simple this time, I think. Do you know how to do Darshan?"

Mary shook her head. "Nope. What is it?"

"It's a Hindu custom. I'll show you. First get down on your hands and knees."

Mary did this.

"Now put your elbows and the palms of your hands flat on the floor in front of you. No, the forearms are straight with the body. Good. Now put your head down to the floor. Excellent. Now stay that way until we tell you to move."

Basil looked at his model and shook his head. "Nice, I think, but now what?"

"Nothing. The position is its own end. It's the ultimate form of submission, to god, guru or master. Like all such things, it has no need of external explanation, one look and the viewer understands what's going on, what the mind of the model is."

Basil walked over to the model and bent over her. "Are you comfortable?" he asked softly.

"I'm all right. It's easier than standing all day."

"The position is a natural one. She can be kept that way for hours and have nothing but a little soreness in the knees if the surface is too hard. On this carpet, she should feel virtually nothing."

"I see."

"You probably do. Of course, if you had a whip around somewhere, I could show you another benefit of this position."

Basil looked archly first at his friend and then at the upturned bottom of his model and shook his head. The light from the skylight he had built into his studio when he bought the house reflected off his bare scalp, making it appear that he had somehow acquired a halo, a distinction he would have assured everyone he deserved. Mary, hearing the idea, made a small laughing noise. Arthur growled slightly.

"I don't recall giving you permission to comment," he said with a mock seriousness that caused Basil to break out into convulsive laughter. "You have an ill-behaved model and you should not encourage her by this unseemly levity," he spoke with all the mock-Victorian seriousness he could muster, without breaking down himself.

Now Mary was laughing out loud and trying to hold her position at the same time, causing her to rock back and forth and threaten to tip over at any moment. Basil choked his laughter off, with some difficulty, and turned to his friend.

"You make a bad Victorian, Art. A terrible one in fact."

"We are not amused," Art responded in a falsetto.

"But you are amusing. Why else would I let you interrupt my work and abuse my model?"

Arthur Malacoda, chuckling with malice that may not have been pretended now instead of laughing, got off the couch and walked over to the model. "I have not yet begun to abuse her," he said in a low voice.

Basil looked out the window, first briefly and then with some curiosity as he walked over to it and began to stare at the dumpy woman walking into the house across the street. Arthur noticed the change and walked over the window as well to look out just as the woman closed the door behind her. Basil shook his head and said in a quiet tone indicative of great tragedy "Mrs. Gunski."

"Who?" Mary asked from her place on the floor.

"A woman who lives across the street. Unfortunate case. Her mind is going."

The writer twisted his face into a contorted grin. "Really?" he asked with a chuckle built into his voice. "Where? And does she have one? I never noticed it."

"It's not that funny, Art. She imagines things."

The writer sighed and looked back out the window, saying with bored amusement, "Sounds more creative than tragic. My own imagination keeps breaking down, writers block, they call it."

"Not in this case. Keeps insisting that she hears voices in her head, Martians broadcasting to her brain."

Malacoda turned swiftly and stared at his friend, looking at the eyes of the artist, his own hidden behind the sunglasses. "You can't be serious."

Basil nodded. "I am. Keeps running down to the police station to complain."

"Sounds like she belongs in a dumpster somewhere with the rest of the loonies. How does she live?"

"Actually, she works as a cleaning lady or something in a place out near you. It's only when she's home that her mind gets a little, well..."

"Should be locked away before she annoys everyone."

"At least she doesn't shit in her pants."

"Not yet."

"Really, Art. You are in a malicious mood today."

"I know. I think later on I'll give some wrong directions to blind people."

Basil laughed and turned to face his model who was still kneeling in the approved position. "He's not kidding. I saw him do it."

Mary turned her face to look up at the pair. "Why?" she asked even though she knew what the answer would be.

Art responded before Basil could speak. "To be nasty, or diabolical. It's fun. Not as much fun as torturing a beautiful woman, but it has its finer points. It's kind of like taking something away from a small child."

A finally shocked Basil interrupted. "That's going just a bit far for my taste, Art."

The writer laughed, a high pitched laugh designed to sound like the neigh of the horse. He had been practicing it for three days. "Nonsense. Builds character and prepares them to pay taxes."

"Did your parents...?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Basil. I'd have slit both their throats while they were sleeping."

Basil shook his head, wondering where this was going to lead. "Comforting thought."

"I find it so."

"Are you sure they died of natural causes?"

"Of course. They didn't leave enough money to be worth killing them over. It's a lot of work you know."

Mary was certain by now that both of them were out of their minds and said "Back to the old lady."

"Who? Oh, Mrs. Gunshit."

Arthur jerked his head up and raised his left eyebrow. "Mrs. what?"

Basil said merrily, "Oh, that's what some of the kids around here are starting to call her."

"Children. The joy of humanity. They should be killed, cooked and eaten, not necessarily in that order."

"Some of these should be. Nasty little beasts. It's all over the neighborhood what's happening to her and you know what people are like."

"Ignorant fools, fit only for slaughter."

The model asked, "People or children?"

"Both, my dear Mary, both." Malacoda answered with a chuckle.

Basil continued. "The local priest, whatever his name is, visits her a lot, and she, being the dumb polack that she is..."

"In addition to being crazy."

"Spends a lot of time in church, on the off chance that divine intervention will save her from the Martians."

"Praying to Holy Elvis might work better. Has she got any family?"

"She has couple of children, in their late thirties, at least, I think, one is a daughter living in California and the other is a son who's in Europe for some company."

"Both doing well, I take it?"

"From what I hear. One would think that they'd try to get some help for their mother."

"Maybe she doesn't want the help they're offering. Or maybe she hasn't told them."

"The couple next door writes them occasionally. I think they told them their mother was having some trouble, but nobody knows how they're reacting."

"Could be the home wasn't as happy as everyone seems to think."

"Possible. It happens."

"I don't know much about them. I think they got along pretty well. But the kids had their careers and the husband died."

The writer nodded with a grin. "I remember that. I think I was here the day they planted him and had the devil's own time finding a parking place."

"I know, I would have been over there myself but I was behind on a contract, as usual. He had a lot of friends. Never see any of them any more."

"Nice people."

"Polacks, mostly. Out for the free meal and a few prayers."

"No different from anyone else. Except for the religion, that is."

"They do take that shit seriously."

Basil laughed. "It keeps them busy and it's not as greasy as those damned sausages they keep trying to feed me."

Arthur looked definitely surprised at that. "Feed you?"

Basil laughed again. "Yes, feed me. Once they heard I was an artist they got the idea into their heads..."

"They?"

"Sorry, the neighbors. They got this weird idea that I was always starving."

Malacoda looked up and down at his friend and then broke into a wide grin. "Well, you could put on a few pounds."

"Funny, Art, funny. They think that artists are all starving."

"They should try living on my royalties for a change."

"I thought you had money coming out of your ears."

"That's from scripting porno films and robbing gas stations."

"I see."

"But back to these generous neighbors of yours."

"They're very nice people, kind of dumb in a working class sort of way, but nice. Only thing is that they have no idea of cuisine."

Mary twisted her head a little to look at the men while not lifting herself. "I don't know. I kind of like Polish food."

Arthur looked around as if he had just heard some weird crashing noise. "Did I just hear an oxymoron?"

"No, just my model. Who you just posed."

"Whom, Basil, whom."

"Who cares? You're the writer. I paint."

"And very well too. Which reminds me, my garage could use a new coat and if you have a free day..."

"Sorry, I don't do garages or windows."

"You should do windows, Basil. It might start a new fashion."

Suppressing the sudden desire to murder his friend, Basil winced a great wince. "Yeech! You know, when I was a kid, around every Halloween they would have this contest at school to see which kids would get to paint the local store windows with scary pictures."

"And you always won."

"Hell no. I always did my best to lose. Who wanted to stand outside on a rainy day and paint a store window and not get paid for it?"

"You see, Mary. Our friend is a true artist. He insists on being paid for his art."

"That's so he can pay his model."

"And I would never be so indelicate as to ask how he pays you."

Basil literally jumped at that. "Art!" he shouted with mock indignation.

"Sorry, Basil, but I couldn't resist it. And I don't see how you can either."

"Resist what?"

"Having attractive, naked women pose for you all day and not jump into bed with them."

"Well, I have been known to on occasion."

"Thank goodness. I do worry about you, Basil."

"Don't worry about him, Arthur," the model squeaked with slight, very very slight, embarrassment.

The writer looked out the window to his left and squinted. "Who's the very round man going to visit Frau Gunski now?"

Basil started and went back to the window. He laughed and said "That's a local cop, Captain Sloboda or something like that. He visits her occasionally, trying to bring her back to her senses."

"Looks like a real dudych. Got your camera around anywhere?"

"In the chest. Why?"

"He looks like the type for a book. I want a picture."

"Be my guest."

Arthur went over to an antique chest that stood in the far corner of the studio and opened the center drawer. He lifted the Polaroid out and ran back to the window to take a shot of Captain Slovino just as he turned to go up the stairs and ring Mrs. Gunski's doorbell. From the window the writer and painter watched as the door opened and the policeman entered.

Arthur Malacoda pocketed the picture as it developed, took it out for one quick look and then repocketed it. He went back to his couch and sat down, crossing his legs and staring at the model, still kneeling with her head to the carpet.

"Tell me, Basil. When is this new showing of yours?"

"In a couple of weeks. The gallery owner wants to give the walls a quick coat of paint and then I go in."

"Well, I hope they have better wine than the last time. My palate rebelled for three days. Where did that poison come from, Seattle?"

"I don't think so."

"It tasted like the juice from an old salmon can."

"I didn't know you drank the juice from salmon, Art."

"I asked for that didn't I."

"You did."

"Did I ever tell you about an old college professor of mine."

"Probably."

The writer chuckled a very weird sounding chuckle and continued. "He got put in charge of some conference and after it was over he got this letter from someone saying that the conference was fine but the soup at lunch tasted like cat's piss."

"Now I know I've heard this."

"Well, it's a good story, so you get to hear it again. Anyway, my professor wrote the man back saying that the man undoubtedly had the advantage over him in that he had never tasted cat's piss."

Basil looked at his painting and mused a bit. "Let me see. That makes at least four hundred times you've told me that story."

"And you never tire of it. Such dedication to my genius must be rewarded."

"How."

"By my leaving you to your labors. I have to get home before the traffic starts." And he got up to head for the back door.

"Have you got everything?" Basil asked. He remembered one time Malacoda had left a manuscript behind and had been literally panic stricken. That was in the ancient times, before computers and the thought of retyping from a carbon copy was the ultimate in horror. It would have better to wake up next to Chuthlu than experience such a thing.

Patting his wallet, "I think so. See you."

"Not if I see you first."

"That's my line."

"I know. Bye."

"Bye. Goodbye, Mary."

"Bye."

As the deep roar of the motorcycle told them that the novelist was out on the streets, a warning to all right thinking motorists to stay off, Basil Johnson and Mary the Model settled back to the usual grind.

"Can I get up now, Basil?" she asked as she heard the back door slam.

"Sure. He's quite a character, isn't he?"

Mary got up and sat down on the couch the novelist had used, still naked and making no move to cover herself. "I'm not sure. Sometimes you think he'll make you laugh yourself to death and sometimes he scares you death. Does he really give wrong directions to blind people."

Basil nodded, frowning. "Yep. Hates 'em."

"Why?"

"Who knows. Art hates everyone."

"Including you and me?"

"I don't know about that. But he and I have been friends for a hell of a long time. We met in college. He'd tie up his girlfriends and I'd make paintings of them."

"Sound's even stranger than you are."

"He is. You don't judge men like Art the same way you judge ordinary men. There's nothing ordinary about him. He's one of these super geniuses who never could fit into an ordinary life and he knows it. He's always known it, from what I gather. His own family adored him, but no one else ever has."

"He seems to attract enough women. I mean, this latest little thing of his is certainly devoted."

"He attracts them, at least the ones who like pain, but it never seems to work out for him. There was a time when he would talk about finding a wife, living a "normal" life. No more. He hasn't talked like that in years. He's become a genuine sadist. His only joy seems to come from human pain and in that he is a genuine Christian. He believes it is far better to give than to receive."

Mary cupped her chin in her hands, rested her elbows on her knees and looked up. The position almost made her look innocent. "You know, I'd love to see his house."

"No you wouldn't. It's very ordinary, very unesthetic, a mess most of the time and he might get you into his dungeon."

"You're kidding."

"What about?"

"The dungeon."

"He really has one. And it gets used."

"Strange man. But lots of people have dungeons now."

"Well, I don't, not yet at least. Damn it. He's got me thinking like him again. He has that effect on people."

IV

Captain Slovino was a man of his word, when the reputation of his department or an arrest was not at stake. He had told the local priest that he was going to visit Mrs. Gunski and so unto Mrs. Gunski he did go. It was not, in truth, anything that he was looking forward to. It was something like a trip to the dentist. Of course you know you haven't got any cavities, but do you really want to find out? Maybe it was everyone else who was crazy and Martians were really beaming their messages to a Polish cleaning lady. It was thoughts like that which worried the captain more than anything else. He was used to nut cases. It was part of the job to have a few of them around. But he always had the sneaking suspicion that insanity was somehow catching, like a cold and if you were too close to someone who had it, you might come down with it yourself.

He had never heard of a sane shrink.

He walked up her front step, still tired from a bad night in the station. He had tried to get some sleep when he got home, but his wife was in a foul mood and the kid was making a mess of the kitchen again. The idea of having her live at home and take a couple of years at the community college before transferring to the university might have made academic sense for his average offspring, but it was proving to be a disaster in the house. On top of that his wife was getting to be almost as round as himself and he was wondering how long it would be before every woman in his life looked like Mrs. Gunski, assuming the floor did not give way under them first. To take matters almost to the breaking point, he had been forced to park almost a block away and that in front of a fire hydrant. Not that he worried about a parking ticket from his own men, but if a fire broke out, he'd have some embarrassing explaining to do to the fire commissioner, who was in a bit of a snit over some small matter involving several of his paramedics and a drug bust.

Puffing from the walk and climbing the few steps to the front door, he rang the doorbell, barely conscious of the fact that he was being watched from every window in the

neighborhood. He waited just a few seconds before the door opened, to reveal the smiling face of Mrs. Gunski, who had just returned from work. She still had her uniform on, spotless in spite of her menial occupation and looking not at all like the unfortunate creature who nightly invaded the station.

"Captain Slovino!" she gushed with surprise and possible gratitude, "Come in."

She held the door for him and he walked into the small foyer and directly to the living room. It was spotless, as he expected it to be, with a painting on the wall that must have cost at least ten dollars at a flea market and several knick-knacks, all absolutely dustless. The incredible neatness of the place, in contrast to the continuing messiness of every other place in his life, struck him as hopelessly poignant. From the kitchen came the smell of cabbage cooking, an almost absolute requirement for this house.

The woman pointed to an old, overstuffed chair. "Please, have a seat. Let me take your coat."

Captain Slovino surrendered his light topcoat with gratitude and sat down in a chair that had seen better days but was still comfortable. There were small cloths on the ends of the arms and he knew without lifting them that they were to cover the wear of those arms.

"Can I get you a cup of coffee, Captain. I just made some."

"Thank you. That would be very nice."

"I always put the pot on when I come home. My John, he used to always want his coffee ready when he came home from work and I just can't get out of the habit."

"It hasn't been that long, Mrs. Gunski. Everyone at the station still misses him and his donuts."

"It'll be seven months in a week that he left," she said wistfully as she went into the kitchen to emerge in a few seconds with a tray holding two china cups, cream and sugar and a silver pot.

"I know."

"This pot was one of our wedding presents. It was something I never thought I'd want to use, but now I never use anything else."

She poured the coffee into the two cups and offered one to the captain who set it down on a small, round table next to the chair.

"Would you care for cream or sugar?" she asked as she moved to her chair.

The captain tried not to wince. "No. I drink it black. I used to use a lot of sugar, but my wife yells at me now if I even look at it."

"My John used to use cream. Sometimes I think he used the coffee to flavor the cream and not the other way around."

"My daughter does that. Drives the Mrs. nuts."

Mrs. Gunski sat down on the couch opposite the officer and poured herself a cup, adding cream and sugar in small amounts, then peering over the cup said, "So it's nice of you to visit an old lady, Captain, but you must have a reason."

"You got me there, Mrs. Gunski. I've been wondering about those voices of yours and I wanted to ask you about them without a thousand people around."

The face of the woman acquired a brightness that no one would have expected possible. "You believe me?"

Captain Slovino tried to not look like he was lying. "I believe you're hearing something. And it may be that some crazy has figured out a way to transmit into your brain," the captain said with mock conviction. He no more believed that than he believed the Earth was flat, but if it got Mrs. Gunski to consider some serious help, he'd try it.

Mrs. Gunski put her cup down and folded her hands, looking at the ceiling. "Praise God. I thought everyone was sure I was nuts. It's been a visit to hell, these last five months."

"Has it been that long?"

"They started about two months after John died. I was sleeping and all of sudden I'd wake up with this screaming in my head. I thought it was something that happened to widows, so I tried to ignore it. They say having your husband die does weird things to you."

The captain nodded sympathetically. "That's very true."

"So I figured it'd go away."

"It didn't."

"It got worse. The screaming stopped and then a voice, kind of a quiet voice, kept popping into my head. No sooner than I'd get into bed and be about to drop off and then it would start."

"And what did it say?"

"Crazy things. Like it was speaking a language I don't know, and then it would drop in an English word or two, but nothing I could make sense of. Well, I didn't dare tell anyone because they'd have put me in the padded room."

"I see."

"But then it got so I could understand what it was saying and it scared me nearly to death. I mean this voice kept saying it was from Mars and it meant to steal my soul for their zoo and how nice it was that my husband was already there instead of hell where he belonged and things like that. I was so mad and it kept up, every night, right after I would get into bed. So I had no choice, I had to see if someone would help me, but everyone thinks I'm crazy. Even Father Skroudas, good and holy man that he is, wonders if I need to see a shrink." And with that she stopped to catch her breath.

Captain Slovino set his cup down and shook his head. The poor woman was in a bad state and older than he thought if she considered Father Skroudas holy, not with the charcoal portrait of the young woman in the hall that the captain knew to be his girlfriend. "So do you get any sleep?"

"That's the other weird thing. When I go to the station and complain, the voices stop for the night and I don't get bothered anymore."

That explained her nightly visits. "And you think that coming to the station has something to do with the voices stopping?"

"I don't know, captain, but they do, every time. It's like my going to you scares 'em off."

The Captain shook his head again. This was something he was never trained to do and he wished oh so fervently that he was not doing it now. It was best to change the subject for the moment. He looked quickly around the room with an eye that was trained to find incriminating evidence even if none existed and saw the two pictures in a hinged frame standing on the far table. "Your children?"

"Yes," she said with a smile. "My children. My son John Jr. is with a chemical company in Europe. My daughter is an artist and lives in Los Angeles. They came home for their father's funeral and stayed about a month and then had to get back to work. Kathy might come back here though. I called her last night and she's real worried about me."

"Nice of her."

"She's a nice girl, even if she left the Church and moved to California. She worries about her poor, old mother and her crazy voices."

"You told her?"

"Didn't want to, but it slipped out and she nearly threw a fit on the phone, wanted to drop what she was doing and fly back right away, but I told her to stay there until this new project of hers, which I don't quite know what it is, works out. She wasn't too happy with that, but she has her career to think of besides me. I never wanted to be a burden on my children, not like old lady Grumbowski down the block."

"Doesn't Mrs. Grumbowski have Alzheimers?"

Mrs. Gunski contorted her face with disgust and put down her cup. "Senile old bag, that's what she is. Those poor kids never have a moments rest. If I got that bad, I wish someone would just shoot me and put me in a dumpster like that family in Indiana did last week on the news."

The captain chuckled a little. "I don't think it's exactly legal to do that."

"Really? I know that, Captain, but it's terrible to watch out my window and see what goes on over there. Those kids must be saints to put up with it."

The captain, who knew more about the Grumbowskis than he cared to talk about, let the matter of their possible sanctity rest as he took a sip of his coffee. "And what is this project of your daughter's?"

Mrs. Gunski covered herself with her pride. It formed a halo around her and she smiled so broadly the captain was sure her face must hurt. "Kathy has a showing of her paintings. Her own show, Captain. No one else in the gallery besides her. I told the fellow across the street, he's an artist too, you know, and he said that it was quite an honor for her. I wish I had the time and money to fly out there, but my job barely pays enough to keep this house running and Kathy wanted to send me the tickets, but I know she doesn't have a lot."

The captain smiled over his cup. There were few things he enjoyed more than hearing a fellow parent talk about the triumphs of a child. It was the sort of thing which made the unpleasant parts of his work, and they seemed to be all unpleasant these days, worth putting up with. He nodded and said, "You have every right to be proud of her."

"Very. And our son too. You know, Captain, its funny, but those two never got along."

"Sibling rivalry. My kids fought all the time until my son moved out and got married."

Mrs. Gunski looked very pained. "Yeah, but with these, it was like they weren't even related. Even now, I called John to tell him about Kathy's show and he just grunted, not even interested. And as far as she's concerned, he might fall off the edge of the world and she wouldn't miss him. They gave my husband and me quite a time when they were young."

Shaking his head with sympathy he put down his cup. "I can imagine. But you never know. Sometimes, they get over it."

"I'm not sure. Do you know that they even had a big fight the night after we buried my husband?"

The captain put on his most understanding look. "Grief does that. Makes you hard to live with for a time. It must have been terrible for them both, having to travel for the funeral and all."

"That's what Joe next door said when I told him about it. But I don't know. My brothers and I fought all the time when we were kids too, but we always made up."

That was the first time anyone had mentioned any other family. "I didn't know you had any other family."

Mrs. Gunski shook her head and took a sip of coffee. "I had three brothers. One died of cancer. One died in an accident and one committed suicide."

"I'm sorry."

"That's life, Captain. The ones you love, those are the ones you lose."

The captain sighed. No wonder the woman was crazy, he thought. That would be enough to knock anyone off the hinges. He looked down at the floor for a second, wondering how he would react if he lost everyone who mattered to him and noticed that his shoes were dirty. It was a small thing, but he could remember when he never left the house without first shining his shoes. No one noticed that any more. "Back to your daughter. What does she paint?"

Mrs. Gunski's face lightened again and she laughed. There was a harshness in the laugh that was the result of age, but enough music to indicate that once she had been young herself and maybe even beautiful. "I don't know. I've seen them and I can't figure out what the hell they're supposed to be. She calls it Neo-Cubism, whatever that means."

Captain Slovino chuckled slightly. "I don't know much about art myself, so don't ask me."

"I asked the man across the street, the artist, one day, oh, about a week ago and he tried to explain it to me, but I couldn't make any sense out of it and then his friend on the motorcycle came and he tried to explain it and made even less sense."

"Was that the same man...?"

"Who left after you came? Yeah, he's a writer, pretty famous I gather from the way Basil, that's the artist, talks about him. Seems like a nice man, in a strange sort of way. Told me that if he gets out to California he'd like to see Kathy's work."

"That's very nice of him. He's not from the neighborhood?"

"No, he lives in the suburbs somewhere. Comes in to visit Basil every few days."

The captain wondered if he were the writer who set the feds on his troops. In any case, writers were bad news for cops, they had too many friends in embarrassing places. He remembered one of his classmates at the academy who had made the mistake of writing a traffic ticket for a reporter and ended up guarding freight trains. And you could never trust them. You might have a few friendly drinks with one and the next thing all the local scandals were on the front page and the television. Bad people, writers, and dangerous. They had power and if there was one thing the captain understood more than crime, it was power and he never wanted to be on the wrong end of it.

"Do you know who he is?"

"Arthur somebody or other. He helped me carry that couch in."

"Really?"

"A couple of months after John died. I'd just had it reupholstered and the delivery man just dumped in the front yard. So Basil and Arthur brought it in for me. The writer has a girl with him sometimes and she is a really weird one."

"How so?"

"Dresses funny and wears lots of strange make-up."

"Sound's like quite a character."

"Well, Kathy's friends, some of them came to the funeral, they look a little odd too, so you can't say. We looked terrible to our parents when we were young too."

"I know. And my kids come up with the strangest things too. Sometimes I think my daughter is running out in her underwear and its her clothes! I don't know." And then there was the little matter of the tongue piercing, but the Captain did not want to even think about that. It was bad enough he had to see it.

"Part of growing up. Do you want them to look like us?"

Belly regarded with disdain. "Hell no!"

Mrs. Gunski laughed again. "Would you care to stay for supper, Captain. I always make too much."

"No, but thank you. I have to get going. And if coming to the station stops your voices, then you just keep coming in. But try not to yell at poor Sgt. Kelly too much. The man has enough troubles trying to keep order in that madhouse as it is."

He rose from the chair with a little difficulty. His stomach did not seem to want to go with the rest of his body. Gravity, it seemed, was not his friend today. But once on his feet, he allowed Mrs. Gunski to show him out the door. After a last farewell, he was on his way down the steps and towards his car.

In a few minutes, Captain Slovino was caught in a merciless traffic jam only three blocks from the station. He was tempted to use his siren, but the way the traffic was blocked, he would only sit there and make a lot of noise, so he waited like the rest of the citizens, badge or no badge, for the mess to move. After about ten minutes of waiting for his radiator to explode, the captain was able to see the cause of the difficulty. The smashed remains of a bicycle was laying on the side of the street with a paramedic truck next to it. The captain sighed with resignation. Another squashed kid was more of a nuisance than a disaster, but it meant that one of his officers would be stuck with paperwork in the station when he could be out patrolling and bringing in some extra cash. As he passed the site of the accident, he had the strange feeling that this was becoming a rather common occurrence. He made a note to check on it when he got back to station. Maybe he could have community services look into the problem, if there was one.

V

Captain Slovino walked into the station to find it in chaos. There were television cameras all over the place and a collection of media bubble brains all waving microphones demanding to see him. Before they could find him, the captain turned quickly, ran out the door and around the back where his trusty sergeant was waiting to hide him. As the captain went down into the basement to wait for the enemy to depart his territory, he made a mental note to have a couple of his officers transferred to a public housing project. This was not turning out to be a good day. The congressmen had come to town early, to surprise everyone and had descended on the precinct earlier that afternoon, made a few hurried accusations and then repaired to the nearest bar for a meeting. The press, following in their wake like jackals following lions, stayed around hoping to make a few minor kills on their own. Fortunately for Captain Slovino, he was such an ordinary looking man, in spite of his size, that no one could remember what he looked like. Which was amazing considering how much man there was.

He was safe, for the moment.

"That was close," the sergeant whispered in the darkness. It was not safe to turn a light on, some brighter than usual reporter might see it.

"I'm going to kill those idiots!" the captain whispered back. "All we need is a bunch of imbeciles looking for votes in my precinct."

The sergeant chuckled quietly. "They won't stay long, Cap. They have to file their stories in a little bit."

Captain Slovino growled at the thought of what the stories would say about his precinct. "Thank goodness. I had enough trouble getting here."

"Traffic's bad again."

"I know. Another squashed brat."

"Again? That's the third this month."

"That many?"

"At least. School principal was on the phone wondering if Officer Friendly could make an extra visit. He's losing all his pupils."

It was a line the captain could not resist. "Must make seeing difficult."

"Huh?"

Slovino tried to explain, sighing with added frustration. "Eyes, pupils..."

"Yeah, right, Cap. Anyway, I told him that the day watch'd give him a call tomorrow to set it up."

"Good. By the way, I just saw Mrs. Gunski..."

"And you're alive?" The sergeant was incredulous, and happy that in the darkness the captain could not quite see his face.

Captain Slovino got the message, though. "Funny. I told her that she could come in any time she wanted. It's the least we can do for her husband. But I asked her not to scream so much. She's scaring the murderers."

Kelly laughed. He needed a joke, at least one he could understand. "Not doing us any good either. Why don't we just let social services handle her."

"The old lady's husband brought us donuts every day for years and you want her put in a nuthouse? We can't do that! It's bad enough that she can't sleep without the rest of us nursing bad consciences."

The sergeant did not want his own frustrations to show as well, but he was wondering how long he could stand the nightly visitations. "But we're not shrinks, Cap. I don't know what to do with her."

"Let her talk. She says that the voices, whatever they are, stop when she comes in, so let her come in. Maybe they'll go away."

The sergeant shook his head, slowly. "I don't know. This precinct is getting real strange."

"What are you talking about?"

"Mrs. Gunski, the dead kids, Jimmy Joe's suicide, and now last night I had the weirdest feeling that I was being watched while I was doing my paperwork."

Captain Slovino rolled his eyes around twice. "Aren't you due for a vacation?"

"Just had mine a couple of months ago."

"Really? I thought it was longer. How long have we been stuck here?"

"I don't know?"

"Could you go up and find out if it's safe for me to show myself?"

"Sure. Be back in a minute."

As the sergeant climbed the old stairs, making clunking noises as he did so, the captain sat staring into the darkness, convinced that everyone around him was losing his mind. Now his sergeant was thinking someone was watching him. Ridiculous! The squadroom was open. There were probably a hundred people watching him, all officers wondering what he was writing about them. Maybe what old lady Gunski had was catching.

Taking out a small flashlight, a gift from one of his kids for his last birthday and usually ignored, the captain looked at his watch. He had been sitting in the basement for almost a half-hour and the sergeant had not yet come down for him. Either the precinct was under siege, or the sergeant had remembered some ancient grudge and was going to let his captain rot among the mice while he and the rest of the squad ate stale donuts and played cribbage as crime ran uncontrolled. After fifteen more minutes passed, the captain was ready to run out of the basement, press or no press and retake control of his station. It was at that most desperate of moments, when the very human spirit was in danger, that the door opened and the sergeant called down that it was safe to return to the light.

"Thank goodness!" the captain screamed back as he ran up the stairs, ran for the first time in almost twenty years. As he reached the top, he noticed that his heart was pounding a lot more than it did twenty years ago and he had to sit down for a second to avoid collapse.

The sergeant bent solicitously over his superior, not sure if he should call the paramedics, realizing that to do so would be to invite unending ridicule, the tension between the two services being what it was since the drug bust a month before. Of course, if the fire department personnel were going to sell cocaine out the back of the station house, well, it was their problem, not that of the police.

"Are you all right, Captain?" he finally was able to ask.

Captain Slovino breathed heavily. "I think so. I'm getting too old for this, Sam, way too old."

"I didn't think you could move that fast."

"I can't!"

"You sure you're ok?"

"Give me a minute to catch what breath I got left and I'll tell you if I'm dead or not."

"You don't look dead."

"Thanks, but I'm still not sure. I haven't moved that fast since I was a new detective chasing a burglar or something it was so long ago."

"What was down there?"

"Me, the mice and too much talking to Mrs. Gunski. Who said that paranoia was catching?"

"I dunno."

"Well, Sam, it is. It is."

Going back around into the station, the captain noticed that the lights in front needed cleaning. They were a constant reminder of how old the building was and right now he did not want to be reminded of that particular fact. He pushed his way past the usual crowd in the squad room and walked, a little faster than usual, into his office, closing the door behind him with just a bit more of a bang than was his normal custom. He took off his jacket and hung it up on a bent hook behind his desk and reached into his bottom drawer, shuffled some papers and came up with a bottle of Jack Daniels.

The captain was not a heavy drinker. The bottle had been a gift from a local bookie five years before and was still almost half full. Looking around, even with the closed door he felt that he was taking a risk, Slovino unscrewed the top and took a slug directly into his throat, hardly noticing the taste. There was a satisfying feeling of warmth along his body

as the whisky made its way to his stomach where it landed like a bomb on Baghdad. There was an instant feeling like breakfast, lunch and part of the stomach lining itself were exploding and then the relaxing warmth spread to his entire body.

With a sigh, more of relief than of guilt, the captain recorked the bottle and put it back in its hiding place. That done, he opened a tube of breath mints and took five of them. It was rapidly becoming one of those days when it seemed that everyone was crazy and he was joining them. For an instant the terrible thought hit him that maybe Mrs. Gunski was right and Martians were transmitting to their brains. He looked up at the clock. It was four thirty in the afternoon.

By six the station was in greater chaos than when he arrived. A truck had lost control and slammed into a line of cars at one of the less competently designed intersections in the precinct. Crime fighting had to come to a halt as half the force was out writing accident reports. Secure in the wisdom that said that involving police in car accidents was one of the greater idiocies of the twentieth century, Slovino hoped that no one would decide to get murdered while the paperwork was being filled out.

He felt guilty. Having a drink on duty was one of the few cardinal sins he quite genuinely avoided. It was a dangerous practice.

Once, when he was a young officer, there was an old sergeant whom the rookie Officer Slovino had idolized. The man had seen everything, murders, robberies, rapes, and had solved almost every case he had been assigned to, sometimes even catching someone who was really guilty. He was a legend on the force. And then one night he stopped off at the local tavern, on his way back to the station from a call. It was a common practice and no one made anything of it. But the sergeant was having a bad time. His wife was making noises about leaving him and one of his kids, like the kids of cops often do, was having some legal trouble. So the sergeant had more than a few.

There was a man in the bar who knew the sergeant from when they were kids. They were good friends, the type of friends who grow old together even though they haven't had anything in common for years except their friendship.

He and the sergeant were joking, the way old friends always do. And then no one knew quite what happened. The man said something about the family. Maybe it was that, or maybe it was the drink. But the sergeant shot his old friend.

There was no way it could be hushed up. There was a new reporter in the bar who wanted to make a name for himself and bashing a drunken, murderous cop who everyone thought was a hero was a damn good way to do it. Within hours, the sergeant had no career, and no life.

Three days later, he shot himself with the family shotgun.

Slovino looked at the bottle of Jack Daniels and thought of the reporters crowding around the station. He took the bottle into the bathroom, poured its contents down the sink and went back to his office, threw the bottle into the wastebasket, thought better of that and put it back in the desk, to be disposed of later.

He had enough problems as it was.

Vitello was bucking for lieutenant. And he was turning into a damned nuisance about it. He was a good cop. A good detective, but he never knew when to keep his mouth shut. But Slovino liked the guy. When the time came for him to be recommended for promotion, he'd do it. Not like when it was his turn and he kept getting passed over. He was too good, the other captain had figured, "the son of a bitch!" thought Captain Slovino. "Wanted to keep me around so I could do his work for him, so he made sure someone always got to be captain before me. If the commissioner hadn't intervened, I'd still be a lieutenant. Of course, with all this stupid administrative stuff, maybe I'd be better off. But my wife likes the money, does she ever like the money."

"Captain?" the knock at the door announced Vitello.

"Come in, Vic."

"Those reporters are really turning this place into a circus. Can't you do anything?"

"What now?"

Vitello laughed. "This afternoon, before you, er, came in,..."

Captain Slovino indulged himself in a laugh. "You mean while I was hiding in the basement."

"While you were hiding in the basement, they almost got into some of the desk files."

"They didn't?"

"Real professional. A couple kept running around bothering everyone with questions and one of the others started to look on the officer's desks."

Slovino laughed. "Maybe we should try to hire them."

"Maybe we should try to bribe them."

Captain Slovino really laughed at that. "I thought we took bribes, not gave them."

Vitello was almost doubled over himself at the thought. "We could make an exception."

"Get back to work and send Dumbrowski and Martinez in here."

Two very embarrassed officers knocked at the door and came in to face a seated and very serious looking captain.

"Well, I hope you two idiots are happy," he said in a quiet voice. "Do you know where I had to spend the afternoon?"

Martinez was trying not to laugh. "We kind of heard."

The quiet voice continued. "You kind of heard, how nice. How wonderful for you." The voice became a bellow of rage. "I spent the afternoon hiding in the basement while reporters tried to go through our files, and God alone knows what the congress-slime were up to because you imbeciles forgot procedure!"

"We didn't tell the press anything."

"You didn't tell the press anything. That's nice of you. Our problem is not the press. Our problem is a new federal attorney who hates cops and has promised to put half this department in Leavenworth. Would either of you like to be the first to go?"

Dumbrowski looked down at the floor and said, "Well, what do we do?"

Slovino smiled. "That's the first intelligent thing either one of you has said since this whole affair began. What you do is keep your faces very clean. If the mayor's wife is speeding you give her the ticket. Let the judge go to the pen. If the alderman's car is illegally parked, you give it the ticket. And if you get offered a crumbcake for your kid's birthday from the local bakery, you turn it down. You don't do shit, jack shit, unless it's so legal that even the department lawyers can't find anything wrong with it, or I will personally see that you to are transferred to the highest crime district in this city. Do you understand?"

Both spoke in unison. "We get it, Captain."

Slovino continued to thunder. "If you don't get it, you will, and that I promise you. Now get back to work."

Slovino sat back in his desk, smiling with the first real content of the day and his frustrations settled very nicely. He hardly even noticed when the first call about a suicide came in.

VI

Arthur Malacoda, best selling author and patron of the arts, at least on those few occasions when he loaned money to Basil, cursed his luck. His Kawasaki was part of the mass of traffic that he so urgently wanted to avoid. After all, that was why he became a

writer in the first place, so he would not have to spend his life stuck behind cars and trucks. A motorcycle is a wonderful way to travel, provided the weather is favorable. Fall and spring are the best times, when there is no ice to slide over, no snow to get splattered with and no hot sun to cook you in your leather and turn the inside of your helmet into a cross between a greenhouse and a microwave oven, at least when it was not raining. Of course his hands still became a little warm inside his gloves and the leather pants tried to stick to his thighs, but he considered it all worth it.

Usually.

But waiting in traffic takes the fun out of it.

Art cursed. If he had known that he was going to lose track of the time, he would have taken the car, not the good one, but the old beater he kept for his trips into the city. The shabby appearance of the ancient Olds, with its rust spots carelessly plasticed over and usual coat of dirt, was not the car that the average thief would expect to contain anything of value. And if that did not work, the book about AIDS prominently sitting in the back seat did.

He could leave his car unlocked anywhere and be certain that it would not be touched. Not that Malacoda gave a damn about AIDS himself. He assumed that if he was going to have a fatal disease, it should at least be one he could enjoy getting.

"Pig isn't going to be happy about this," he mused as he made a sharp turn around an inconsiderate truck. "She always gets upset when I take too long."

There was a side street about a half-block ahead and Art moved his bike towards the right lane again, causing the truck driver behind him to think unpleasant thoughts about people on motorcycles. Art gave a growl, a real one, that would do credit to a lion, inside his helmet and calculated the time it would take for the traffic to reach the minor intersection. He looked at his temperature gauge and decided not to wait the fifteen minutes. An overheated motorcycle was no fun at all.

Gingerly, carefully, and just a little wickedly, he slipped his bike between the cars ahead and the curb, hoping that no one was going to park. The driveway to the old bungalow was obviously placed there by the gods for his convenience and Art was not going let a divine gift go to waste. He turned into it and roared down the sidewalk to the intersection, turned the corner and was into the street before anyone could guess what he was planning, and to make things even better, the traffic cop was stuck two blocks back in the vehicular morass and could do nothing about it. It was doubtful that he even saw it. But, just in case, Art set the switch on a small tape deck, sitting by his radio.

A quick look in the mirror to check that no one was coming up on him and Art rolled merrily down the empty side street to the next artery, four blocks north. So what if he was a little out of the way. He would more than make up for the time later.

"I give the gift of speed," he thought as he turned the throttle more, feeling the comforting rush of the air sweeping around him, setting up a dull roar inside his helmet as the air vents grabbed the wind and swirled it around inside to cool his head. The temperature gauge began to drop in a most satisfying way and Art turned onto the next street and headed west again, this time with less trouble.

"Maybe I should get a new collar for Pig," he thought as he went past a pet shop. Then he shook his head. The one she had was good enough.

Traffic began to slow again, though not to the level it had been before and he looked at his watch. This was becoming very annoying and the annoyance as made no less by the stereo in the car next to him thundering out some cannibalistic mating rhythm that resounded in his helmet. He reached over to the tape deck in the center of the handlebars just under the gauges and turned one dial all the way to the right and then flipped a switch on the amplifier. The light would stay red for about thirty more seconds and that would be more than enough time. He grinned at the thought of the subliminal message, a super subliminal if there could be such a thing, harmonized to the engine noise of his motorcycle, burning into the subconscious mind of the clod in the car. It would be fitting revenge for the trouble he was causing and he would not be causing it much longer.

Arthur Malacoda had studied speed hypnosis years before while he was doing research for a novel, one that had not sold too well, he remembered with distaste. Still, it was a nice gimmick for parties and bars and was one hell of a way to get a woman into bed. His first royalty check had gone for the equipment to make his own subliminal tapes to improve his writing skills. It did not take him long to find other, more interesting and entertaining uses for his toys.

They made great practical jokes. Once he had managed, with the aid of an unsuspecting friend, to change the Muzak tape in the local K Mart to one which he had doctored. The message invited, actually demanded, that people steal. The store nearly went out of business in three days and they never did find out the cause of the shoplifting epidemic.

The same tape turned his neighbor across the alley into a kleptomaniac and she had to be hospitalized for a time.

That was even more fun than putting the whoopee cushion under the organist at his mother's funeral, but that had actually been his mother's idea and he was merely carrying out her last request, that something be done to liven up the proceedings. It had accomplished that.

The titters of suppressed laughter continued through the eulogy, probably encouraged by the itching powder surreptitiously placed down the preacher's back.

It was, after all, keeping with the family traditions. The Malacodas were not believers in the concept of the sacred and grief was, in the final sense, something that was to be

inflicted on other people, preferably relatives, whom, as all knew, were created for the express purpose of testing poisons.

The road became bumpy and Art had to watch his driving with more care. There were few things more uncomfortable than to hit a pothole at high speed on a motorcycle. The possibility of flying headlong over the handlebars into the back of the pick-up in front of you is nothing if not worrying, not so much for the danger as the embarrassment.

It never failed to amaze the author how streets could rapidly become obstacle courses. Things he would not even see in his car became lethal barriers. And the closeness of the traffic, crowding into his holy space, increased the paranoia. A motorcycle on the open road was a symbol of freedom to be cherished. In city traffic it was a living nightmare.

He wished that he had watched the time better.

He also noticed that he had neglected to turn off the tape and had no doubt infected a number of his fellow travellers. Touching the switch, he said "Whoops!" and laughed out loud. It was a wonderful thing, a moment of forgetfulness turned into a fantastic prank. Of course he would have to give himself a "flu shot" when he got home, just to be sure that he would not be infected by his own virus, but it was worth it. Besides, he treated himself regularly anyway. It was best not to take chances, not with the sort of games he played these days.

A new stop-light loomed before him. It had been some months, maybe even a year since he had travelled this route, and he did not expect that light to be there. Even so, he welcomed the chance to rest. As the drivers around him fumed and fussed and complained, Arthur Malacoda took a few seconds to relax his muscles and do a couple of deep breaths, not really a healthy thing in his present location, surrounded by exhaust fumes as he was, but calming nonetheless. Recharged, he left the intersection and continued a largely uneventful ride home.

Home was a small house, with a small front porch and detached garage. The garage contained his cars and had barely enough space among the accumulated tools and miscellaneous junk for his bike. It also needed painting.

Pulling into the driveway, he touched the radio control in his belt pack and the door cranked open, groaning with the effort. Slowly wheeling up to the entrance, Art dismounted and turned off the ignition before gently pulling off his helmet and taking off his jacket. He pushed the bike over to its space next to his old car, just behind the lawnmower and lifted it onto its rear stand. He gave the gas tank an affectionate pat and then went to the house, closing the big door behind him.

Finding the key to the back door was always a chore. He had enough keys on his ring to keep a locksmith in business and in the back of his mind was always the suspicion that he no longer had the locks for half of them. He looked for a few seconds, found the right key and opened his door.

The back door opened into a small hallway which led to the kitchen. To the right of the kitchen door was a stairway that went to the basement. He walked into the kitchen to be immediately kissed by a thin, blond young woman, about his height, with hair almost down to her waist and a narrow, pointed face, wearing nothing but the bottom of a thong bikini and leather bracelets locked on to her wrists. Her bare feet were soundless on the tile floor.

"Hi Pig," he laughed as he kissed her back. "Sorry I'm late."

She laughed. It had a slightly odd quality, that laugh, sort of like a bell with a crack in it. "You're never sorry about anything."

He nodded, vigorously, "That may be true. It isn't dinner time yet."

"You're also never late for dinner."

"As a matter of principle, no. As a matter of fact, once back in 1968 I think I was two minutes late."

They kissed again and Art gave Pig a good, loud swat on her bottom with his left hand. Pig jumped, just a little, and kissed him even harder.

Pig's real name was Paula. And she was discovered by Malacoda sitting on a park bench. Or, perhaps, she had discovered him. Malacoda was never quite sure.

It had been a sunny day, in late fall, when the trees are bare and the sun sits low over the buildings, when the shadows come quickly and the warmth of the day disappears even more quickly. Malacoda was in a sour mood that day. He had been fighting with his publisher whose copy editor, not understanding the sacred nature of each of his words, wanted to change one of his chapters. It was the sort of annoyance that he never got used to and he was walking through a city park near his friend Basil's house wondering if he should drop in and share his discomfort, for, after all, that was what he had come into the city for in the first place.

But his gloom was so great that he did not wish to inflict it on the artist, who was probably having a bad day of his own, being behind schedule as usual and Malacoda knew from the years of their friendship that artist block was as bad, if not worse, than that demon from the pits of hell that besets writers whenever they had deadlines. He wandered over to a bench and sat down at one end, feeling the south breeze against his hair and his light jacket. He sat there for some time, watching nothing in particular, trying to decide what to do, when what may have been a young woman or a girl sat down at the other end of the bench. She was dressed a little too warm for the day, her hair hidden by a stocking cap pulled down almost to her ears. She was also wearing a heavy, down jacket but her jeans looked well worn and her tennis shoes were more suited for mid summer than fall. For a time, Malacoda was certain he was about to be assaulted by a homeless person.

Malacoda looked over at her for a second and then, not sure of the gender, shook his head and, to be safe, put his right hand into his jacket pocket, feeling the comforting weight of the small .22 automatic he always carried when he went into the city. He would have been content to just sit, but there was something about the person at the other end of the bench that puzzled him, whether it was the indeterminacy of the gender or the odd clothing, but he was sure there was an interesting story to be found and stories were his business. Assuming it was sane enough to talk, that is.

There was one small difficulty. Getting the story out of her, or him, or it or whatever.

He waited for a few minutes, watching the other person with his peripheral vision until it became obvious by the shape of the face and a few other movements that it was a female, relatively young and probably harmless, at least he hoped.

The direct approach was always the best. But first she needed a little preparation. The author reached into his jacket pocket and took out a small tape recorder and turned it on, adjusting the volume just loudly enough that the girl could hear it but not be annoyed. After a few minutes, as the recorded story played, she began to make a strange movement with her right hand, lifting her hand off her lap, up and down, about three times. The hypnotic subliminal tape was working.

Rising from his place on the bench, he walked over and looked down at the girl. He fixed her eyes with his, in the same way that a python fixes a rat, and said "You must be cooking in that hat."

She was about to say something sharp and obscene in retort, but had no chance, for Malacoda kept speaking in a fast monotone.

"You are very hot under that and you want to take it off. It is really far too warm for a hat and you want to take it off, so take the hat off and you can hear only my voice."

The hat came off, to reveal a head of hair like Malacoda had not seen since college. He grinned with the joy of a striking hawk and continued.

"The jacket is too warm. You can feel yourself cooking under it. You want to take off the jacket, you feel that you must take off the jacket. The air is stifling you, the heat is stifling you. You must remove the jacket. Take off the jacket."

In a matter of seconds, the girl, as she was now definitely revealed to be, removed her jacket to reveal a torn T shirt covering a pair of large breasts and a slender torso.

"I'm going to sit down now and in five seconds after I sit, you will begin to tell me all about yourself. You will want me to know everything there is to know about you and then you will see in me the type of man whom you have always desired. You will want to listen to me and obey me."

And with that, Malacoda sat down at the other end of the bench and counted to five.

"Hello," came the soft soprano from the girl at the other end.

He had her.

In the next hour, until the sun began to completely disappear and the warmth of the day with it, Paula, as she said her name was, told Malacoda how she was living with some friends but that it was not working out very well and she wanted to get away, but could not find a place she could afford. It seemed that money was a problem for her because she had made the mistake of trying to be an actress in a city where actresses were in oversupply and she was not very good at being a waitress. She talked so fast, in fact, that Malacoda had to stop her several times and tell her to slow down, while thinking that he was going to have to work on his basic command phrasing to avoid this sort of problem in the future.

"Look," he said, solicitously, "It's going to get really chilly out here in a few minutes and I'm not exactly dressed for winter. Why don't we find some place for a cup of coffee and then continue?"

Paula agreed, as if she thought she had a choice in the matter. Which was just as well as both of them were getting hungry.

They walked to a small, Greek restaurant about a block away, where Malacoda had often gone with Basil. It was typical of the places that were a fixture in both the city and the suburbs. The water glasses always the same type of glassware, the menu almost always the same, being printed at a place near the lake with a sign in the window that was in both Greek and English. Malacoda's mother had been of the opinion that they all bought their supplies from the same factory and it turned out that she was almost right. Malacoda had found the place, a supply store downtown about a mile and a half west of the river. It was the type of restaurant where one could order a club sandwich and be sure that it would taste the same as a club sandwich everywhere else in the six counties. Where the veal cutlet would be ground veal breaded the same as everywhere else and the gravy would taste the same. But a person does not eat in such places looking for adventure, or variety. These are restaurants where one goes to fill the belly and not spend much in the process.

It was the type of eatery that Arthur Malacoda felt best in. He despised fast food, with its counters and smiling adolescents, to say nothing of the uncomfortable benches that the diners were supposed to sit on and he had likewise no use for the fashionable or the trendy when it came to his stomach. Healthy food was for hypochondriacs and he hated to wear a necktie, which was another one of the reasons he had become a writer in the first place. He could never get the damn things straight. It did not matter where that he was in the city, usually so alien and dangerous to him. As soon as he deposited his body into a booth in a Greek restaurant, he was home, and safe.

It was clear that his companion felt the same way.

Looking over the menu was more of ritual than a necessity, but Malacoda played the game and said "I'll think I'll have the turkey club. What about you?" Then he paused for a couple of seconds before saying "I'm buying."

"I can't let you do that," Paula said rummaging in her small purse to see how much money she had.

"Of course you can. Provided what you order is within bounds of reason," he added laughing.

"Then I'll have the deluxe hamburger."

The waitress came over, a woman in late middle age who either was stuck with elderly parents or several tuition payments or, God forbid, both. She took their order and disappeared to give it to the illegal alien who was working as the cook while another alien came and filled their coffee cups.

"So you wanted to be an actress." Malacoda continued the conversation. He looked down at her wrists, wondering if he could see any telltale marks. It was a habit of his.

"Something like that."

"Well, you have the voice for it and you're not likely to make the camera lens explode, like Eleanor Roosevelt did back in the thirties. Do you know that she was so ugly that they had to hide all the mirrors in the white house for fear that Franklin would be cut by the flying pieces. She'd take one look and Bang! Glass all over the room."

The girl laughed, loudly. So loudly in fact that people in the other booths, normally oblivious to everything but their roast turkey and dressing, turned to see what the fuss was about. When they saw an attractive, young woman with a man, they turned back to their food, remembering that they too had once been young and unconcerned about the other people in the restaurant.

"So tell me about yourself," she said softly, just a little embarrassed after she realized that she had acquired an unpaying audience. "I mean, I've been telling you all about me."

Malacoda gave a soft chuckle. "Well, there isn't a lot to tell. I'm a writer, supposed to be a good one but that depends on which reviewer you talk to. I came into the city to annoy an artist friend of mine who lives here but got sidetracked and ended up sitting in the park. I have a small house in the suburbs, about a half-hour drive in good traffic and forever in rush hour where I live alone with my computers. I do have a bit of a nasty sense of humor, so be warned."

The girl smiled, it was a beautiful smile, the smile of a Gothic martyr. "You don't seem nasty."

Malacoda felt himself being attracted more to the smile than to anything else. "Looks, it is said, can be deceiving. I haven't brought out the rubber chocolates yet."

"Do you have a nice house?"

"Pretty messy. I'm the world's worst housecleaner and you don't even want to think about the garage."

The smile was replaced by an expression of disgust. "The place I live is a disaster. We even have rats in the basement."

Malacoda made one of the strange faces he was famous for. His eyebrows raised almost to his hairline, the corners of his mouth dropped and his eyes bugged out. "Yeech!" he exclaimed, with true feeling, never having seen a rat in his life, at least of the four-legged variety, and fervently wishing to never do so.

"It really sucks." and then, with no warning, "Can I come home with you?"

The author was putting his napkin in his lap and dropped it. That was not part of the initial control process and he had planned to introduce the suggestion during dinner. But he recovered quickly and said "That's the best offer I've had in a month. But are you certain you want to. I can be very demanding and there are risks to being involved with me."

The pointed little face grinned at him. "Like what? I mean, you don't have a disease, do you?"

"No, nothing like that." As if he knew, or even cared.

"Well, then what. Don't you like me? Are you married with ten children tearing up the house?"

"Yes, I like you, I think, not knowing you very well. And no, there are no wives and children, at least none that I know about."

"Well, then what risk could there be. You don't look like a serial killer."

"Serial killers usually don't. That's how they get their victims. Let's just say that I can be well, a bit demanding."

She smiled and held her hands out in a gesture full of meaning to someone who could understand it. "So demand. I'll do anything you want."

Malacoda had this strange desire to shake his head and wake up. Never in his life, and it was not a short one, had he heard such a request, so earnestly phrased.

"Maybe I should worry about you. No one's after you?"

"No one. I don't think I could get arrested."

The author sat back and was silent for a second, then grinned slightly. "You said 'anything.'"

"Yep. Whatever you want me to do."

"That covers a lot of territory."

"Well, I don't think you'll break my arms and slice me open, so..."

Malacoda chuckled. "Alright. You can come home with me. But I should warn you again, it might not be the most comfortable experience of your life."

"No rats."

"That's true, no rats. No drugs, no smoking either."

She laughed, convinced that she had made a conquest. "So I don't do either."

They ate in relative silence, Malacoda thinking earnestly that he might be making a terrible mistake, but that the offer was too good to pass up. After they finished, he paid the check and they began to walk to his car.

"Now I'm going to give you one more chance to back out. I expect you to do what you're told, beginning when we get to the car."

"OK." she answered, smiling and walking fast. Malacoda would have had a hard time keeping up with her if he had not been in the lead.

They came to his car in a few minutes and he held the door open for her. She got in and he went around and opened the trunk, looking inside. In the trunk was a suitcase in which he carried a change of clothes, including a cheap jacket, for which many polyesters gave their lives, and a necktie. This way if he felt like going to a nice restaurant, he would never have to feel underdressed, a cardinal sin in his life in spite of his dislike for neckties.

He took the necktie and went back to the car, got in and said, "Turn around."

To someone who had seen the hand gesture in the restaurant but did not know its meaning, it would have become obvious now, for Paula seemed to be prepared for this because she turned her back to him and put her hands behind her. He spoke as he tied them "You've done this before." he stated with a wry grin.

She laughed. "Yeah, my friends were always tying me up. I figured you would too."

Malacoda laughed as well while he worked on the knot. "My god! It shows!" What do you mean your friends always tie you up.

Paula laughed. "We like to kidnap each other. So they tie my hands, blindfold me, and take me where they want to. And it does sort of show on you, well, not too badly. And you did say you were demanding."

"And you are too trusting for your own good. I might really be a serial killer."

"Hey, I get a place to stay, a free meal and maybe even some good sex. It's worth the risk."

Malacoda finished tying her hands saying "Don't bet on the good sex. I can be really clumsy when I try to be," Malacoda had the uncomfortable feeling that either this was some joke of Basil's or any second now he would hear the voice of Rod Serling telling him that he had landed in the Twilight Zone. "Is that how you got into the place you're staying now?"

Her hands moved slightly in their bindings as she turned to sit back in the seat. "Nah. After I got out of college I answered an add for a roommate. Turned out to be a bunch of dudyches. Real boring. Call themselves artists but spend the whole day working as waitresses. Maybe one paints something in a month."

He climbed into the driver's seat saying, "Sounds nice and safe."

"Who wants fucking safe? I need some adventure."

"I'm not sure that I qualify as that."

"Well, you got me tied up. That's at least a beginning."

"Just be thankful it's not the beginning of the end of you. I'd better take you home for your own good. But first..." and he pulled the hat down so the rolled end covered her eyes.

The drive back to his house seemed to take a lot longer than it usually did. It must have had something to do with the extra turns he took to avoid police cars and when he backed the car into the garage, Malacoda felt terribly relieved.

"We there?" Paula asked.

"Yes, we there, or here." Malacoda said with disdain as he went around to open her side of the car. He helped her out and then said, "Something we have to do first," as he untied her hands. "Don't touch the hat. These clothes make you look like a real pig, so they stay in the garage tonight."

Paula began to undress as Malacoda looked on shaking his head, certain by now that Basil was playing a joke on him. This might be one of his models and he would walk into his house to be confronted by Basil and his other friends all laughing at his discomfort. It was the sort of joke Malacoda would have played. Like the time the wife of one friend planned a surprise party for her husband and he came home to find a living room emptied of the furniture and his wife tied up on the floor. He nearly had a heart attack before they all got out of the bathroom to shout "Surprise!"

When Paula was naked except for the hat pulled down over her eyes, Malacoda walked up to her and embraced her. She gave him a strong hug and kissed him, missing his mouth at first but finding it after the third try. Her bare feet were cold on the floor and she was starting to shiver a little even in the warmth of his grasp, so Malacoda went behind her, retied her hands, commanded "March, Pig," and led her out of the garage to his house, wondering if any of his neighbors were looking out the window at them.

The next day they picked up her stuff and moved her in.

Paula had come into his house naked and Malacoda doubted that she had worn many clothes there for any length of time since. She would get dressed when they went out and strip as soon as they got back, sometimes before. He had to warn her if company was coming and then she never put on much more than her bikini. He was actually amazed that she had the bottom on.

"So how was your day," she asked as she put the wok on the table and began laying out the fixings for dinner.

"Pretty good. Basil's painting is beginning to look interesting and there's this strange lady across the street from him who's going nuts. Some cop came to visit the old bat."

"And the poor woman?"

"She'll probably end up diving in a dumpster or something. No big deal. But it might make an interesting story, good for a few laughs, after I finish the Vasiliev project."

"Have you ever told Basil about all this? And what is a 'Vasiliev' anyway?"

"No. He thinks it's funny that I take pictures around his house, of his neighbors and all, but otherwise he doesn't think of it at all because he doesn't know anything about it. Friend Basil has a weakness. He believes in ethics. And when the book is finished, I'll let it explain 'Vasiliev' to you"

"And you believe only in results. And writing a good story."

"Like I always say. And supper. What're we having?"

"Pork with bean sprouts, mushrooms and lots of garlic."

"Vampires beware!"

"Sometimes I expect you to turn into one, but I still love you."

"Just because I bite your neck occasionally. Undoubtedly due to good taste on your part."

"Certainly. I picked you didn't I?"

Malacoda felt it wise not mention her possible lack of choice in the initial selection, if not in the outcome of it. He sat back and watched her mix the ingredients, with a skill she had not had when he first acquired her and then got up to bring out the rice.

As they ate, he asked, "So what did you do today, while I was running around?"

"I cleaned up your office, dusted the computer and put the bills in a nice pile on your desk."

"Thanks, I think. By the way, we're invited to Basil's Friday night for a party."

"That's nice. Any reason?"

"I think he wants to have a party."

Malacoda felt a toe moving up his trouser leg. "Will you stop that?" he asked peevish at the interruption of his dinner.

Pig giggled. "No."

Malacoda could never understand why she liked this little game, especially as it interrupted dinner, but he said, "Then I have to stop you." and he got up, went over to a box nearby, pulled out a set of ankle chains and came back to lock her feet to her chair. He locked the right ankle and then ran the chain back over the rear rung of the chair before locking her left, pulling her feet under the chair.

"I can't do dishes this way," she giggled again.

"We'll worry about that later," he growled, but he was smiling.

He was still smiling a minute later when he got up, left the room for a second and came back with a small padlock. He pulled Paula's hands behind her back and locked the bracelets together, then sat back down.

"Uh, Art?" she said with a little grin.

"Yes, my sweet?"

"How'm I gonna eat dinner?"

"I imagine you'll think of something."

"I was afraid you'd say that."

"No, you're afraid of what comes after dinner."

"Should I be?"

"Yes."

"Then I guess I better eat, to keep my strength up."

"I assume that means you've figured out how you're going to do it."

Paula did not answer in words, but put her face into her plate and began eating off it, licking the food into her mouth and making one hell of a mess of her face in the process. Malacoda looked at her and was glad he decided not to blindfold her yet. The blindfold was hard to wash.

It was hard for Malacoda to eat as well, he was so busy laughing as Paula came up for air with a grain of rice stuck right to the tip of her well sauced nose.

"It tastes better than it looks," he laughed as he finished one helping and heaped his dish with another. "Want more?"

"Sure."

He piled her plate and again she dived into the food. By the time they both were finished, Paula's face was barely visible under the sauce and rice that was stuck to it.

"My love," Malacoda said laughing and shaking his head in mock disbelief, "you are an utter mess."

"A real Pig, right?"

"Right. So let me clean you off." And with that, he went to get a wet towel and wipe Paula's face spotless. A dry towel finished the job and that finished, the author bent down to unlock the leg irons holding Paula to the chair. "Up Pig!" he ordered, sharply and she stood in a quick motion as he pulled back the chair from behind her. She stood waiting as he put a thick, leather collar with many rings attached around her neck and hooked a leash to it.

"Let's get this out of the way," he said and unhooked the bikini bottom, leaving her naked but for her bindings. "Now off to the pen," and he led her to the stairs and down them into the basement.

The basement had long ago been turned into a recreation room and then into an office and now into a playroom of sorts. There was a post in the center of the room which fulfilled the essential role of holding up the house. It also had other uses.

Malacoda unlocked Paula's bracelets and stood her with her back to the post, then locked her wrists behind it, forcing her shoulders back and her breasts forward. He went over to an old chest and opened the top drawer, removing a handful of webbed straps. Then Malacoda went back to Paula and strapped her ankles and knees together and then to the post. He added straps around her body above and below her breasts. A rubber ball attached to a harness filled her mouth and a blindfold completed the arrangement.

He stood in front of his sightless, silent victim and cupped her breasts with his hands, pinching the nipples slightly until they turned nice and hard. Malacoda kissed her on the right cheek, chuckled slightly and said "Don't go away."

It was an old joke, but she never complained about it, probably because of the gag, and he went over to an old, scratched and much carved desk and selected a cassette, put it in the old recorder and donned a pair of large headphones, a type virtually guaranteed, with your money back if they failed, to keep out any outside noise. He sat down in an ancient recliner and leaned back, punching the play button as he did so.

Soft, repetitive music filled his head as he relaxed. He knew, but did not really hear, the message that was programmed into the music.

"You love life. You enjoy living. Life is good. Life is fun. You want to live forever. You are happy, deliriously happy. You are filled with the joy of living."

It was his flu shot, played for an hour every day, while relaxing, eating, writing, whatever he could do while attached to the machine.

It was a necessity, for he too had heard the tape his machine on the motorcycle had played that afternoon.

As he finished, across town a man who had been driving a pick-up truck hanged himself.

As Malacoda went over to Paula and attached a pair of clothespins to her still hard nipples, a woman in the city said good night to her baby, went into her bathroom, ran some warm water and sliced her wrists.

As the writer went over to the chest and took out a short riding crop, a lawyer hung up his phone and shot himself.

When the crop hit Paula's thighs, a college student went into his parents' garage, sealed the doors and turned on the car engine.

Later that evening, as he tied Paula to the posts of the bed, people began to hear the news about a rash of suicides on the north side of the city.

As his body moved on hers and hers, within its limits, moved with his, all hell seemed to be breaking loose. The dead were piling up. But they did not know, and Malacoda would not have cared if he did. After all, he would have known the cause.

VII

Captain Slovino wished that the night would end, quickly. It seemed that no sooner had he rid himself of the reporters and camera crews, enabling him to sneak back into the station and yell at his erring officers, when calls began coming in about suicides. For whatever reason, the people in his precinct, as well as the rest of the city, were either killing themselves, or trying to, with such abandon that he could only imagine that something had gotten into the water, which was patently ridiculous enough to be true. And it kept his homicide crew running from place to place with no time to finish the all-important paper work, so essential to the lives and psychological well-being of the people downtown. Added to that was the horrible fear, barely stated but obviously felt by everyone in the station, that the epidemic might bring the reporters and television cameras back, a situation to which AIDS, cholera, Mother Theresa and the Black Death were preferable.

It was in the middle of all this that Mrs. Gunski wandered into the station, not yelling, but looking totally confused, utterly distracted. The Sergeant took one look at her and called the Captain out of his office. Captain Slovino started from the shock of it. The old woman looked worse than he had ever seen her. Her face was tear-streaked and her clothes were an absolute mess. It was obvious from the way she was breathing that she had run all the way to the station.

"Captain!" she wailed. "It's back again!"

Slovino ushered her into his office and seated her in the worn, straight-backed chair across from his desk, closing the door and, in effect, putting the "Do Not Disturb" sign out. He sat down and sighed. "What happened?"

Mrs. Gunski tried to put on her best cleaning lady voice, but it did not work. What came out was a groan with words. "The voice is back again. I laid down and went to sleep and then it was back, laughing at me. It said that people were killing themselves all over the city and it was my fault, that my soul was going to burn with my poor husband's for killing all the people."

The Captain made a small start, but controlled himself. It seemed that weirdness was going to be the norm this night and Mrs. Gunski was going to be its latest victim. But how could she know that there was a mass suicide epidemic going on at the very moment? This was the strangest thing he had ever encountered in his twenty-five plus years on the force. It was also the most frightening.

"Tell me," he asked in as gentle a voice as he was capable of, "what does this voice sound like?"

Mrs. Gunski took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. "It's a man. A normal voice. No accent or anything. He sounds very quiet. He doesn't shout, though he does laugh sometimes."

"I see, I think." Actually, the Captain did not see at all, but he felt he had to go through the motions of at least appearing to be investigating. What appeared to be insanity was now taking a much different form. And insanity was preferable to what the Captain was almost afraid to imagine.

"Could you wait here for a little bit? I have to get some paper." The Captain excused himself and went into the squad room.

He walked over to the Sergeant and asked "Do you have the number of Father what's his name--Skroudas?"

"Was he the one you talked to about Mrs. Nutsy?"

"Yeah. I may need him. You won't believe what I'm hearing in there."

"You won't believe what's happening out here. We've had to send vice guys out to these suicides. No homicide people left. One hospital is already overloaded with attempts alone."

Captain Slovino looked around the station furtively and then whispered, "Sergeant, do you believe in devils?"

The sergeant let his eyes go wide for the briefest instant. "I didn't used to. After tonight, I'm not so sure."

"Same with me. Got that number?"

Sergeant Kelly rummaged through some papers on his desk. "Let me look. Yeah, here." and he ripped off a piece of paper and handed it to the Captain who took it and went back into the office.

Mrs. Gunski was waiting for him with a pained look that refused to leave. "Would you like some coffee, or something?" Slovino asked before he sat down.

"Just a glass of water," she answered.

"No problem," and he went out again to the water cooler and returned with a paper cup.

"Have you told anyone else about this?" he asked as he sat back down.

"I was going to call Father Skroudas, but I've bothered him so much lately and you said to come here."

Captain Slovino nodded and nervously adjusted his necktie. "I understand. Would you mind if I called him?"

"No. If it'd help me, I'd call anyone."

"I've got his number. He won't mind." And Slovino dialed the number. The housekeeper answered.

"This is Captain Slovino. Is Father in?"

The grating voice on the end answered, "No, he's been out all evening giving last rights. Is everyone in the parish dying?"

"I hope not," the captain answered with exasperation.

"He came back for more holy water. He ran out!"

"I'll try later. Thank you." But he did not feel any thanks, only frustration.

"He's not in?" Mrs. Gunski looked more pained than before.

"No. He's got something keeping him busy tonight."

"Maybe it's just as well."

"I wish he'd get a new housekeeper. The one he's got now is a pain in the ass."

The old woman actually managed a smile for a second, the first one since coming into the station.

The intercom buzzed and the Captain pushed the button. "What is it?"

The Sergeant's voice said "I just thought you'd like to know that Vitello had to take the rest of the shift off. His mother just died."

"Picked a nice night to do it."

"Yeah. But at least we know this was from natural causes."

Vitello's mother had been sick on and off for years and her death had been coming for some days.

"Well, put me down for some flowers. And if he needs anything else, call me."

Then turning to Mrs. Gunski, "Sorry about that. We're short tonight as it is. I don't know what it is, but some nights everything gets going at once."

"And I'm adding to it," she said apologetically.

"Don't be silly. Are you feeling better?"

"A little."

"I'll have someone drive you home. And don't worry. We'll do something for you. I don't know what yet, but something."

"Thank you. And if you ever want to stop by for dinner. I always make too much."

"I'll remember that." The Captain escorted her back into the squad room, motioning one of his desk people over. "Take Mrs. Gunski home and make sure she gets in all right."

As the two left, the Sergeant looked at the Captain and twiddled his right forefinger around his ear.

Slovino chuckled. "Yeah, but there's more here than just craziness."

"Cap. The woman is a nut case."

Captain Slovino let out a sigh and shook his head. "She's got a big problem."

Sergeant Kelly leaned over the desk and whispered loudly. "I know you don't like the idea, but maybe you should let social services handle this."

The captain shook his head. "Those idiots? No way."

"Maybe she should be committed."

Captain Slovino felt himself losing patience with his sergeant. "How? She's a nuisance, but she's no danger to anyone. There isn't a court in the world that would allow it. I'll try to talk to Father Skroudas again tomorrow. That's assuming that he doesn't run out of holy water again."

"What?"

"I talked to his housekeeper."

"That bitch is worse than Mrs. Nutcase there."

"Anyway, the good father is out giving last rights. It seems to be a growing business these days."

"I know. Look around." Sergeant Kelly waved his left arm around the station to emphasize the point.

The squad room was empty. Where normally it would be crowded at this time with cops filling out forms and aggrieved citizens complaining, there was hardly anyone in sight. "Where the hell is everyone?" Slovino barked.

Sergeant Kelly raised his eyebrows. "Investigating suicides. I've never seen anything like it. Even the traffic boys are doing it."

"Is the whole fucking town trying to kill itself?"

"Might be. And we're just hearing about the successful ones. Nobody knows how many people tried tonight and didn't make it."

"I hope I don't find out. It might be catching," the captain said with genuine sincerity.

"You think it's some kind of virus, Cap, like brain AIDS or something?"

"How the hell should I know? I just have this terrible feeling that any second now I'm going to get a call from downtown blaming us for the whole mess."

"Why'd they do that?"

Slovino laughed. "Who knows. But they'll have to blame somebody and after this afternoon we stink all over the department."

"Well, I'm glad I don't work the morgue tonight."

"They must be stacking them in the corners. It's stiff city tonight. Like when all the old folks croaked during the last heat wave."

"Think anything else'll happen."

"I don't think we'll have anyone left alive for anything else to happen to tonight. I'm gonna take a little rest in my office. Yell if we get anything interesting."

Rest, for Captain Slovino, proved to be easier said than done. He lay down on his couch, an item of furniture not normally found in the old station, and looked up at the ceiling. He had heard of mass suicides before, but never on this scale and never by total strangers. Besides, suicides were something he never liked to touch anyway. No one in the department did. It just meant a lot of unnecessary paper work and did no one any good. After all, it was not like something the D.A. could take into court, unless crazy old Doc Kervorkian had come to town. He chuckled softly at the thought.

"Yes, your honor, I know the defendant is dead, but the state wishes to prove that he still committed his own murder."

And the judge responding, "What does the state want, that we exhume the defendant and rebury him at a crossroads with a stake through his back so that he does not turn into a vampire like the last case your office brought?"

All to the laughter of the assembled press, like when the mayor was going to join the ceremonies for the opening of a new movie studio and, just as his limo was about to park, got the call from his office that the press had discovered that the studio was being financed by mob money. The limo pulled away and never returned.

And then there was the matter of Mrs. Gunski and her voices. There was no possible way she could have known what was going on, yet her voice was telling her that she was in some way responsible for it, an absurdity if ever there was one. The Captain was almost tempted to try to get her to commit herself, but there was a suspicion in his mind that putting the poor woman away would only make her problem worse.

"She's lucky we don't burn witches any more. I'm not sure that I am, but she's lucky."

The intercom buzzed and the Sergeant said, "We've got a reporter out here who wants to know if we know anything about the rash of suicides."

"Tell him that he probably knows more than we do. Maybe they've heard something downtown, but we know shit out here."

The reporter's joking voice came through the intercom, "Should I use that quote?"

"Use whatever they let you put on the air. Nobody tells us anything anyway."

Slovino went back to his couch, with the strange feeling that his necktie was too tight. He took it off and loosened his collar. "Got to be careful," he thought. "This suicide stuff could be real unhealthy to catch."

He actually drifted into sleep for a short time, only to be awakened by the noise of some of his people coming back into the squadroom.

"I had two hangings," he heard Martinez saying with his usual laugh.

"You got lucky. I had one gas himself and almost blow up the whole apartment building, me included. Then I had three that shot themselves, one with a shotgun. What a mess!"

The Sergeant bellowed, "Turn it down, you idiots. The Captain's trying to rest."

"Well somebody better watch him or he might try eternal rest himself. It seems to be the latest fad."

"And you clowns might drive him to it."

"We haven't yet."

"Not for lack of trying, gentlemen," came the Captain's voice from his now open door. Now get those forms filled out and maybe if you're real good, Captain Slovino will let you look at some real crimes."

"That's real funny, Cap. After tonight, a nice domestic violence call would be a pleasure."

"I'm glad you enjoy your work, Martinez. I'll remember that. Anyway, did any of you clowns get an idea about what might be causing all this?"

"Maybe the President belched on the news or Hilary got a new hat. We don't know. They were all dead when we got there."

"After all, Cap, that's why they called us in the first place."

"Very funny. Look, we already had one reporter in here and we'll most likely get a lot more, unless this is going on all over the city, which I fervently hope. Then the idiots downtown can deal with it. Now get back to work!"

Slovino went back into his office and sat behind his desk. The computer on the Sergeant's desk could tell him if the suicides were all over the city or just in his precinct, but he did not want to fight with the machine to find out. And, if the truth be told, did not really want to know. He was going to be very happy to go home, go to bed and forget the whole thing for a few hours.

VIII

Father Skroudas' housekeeper looked even more ugly than usual when Captain Slovino walked in the next afternoon, and that took some real doing. He had a difficult time hiding his disgust at what was already a terrible day which had begun with the Commissioner's secretary rousing him from a fitful, dreamless sleep to summon him to a meeting at the City Hall. These meetings were never something to look forward to and the

Commissioner, a thin man with a tiny mustache that made him look like a refugee from an Eastern European gangster movie, spent most of the time at this one pacing the floor of his office and complaining about the media and its continuous demands on his time. In the middle of his tirade, he turned to Slovino and asked, "And where were you when the press descended on your station yesterday afternoon?"

Captain Slovino shook his head in shame. He could hardly say he was visiting a crazy old woman and then hiding in his basement. "I got lucky, sir. They came before I got to the station."

The Commissioner snorted. "That's the worst excuse I've heard since my oldest kid said that the dog threw the baseball through the car windshield."

Captain Slovino did not know if the laughter resulting from that was directed at him or the Commissioner. "Sorry, Sir. It just happened to work that way. I didn't even know they were there."

"Nobody bothered to call you?" The Commissioner was sneering now.

"If they did, I wasn't in the car." Captain Slovino hoped that he was still a convincing liar. Of course he knew that he was in the presence of experts.

The Commissioner continued the interrogation. "I see. And you conveniently forgot to turn on your cell phone. Well, that's not the worst of it. This mess last night. They're still counting the bodies and nobody knows why."

A very large officer, even fatter than Captain Slovino, sitting balanced on the edge of his chair because he could not fit between the arms chuckled. "Maybe it was something in the drinking water," he laughed.

The Commissioner began to change color, his usual red becoming slightly purple around the hairline and he turned on his right heel to face the speaker. "I'm glad you think it's funny, Wronski," he bellowed. "Because I've just been on the phone with a man who spent the morning testing the water."

Captain Slovino was very happy to be sitting in the living room of Father Skroudass, ugly housekeeper and all, after that meeting. Usually a waste of time, that one had been one of the worst. "Let the idiots in social services handle it," he thought with an inner sneer. "They deserve it."

Father Skroudass came in, barely awake himself. He had not bothered to put on his collar and his house slippers were beginning to show signs of wear. He had not shaved. "Good afternoon, Captain. You look almost as tired as I am."

"It's turning into a long day, Father. I tried to call you last night but Mrs. Budding said you were extremely unavailable."

The priest grinned. "I doubt she was so diplomatic. Last night was a disaster. Do you know what happened?"

"Nope. And I just escaped with my life from a meeting with the Commissioner about it and nobody has any idea what could have caused it."

"Something in the water?" he said with a grin that made the captain wonder if the priest was joking or serious.

The captain groaned. Why did everyone say that? "They're testing it. But that was why I wanted to talk to you."

Father Skroudas sat down and chuckled. "Really. You don't think Mrs. Budding is dumping her coffee in the lake, do you?"

Slovino laughed, hard. The housekeeper, whatever her other many faults were, at least made good coffee. "No, it's a lot stranger than that."

Father Skroudas reached over to the end table and picked up a pair of glasses, put them on and sighed. "Well, if it's stranger than Mrs. Budding, I had better be able to see what you're talking about."

Captain Slovino sighed. "Mrs. Gunski came to see me last night at the station."

"As usual."

Captain Slovino looked around the room, shook his head and said, "Not quite. You see I did go to visit her and I told her to see me rather than stand in the squad room and shriek. The Sergeant wants to find a reason to put her away and after what he's gone through with her, I hardly blame him."

"If it's any comfort, Mrs. Budding shares the opinion of the good Sergeant Kelly." Father Skroudas said, quietly, looking at a dust web forming in one corner, next to a portrait of the Pope, that his housekeeper kept missing either through malice or incompetence.

"He'll be happy to hear it. But anyway, I told her to come to my office and that way things wouldn't get so out of hand, so last night, right in the middle of total chaos, in she comes."

"Yes." The priest tried to look interested, but had the feeling that he was not doing so well at accomplishing it.

If the captain noticed the boredom, he ignored it. "So I bring her into the office and she tells me that the voice is back. But then she says that the voice told her that people were killing themselves all over the city and it was her fault."

Father Skroudas almost dropped his glasses from his nose. "She said that?"

The captain nodded. "She was very disturbed about it, as you can imagine."

"Yes, I can imagine. Had she been listening to any news before she came into the station?"

"I doubt it. She really had no reason to know about what was going on anyway. The reporters didn't start coming in until after she left."

"Then you think she had not heard anything."

"I'm pretty positive. That's why I tried to call you but you were busy giving last rites."

The priest gave a short laugh. "Was I ever! I've never run out of holy water before. I had to go back to the church and reload."

Captain Slovino chuckled at the thought of the priest noticing his container was empty at an embarrassing moment. "Anyway, I don't know much about this stuff and so I figured you might."

"Have you seen a tape of The Exorcist lately?"

"Nope."

"Good, because I don't think we could persuade the Bishop that Mrs. Gunski is possessed."

The captain could not suppress a smile. "Is that good?"

"Do you want her throwing up green glop all over you?"

"I kind of thought it would be on you."

The laugh was longer now. "Bless you too, my son. But to be serious about this, she is acting more like the victim of demonic obsession rather than possession."

"What's the difference?"

"The ritual to get rid of it is cheaper."

"I thought you said you were going to be serious."

"I'm trying to be, but it isn't easy. I've never seen it and I know very few of my fellow clergy who have, except for my Pentecostal minister friend down the street who claims to have cast out the Demon of Chewing Gum and a seminary classmate of mine who got stuck being chaplain to a charismatic prayer group that meets at Loyola University. They have

this fake shrink who takes her clients to have demons cast out of them at least once a week. This is really something very rare and the Church, at least mine, tends to avoid getting involved if involvement can be avoided. Have you considered trying to turn Mrs. Gunski into a Pentecostal?"

"Father?" Slovino responded much the same way as he would to one of his officers who was acting more childish than usual.

"Sorry, just a thought. This is, not to be kidding, a potentially very unpleasant situation."

Slovino looked down at his shoes and noticed that they were muddy again. That seemed appropriate, somehow. "How unpleasant?" he asked.

The priest went over to a carafe and poured himself a small glass of port. "Would you care for some?"

"I'd love something to drink, but I think I'd better not."

"I probably shouldn't either, but the flesh is weak. Anyway, we would have to go through all manner of bureaucracy and then a bunch of holy rigmarole and even then we could not be sure that we had solved the problem, if there is a problem."

"I think Mrs. Gunski is convinced of that already."

"No doubt she is. But paranormal voices are more common than we would care to admit and we can never be truly sure of the cause. She could be merely schizophrenic."

The captain thought of the poor woman in his office. "Doesn't sound like any schizo I've ever run across."

The priest continued his explanation. "No, probably not. But such things, I'm told, are not uncommon in those cases. It's like a person with multiple personality speaking French when you know he never had a French lesson in his life. Lots of things in the human mind we can't explain. It might be good if she would go to a psychiatrist."

The captain felt it was time that he did some explaining of his own. He leaned forward in his chair and said, "Father, for years her late husband came to the station every night with donuts that he picked up on his way home from work. Every holiday, she would bake us a cake. I can't let that poor old lady end up drugged in a dumpster."

Father Skroudas took another sip of port. "You can't be sure that would happen."

"You don't have to deal with the imbeciles that we jokingly call our social services department. They'd find more drugs for Mrs. Gunski than an army of Columbians."

"I see. You're right, I don't deal with your social services department very often and for that I give daily thanks. And this is a great mystery. Perhaps she heard something on the radio while she was sleeping and her mind did the rest. She isn't in very good shape right now."

"She said that she was sleeping. I doubt that she had a radio on."

"It's been known to be done. Or a car radio outside. Anything is possible."

Slovino had the terrible feeling that nothing was getting accomplished. "Father, does this sort of thing happen often?"

"What sort of thing?"

"Somebody needs help and no one can figure out what to do."

"Sure. But usually it's not us."

"Well, I have to get back to work."

And with that, Captain Slovino rose and walked to the front door, escorted by Father Skroudas who resolved to say a prayer for not only Mrs. Gunski, but himself and the Captain.

The captain would have been grateful if he knew.

IX

"Shouldn't you be working on that new novel of yours?" Basil asked looking at his friend who was busy staring through his sunglasses out the window, with his hands firmly implanted in his pockets.

Malacoda started. His mind had been occupied. "What? Oh that can wait a few days. I still have some ideas floating around. Do you know who the priest is?"

Basil chuckled through a closed mouth. "What priest?"

"The one going to the house across the street. You know, where the crazy old lady lives."

The artist went over to the window and looked out over Malacoda's shoulder. "Probably Father Skroudas."

"Do you know him?"

"I'm not Catholic," Basil said with a finality that usually ended one of Malacoda's books.

The writer grinned and continued to look out the window. "Neither am I, but he looks like he might have an interesting story buried under that collar. Besides the usual bang-the-choir-boy stuff."

"Lot of interesting stories going on."

Malacoda looked around at Basil. "Really?"

"Haven't you heard the news?" Basil asked with eyebrows raised in uncharacteristic surprise.

"Not really. Been too busy. Besides, famines bore me more than Iraq."

Basil chuckled. Malacoda thought famines were funny. "No famine this time. Seems a few hundred people killed themselves last night."

The author laughed. "Better be careful of the water."

"That's what everyone says," Basil remarked quietly.

"What do you say?"

The artist shook his head and turned back to his painting. "Very odd. Interesting news, but odd and I hope it isn't too catching. I have a painting to finish."

"And a party to plan."

Basil coughed slightly. "Art," he said somewhat haltingly. "About the party..."

"You're not cancelling it?" he asked in horror.

Basil laughed. "Hell no! But when you bring that little blond of yours, could you, well, keep some clothes on her?"

Malacoda thought of the argument that would produce. "Trying to save money on the heat?"

Basil shook his head and rolled his eyes. "Very funny. No, I'm inviting some of my neighbors as well and they're sort of, well..."

"I see. But Pig'll hate it."

The artist smiled, knowing himself what the reaction would be. Paula would have been a permanent resident in a nudist colony if circumstances had let her. "I won't be too happy either. When will you let me paint her?"

"Depends on what color. She looks rather bad in puce."

"Her picture, you idiot!" Basil said in mock frustration.

"I don't know. I've seen what you make your models look like by the time you're through with them and I'm not sure that I want her to look that way. Besides, I still remember Terry. I still get hate mail from her over that."

"That was twenty years ago! I'll make it a nice one. That face of hers would make a great Gothic Madonna."

"That would be funny."

"I thought you'd appreciate the joke."

"But why are you inviting the neighbors. They'll be bored silly with us crazy artists and writers and one clothed would-be actress."

"That old lady across the street has a daughter who's an artist, and apparently becoming a rather successful one."

"So?"

"Well, with all the trouble her mother's having, she's flying in for a while to try to help out."

That was interesting news. "When did you hear this?"

"Yesterday evening. I was taking out the garbage and ran into the man who lives next door to Mrs. Gunski."

Malacoda was surprised that everyone called her that. Maybe the woman did not have a first name. Or maybe she did and no one could pronounce it. After all, she was Polish. All consonants and no vowels. "And he told you."

"So I figured I'd be professionally courteous and invite her and her mother along with a few other neighbors as well so she wouldn't be among total strangers."

Malacoda laughed. "Basil, my old friend, at times like these I despair of ever turning you into a fellow sadist. You're just too kind for your own good, or anyone else's."

"What's that supposed to mean?" the artist laughed.

"To make your neighbors comfortable, my poor Paula is going to have to wear clothes in public. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Well, I'm not. And it won't hurt for you to spend some time with normal people for a change."

"I've got neighbors too, you know."

"I've met your neighbors. They're as strange as you are, in their own way."

Malacoda frowned and tried not to laugh. He went to a lot of trouble to keep his neighbors from seeing Paula in her natural state. "My neighbors are very nice, extremely normal people who do not cover their lawns with flamingos or have other neighbors that everyone thinks are crazy. Annoying at times, yes, but crazy, never."

"And you're telling me that they think you're normal?"

"Actually they do. Do you know what that young couple that lives next door to me did yesterday?"

"Saw Paula tied to a lawn chair, had a fit of terror and moved out without even packing."

Arthur laughed, and laughed so hard that he had to sit down. "No," he was finally able to choke out. "That was the family they bought the house from. You remember, the ones with the dog that kept barking."

"I remember you making sure to run your lawnmower under their children's room when they were supposed to be having their nap."

"Served the little bastards right. Anyway, this couple was putting down a layer of stones, gravel you know, around their house and they even gave me a couple of buckets to fill in the rut next to my curb."

Basil gave a short laugh and put down his brush lest he laugh harder and ruin his work. "That was good of them, considering that you tried to persuade them that the house they bought had termites."

Malacoda sighed with the thought. "It would have been a great joke, but they didn't fall for it."

"Are you ever serious?" Basil asked, actually surprised that Malacoda had not really infested the house with termites as a joke.

"Only when I look at my bills."

"Besides that."

"Basil, old friend. I only look at three things. My bills, my girlfriend, and your paintings."

"And my neighbors."

"Well, they are an interesting lot."

"And you do make them notice that motorcycle of yours."

"Basil!"

"No, they ask about you all the time. I think it had something to do with Paula riding behind you wearing her leash."

"That was pretty funny."

"The people next door agreed. Your neighbors may think you're perfectly average..."

The author looked shocked, or rather tried to. "God forbid! They know I'm a genius."

"You know what I mean, but mine think you're a nut case."

"Takes one to know one."

"And to make matters worse, they think I'm as crazy as you are."

The author chuckled slightly and leaned back in the chair. "When the truth of the matter is that any craziness on my part comes from hanging around with lunatic painters."

"Well, this Friday, try to behave yourself for once. And no handcuffs on Paula."

"What about on Mary?"

"Who?"

"Your model. I think chrome and her would go great together."

"Some other night. The Gunski girl is going to be nervous enough as it is with the mess her mother is in."

"My dear Basil, anyone who shows paintings on the west coast can be many things, but nervous with eccentric people is certainly not among them."

"Even so. I want this evening to go just right. So please, please try to behave yourself."

"I'll be the imperfect gentleman."

The artist sat down and looked at the author, remembering the last time he had promised that and then proceeded to spike the punchbowl at a children's party with LSD. "That's what's worrying me."

"You know something, I really am beginning to worry about you. You've never been so solicitous of the welfare of your neighbors before."

Basil moved over and sat down on the couch, on which normally Malacoda would be sitting, and poured himself a glass of port from an antique decanter on a small end table. "It's gotten pretty bad. From what I hear, her voices are getting worse."

Malacoda coughed a little, to try to keep from laughing. "Voices?"

"I told you. She's been having these attacks at night and running down to the police station."

"That seems rather strange."

"Well, I guess, from what I've heard, her husband used to bring the cops donuts every night and so she kind of feels close to them or something. That's why the Captain was there visiting the other day."

The author grinned, very slightly. "I see. You said the voices are getting worse?"

Basil was not grinning. "That's what I hear. I guess last night she really went berserk or something."

"Poor woman."

"Anyway, that's why the party for the daughter. The kid's virtually stopping her career for the old lady."

"Really?"

"I wonder how much work do you think she'll do with Mrs. Nutcase to take care of."

Malacoda snorted with contempt. "Maybe she'll just put the old bat in the loonie bin and have done with her."

"Would you have done that to your mother?"

"No, I'd have greased the stairs."

"I really think you would have."

"Never forget that 95% of all fatal accidents occur in the home and 50% of them aren't accidents."

"Did you ever tell that to Paula?"

"Probably. It's one of my favorite lines."

Basil offered the bottle. "Do you want more of this port?"

"Don't mind if I do. But only one more glass. I have to drop something off at my agent's before I head for home."

"Your new book?"

Malacoda filled his glass and took a sip. "Part of it. I need his opinion on the fourth chapter. It just doesn't feel right."

Basil drew a sip from his glass and looked across the room at the author. He and Malacoda had known each other for years, ever since a weird night of student drinking at a once little known club that had suddenly become popular and then gone out of business in the early 70's. He was never quite sure what to make of the man. Never seeming to take anything seriously but at the same time truly gifted. A real genius if ever one existed. Malacoda was one of the few men, or women for that matter, that Basil knew who never, but absolutely never, was without something to say about anything. It was possible to come up with a topic that no one in the room had even heard of and Malacoda would form an opinion and express it, instantly even though Malacoda had never heard of it either.

And the opinion would seem to be informed, at least.

Basil also wondered about the darker side of his friend. For Malacoda, giving wrong directions to the blind was no joke. He had been with him when Malacoda had done just that and the poor creature had nearly been done in by a truck. Knowing Malacoda, it was to be expected that S/M was a part of his life. But Malacoda took it to extremes that shocked even the most dedicated participants in the hobby who often used it as a way of sublimating their antisocial tendencies in a harmless, mutually pleasurable way. Malacoda was closer to the stereotype of the mad sadist and Basil was not entirely sure it was just image-making to help sell books.

One time, Basil had come over to Malacoda's house to be greeted by the sight of a naked girl strapped spread-eagled across the living room wall, blindfolded and virtually the whole front of her whole body covered with clothespins. She had been left that way for the entire evening, as a decoration.

Basil often wondered about the strange forces that drove his friend and assumed that he would never understand them.

"I don't understand how you can live with all that anger you carry around?" he had once asked Malacoda.

The author looked up over his port and grinned, then gave a slight but infinitely sinister chuckle. "Easy. I'm not angry, certainly not at you, nor at myself, nor at anyone else at the moment."

Basil was unwilling to give up the point. "That's not the point. You take a delight in cruelty, at least to people, that I've never seen in anyone. You must be awfully mad at something."

Again the chuckle, followed by a sip of port. "Well," Malacoda spoke and the softness of his voice was like sandpaper on a burn, "You're right about my cruelty to humans. I've never hurt an animal in my life, except to eat them and that's unlikely to change as I can't digest vegetables. But I disagree with you about my anger. That's far too strong an emotion for me. Rather let us say that I've learned to live with the dark side of my psyche and have found that I rather enjoy it. You would hardly expect me to act like some preposterous boy scout, would you?"

At that it had become Basil's turn to laugh. "I can never imagine you helping an old lady across the street, but when it comes to knot tying, that might be another matter."

Hearing that, Malacoda leaned back in the chair and his laughter roared so loudly that it made the old sash windows shake in their tracks. He laughed for a good five minutes, with Basil joining him until both were almost out of breath.

"No, old friend, I was never a boy scout and what knots I know I learned by practicing on the little girl across the alley. Still, the idea has merit and if I ever have a son, I may reconsider my aversion to scouting."

"I can't imagine you with children."

"But I love children, especially roasted and served with a nice orange sauce."

"But why this joy in human suffering. I don't know anyone else who laughs at famines."

"Neither do I."

"You're not answering my question."

Malacoda had pushed his face into one of his famous grins. "I didn't know an answer was expected. Seriously, if one looks at the human race, there really isn't a lot about it that is very likeable. Man is a nasty, brutish creature and as we are human, we have an obligation to be as nasty and brutish as possible. It's merely a way of living in accord with our basic nature. I'm not angry, I'm indifferent and if I take what may seem to my many critics an inordinate delight in the sufferings of orphan humanity, as our poor Victorian

brethren used to say when they were thinking of social systems for other people to live under, that is merely my way of dealing with the facts of life. As it is in the nature of people to suffer, one should approach their suffering as an entertainment. I have no doubt they would see mine that way if anything would happen to me."

Basil went back to his painting, still musing over that conversation. Perhaps his friend had a point, after all. There was an old cliché about artists suffering for their art. Maybe Malacoda had simply decided that others should do his suffering for him.

X

Traffic was light as Malacoda roared home. The idea of bringing Pig to a party with Basil's neighbors was almost too funny for words. No wonder his priggish friend was nervous. Then he caught himself. He had never thought of Basil in that light before. After all, he and Basil had raised more than enough hell together over the years and had been seen with each other so often that some serious and upsetting rumors about a possible gay relationship had begun. Well, that upset their friends, who did not quite know how to approach the subject, but Basil and Malacoda had had a very good laugh, considering that neither of them could stand the sight of a naked man. He remembered the time in college when Basil had taken a life drawing class and had come out thoroughly disgusted with the professor's continued use of male models. For all of his virtues and tolerance, Basil was probably the world's last homophobic artist.

Malacoda was more tolerant, at least as long as no one considered putting anything up his rear end. Thus he usually avoided Catholic Priests and Boy Scout leaders.

When he got home, Pig was not in a happy mood. She stared at the ceiling as she talked, which was her way of showing annoyance and occasionally stomped a bare foot on the worn carpet.

"What do you mean I have to wear clothes? Basil's seen me naked before! All our friends have. And no bondage? What the hell am I supposed to do with my hands?"

Malacoda had a very hard time trying not to laugh. He loved the idea of having an enthusiastic victim, but sometimes Pig could touch the ridiculous without realizing it.

"I think he's sort of worried about his neighbors," he said calmly. "They're really not used to having naked women running around with their hands tied behind them."

Paula gave a loud snort. "Well, they should learn. It would probably do them good to try it themselves."

Malacoda chuckled a little at her comment and more at the thought of an evangelical masochist. "It might at that, but that is not what Basil thinks and it is his party we're going to."

"I don't think I want to go."

Malacoda stared for a second and growled, "I don't recall that I was giving you a choice."

"But what am I going to do there. I'm used to being your window dressing. I don't have say anything, just look pretty and I never have to worry about body language. At this thing I'll have to do both."

"You'll be fine. You used to live in that neighborhood, remember?"

"How could I forget. Do you think I'll know anyone there?"

"Possibly. It'll be the usual art crowd, with a few of the locals thrown in so Mrs. Gunski won't feel totally left out. I told you it's for her daughter."

Pig stamped her bare left foot and snorted. "Great. I have to get dressed to keep a stupid polack from being embarrassed!"

Malacoda was beginning to lose his temper. "Yes, you do. And I expect you to behave yourself or it's the pebble mat for you."

Paula made a face. "I hate that thing. Why can't you just beat me."

"Because you like it when I beat you."

"That's true."

"And you can wear your collar."

That seemed to slightly mollify her. "Well, if I have to..."

Preparing Paula for the party meant more than getting some clothing on her. Paula hated clothes and hated shopping for them. As has been pointed out, if she could have had her way, she would have been a permanent resident at a nudist colony. And she was going to have to look reasonably nice for the party. It took a little doing but she and Malacoda finally agreed on a dark miniskirt and white, sleeveless top with a low neck so her collar would show better. Of course it could not be too transparent because she was not going to wear anything underneath it. Well, almost nothing.

The late afternoon before the party, she was naked, as usual, standing bent over in the pillory in the center of the basement. Her head and hands were locked into the wooden stock and her ankles were spread by a stock mounted to the base. From her position, she

could not see the clock on the wall behind her, but she was still pretty good at guessing the time.

"Shouldn't we be getting ready to go?" she asked, with the strange feeling that she knew what the answer would be.

"I am getting you ready," Malacoda answered as he looked through the collection of whips and paddles. "First I want to figure out something, so don't go away."

"Very funny. I wish you'd change that joke, sometime."

"You talk too much. But no gag tonight."

"Drat!"

"Ah," he said with satisfaction, pulling a wide, leather paddle from the box, "this will do perfectly."

He walked over to her, stood behind her for a few seconds as was the usual ritual, and then struck.

Paula gave a loud yelp and pulled up to be stopped by the wooden frame holding her. After ten such blows, her bottom was beginning to turn a bright red and she was twisting her body around as though she was beginning to have trouble standing. Ten more and she was merely groaning.

Malacoda did not stop the beating until he had hit her fifty times. By then, Paula's face was covered with tears and her rear was swollen and literally glowing.

"I think that will do. Don't want you to be too comfortable tonight."

"Thank you," she said with obvious sarcasm which was immediately answered by five more hard swats.

"Remember what I always tell you. You play smart ass with me and I'll make your ass smart for it."

"It's hard to remember anything bent over like this."

"Excuses, excuses. But now we have to get you ready." And with that, Malacoda unlocked Paula and took her upstairs so she could get herself cleaned up and put her make-up on.

That took a good hour, which was about normal, so Malacoda was not particularly bothered by the delay, even though waiting for anything was usually enough to send his

blood pressure over the top of the gauge. Besides, it gave him time to catch up on the newspaper. He had cleaned himself up while Paula was waiting in the basement.

Finally, after he had to remind her of the time, Paula was finished and came out of the bathroom. Malacoda rose from his chair, looked her over, wanted to give her a kiss but was fearful of smearing something lest she spend another hour repairing it and took her into the bedroom to help her get dressed.

First he put a harness on her that squeezed her breasts at the base and had a strap that went around her waist and up between her legs. He grinned as he pulled it and asked, "Is that too tight?"

"Just a little."

"Good," and he tightened it an extra notch, then locked it in place with a small padlock. A couple of other locks made sure that Paula was going to wear the harness until he decided to let her out of it.

He stood looking at her and debated whether or not she should be wearing nipple clamps, then decided that they would probably show under the top, especially with the harness pushing her breasts up the way it did.

Paula dressed, wearing her skirt and top, but leaving her legs bare except for a pair of high-laced sandals. Paula complained about that. She wanted to take her shoes off as soon as she got to the party, but Malacoda did not want her stepping on anything. Malacoda completed the ensemble for her by locking on her collar and fastening a leather bracelet to each wrist. The bracelets were not linked, but that would only take a second with another padlock between them.

"You look beautiful," he said quietly, giving her a hug.

She returned the embrace and gave him a soft kiss so as not to mess the make-up. "I have a loving master."

"I have a lovely victim. They'll all be jealous of you."

"Your necktie is a little crooked."

"Is it?" and Malacoda looked into the mirror to make the adjustment.

"That's better. What jacket are you wearing?"

"The blue one."

She looked up at the wall clock. "I think we should get going."

"I think you're right."

Malacoda locked her bracelets together in front of her and hooked a short leash to them. Stopping to check the house and make sure nothing was left running in the kitchen, he put on his jacket and led her to the garage. She got into the car first, wincing as she sat on her sore bottom, and he pulled her seat-belt over her arms and snapped it. Then he got in and strapped her ankles together and put on her blindfold. He gave her a quick peck on the cheek and started the engine.

They arrived at Basil's about a half hour later, traffic being rather light, and it took another ten minutes of driving around the neighborhood to find a parking space. Once parked, Malacoda removed Paula's blindfold, unstrapped her ankles and then considered leaving her hands bound. But Basil would have been rather unhappy, so he unlocked them as well and put the padlock in his pocket.

He got out of the car and went around to open her door and unstrap the seat-belt.

"Free at last!" she exclaimed, with a laugh.

Malacoda laughed. "Don't get too used to it."

"I wouldn't dream of it."

"Well, lets go meet the neighbors."

Basil had appointed his new model, Mary, to take the role of hostess and she disliked wearing clothes as much as Paula did. And when she opened the door, it was obvious that she was wearing a lot more of them. "Art, Paula. Good to see you."

"Good to see you to," Malacoda answered with genuine cheer.

"Aren't you roasting in that dress?" Paula laughed. The last time she had seen Mary, they were both naked, Mary posing for Basil and Paula handcuffed to the staircase.

"He's letting you move?" Mary asked in a whisper?

"Basil said his neighbors are coming and didn't want us to shock them," Paula answered in her own whisper.

"I see."

Looking around the room, Paula could see a number of frumpy people who looked as if they had invested in a bankrupt polyester farm. "I see too. Those must be the neighbors."

"Not all of them. The one with the wife who looks like a short basketball with an orange on top owns three galleries."

"No accounting for taste," Paula said.

"Or lack thereof," Malacoda whispered to the two women. "I've seen them, both their galleries and their wives. Where's Basil?"

"Oh, he went into the kitchen to chop ice," Mary answered, pointing to the door.

Malacoda pecked at Paula. "Your favorite torture, my love."

"I thought you didn't want to shock the neighbors."

"I might change my mind. Let's mingle."

Mingling was not an option. Basil's living room was almost as small as Malacoda's and it was full to overflowing with what was possibly the most peculiar collection of humanity Malacoda had ever seen. One side of the room contained the art crowd, wearing the uniform of the month. The neighbors were gathered on the other side and in the middle were a few people who did not fit into either category or belonged to both.

Malacoda recognized the pitiful figure of Mrs. Gunski who was standing with a small glass of what looked like Ginger Ale trying to understand what her daughter was doing with these weird people, especially the group on the other side of the room. One of the neighbors, obviously, was talking to her, but the noise of the room was such that he could not make out what they were saying and he assumed that it probably was not worth bothering with anyway. Along with Mrs. Gunski and the neighbor was what was obviously a Catholic priest (it was unlikely that Basil would invite an Episcopalian since he didn't know any) and what appeared to be the form of the local police captain.

Malacoda thought it odd that Basil would have invited them.

Captain Slovino did not really want to accept the invitation from Mrs. Gunski, but she virtually begged and finally bribed him with strudel. Nevertheless, he felt much more comfortable to see Father Skroudas at the party as well.

Basil had been a little less happy. When he invited Kathy Gunski and her mother, he had not thought at all about them asking if Mrs. Gunski could bring a couple extra guests. He had assumed that they would be relatives and would fit in perfectly with the neighbors. When the priest came to the door, Mary almost fainted and Basil had a hard task avoiding laughing at his own foolishness. On reflection, it would seem natural for the old lady to invite her two most frequent visitors. And he could not wait to see the look on Malacoda's face when confronted by the presence of Captain Slovino.

"Arthur Malacoda?" a man asked from about three feet behind the author.

Malacoda started for a second, turned a little faster than he would have wished to and looked into a grinning face, bearded with a gray beard about two inches above his own.

"Maybe you don't remember. I'm John Salinger."

"Of course. We met at the ABA a couple of years back."

"That's right. I was doing some illustrated novels and you had just published your horror book."

"And a horror it was too. All that work for such bad reviews. Oh well, if I wanted a normal life, I would have sold insurance."

John Salinger laughed a hearty, bass laugh and took a drink from his glass. It was clear liquid and could have been either Vodka or very flat club soda. Malacoda guessed vodka. "The creative life! And you know Basil, or the girl?"

"Girl? Oh, the guest of honor. I know Basil. And before I forget, this is my slave, Paula."

John Salinger regarded the collar and cuffs as Paula giggled, and understood immediately. "Pleased to meet you." To Malacoda, "This is quite a group. Do you know any of the neighbors?"

"Not really. I've met a couple of them visiting Basil over the years. I'm wondering what the guest of honor looks like. I see her mother over there."

"Where?"

Malacoda pointed to the group in the corner. "Next to the priest and I think the man with them is a cop of some sort. A friend of the family."

"Basil's?"

"The Gunski's."

"Art!" came the familiar voice from the kitchen door. "I was wondering if you got lost or something."

Malacoda turned. "Hi, Basil. No, we ran a little late. Seems Paula got tied up in something."

Paula giggled again and Malacoda gave her a small kick. Basil almost roared. "Can I get you a drink?"

"Beer. And real beer, not that damned dishwater you brought back from Colorado."

"That was fifteen years ago."

"And I can still taste it."

"Paula?"

"Beer."

Basil, who was actually wearing a shirt, disappeared in a mass of humanity for a few seconds before returning with two glasses of beer. Malacoda took both of them and handed one to Paula. He took a sip and nodded. "It'll pass."

Basil snorted and laughed at the same time. "It better. That keg cost me a fortune."

The author laughed again. "I can't imagine you spending a fortune on anything except more plastic flamingos for your yard."

"I could use a couple more at that. How's the book coming?"

"Slowly. I keep getting distracted by someone."

Basil whispered in Malacoda's ear, "She needs a better gag."

"I was going to bring her in wearing one."

"I don't think either Father Skroudas or Captain Slovino over there would quite understand."

"I don't think so either. You keep weird company these days, Basil, very weird."

The artist laughed. "And you don't. No, they came with Mrs. Gunski."

"That must have been a surprise."

Basil chuckled. "Actually, I half expected you to ignore my just request and bring Paula, well, you know, and then discover them here."

Paula laughed out loud at the thought of it and Malacoda joined her. "Shame on you," he said in mock deprecation, "that you would even think me capable of such a heinous act."

"It's exactly what you'd do. I don't know how you managed to get clothes on her anyway."

"It took some persuading."

"I imagine it did. And we'll see if she can sit down after it. Let me introduce you to some of the people you don't know. I see you met John."

"We've met before. At a convention."

"Excellent." And with that Basil led Malacoda and Paula up to a reasonably neat man in what seemed to be his mid-forties. "Harold. I'd like you to meet Arthur Malacoda and his girlfriend, Paula."

"Harold Shoenfeld," the man said shaking hands. It was a firm grip.

"Harold owns the gallery that Kathy's showing her new work in. He flew out from LA with her."

Malacoda grinned thinking, "a convenient relationship, no doubt."

Harold spoke in a low baritone. "I had some business here and I figured I'd fly along. I don't know if you've heard that she's having some trouble with her mother." Then he whispered, "the old woman's gone batty. Hears voices."

Malacoda tried to look concerned. "Basil mentioned something about that."

"Well, I don't want it to affect her daughter's work too much. I have lot riding on her."

"And a lot of fun riding her too, I imagine," the author thought. "The show is going well, I take it," he said aloud trying very hard to control a desire for mordancy.

"Very. Sold two large canvases the first night. The kid could be a real star, but now she has to take off work for this."

"Well, maybe it won't last long."

"I hope not. Have you two known Basil long?"

"I've known him for years. Paula met him through me."

"He does some interesting stuff. And he sells good too. What do you do?"

"I try to write occasionally. Like when I have to pay bills."

Harold smiled with what might have been condescension. "Really. Sorry, I don't get to read too much myself. Running the gallery takes up almost all my time."

Malacoda grinned with a feeling of obvious superiority. "Don't feel bad. I never read my own books anyway. They're terrible, but as H. L. Mencken said, 'no one ever went broke underestimating the taste of the American people.'"

Harold laughed. "That's what keeps us all in business. Of course the stuff from this country is infinitely better than that garbage coming out of Europe these days."

Malacoda smiled. "Europe is a museum in need of dusting, with powdered cyanide."

"That's good. Can I use it?"

"I didn't copyright it yet. Sure. No extra charge."

Paula stood off to one side of the conversation, her eyes wide and her hands folded over her belly. She had the terrible feeling that she was going to have to wash slime off of Malacoda for a week after this party.

"Look, she's your artist," Malacoda was saying. "Where is the guest of honor?"

"I wish he'd stop calling her that!" Paula thought.

"I think she had to use the bathroom," answered Harold the gallery owner and Malacoda noticed that there was a spot on his blue necktie.

"This is kind of strange. I mean, no one in this room, except you, has ever seen her work."

"It is just a bit odd, but in my business, we see everything."

"I don't doubt it. Always thought the art world would be an interesting subject for a novel, you know, some serial killer with a grudge against gallery owners. That sort of thing."

Harold gave a short laugh. "Plenty of material there. I have this nightmare of a mob of artists chasing me with brushes and palette knives."

"My first publisher had similar dreams after he looked at one of my books. Except in his case it was lunatic new agers armed with vegetables."

"Sounds like some of my clients."

"Do your clients know the idiots who reviewed my last book?"

"That bad?"

"They thought so. One even called me the Antichrist. I mean, it's nice to make an impact, but to be called the Devil...!"

Harold saw the opportunity, or so he thought. "I have one artist who does some very interesting stuff based on Hindu demonology. Maybe you'd like to see some slides sometime."

Malacoda laughed. He expected to run into at least one person who could talk of nothing but business, but this was pushing the envelope. "Maybe on my next trip to California."

"I'll give you my card." Harold said and produced a brown leather card case and withdrew a business card printed on black board with gold lettering. Malacoda accepted it, returned a white card of his own from a plastic holder furnished by the printer.

"Ah!" Harold gushed with some satisfaction. "Here comes my new star."

Kathy Gunski emerged from the bathroom to face the cheering multitude, hoping that her mother would not start hearing voices again. It was an embarrassing thought that any moment the old woman would start gibbering the sort of nonsense that had dragged her back to this dreadful, old neighborhood with its cheap restaurants and idiot children wearing stupid, eastern European peasant suits on every foreign holiday. The only relief she had was in finding that Basil was living across the street and was willing to introduce her to some of his friends. But she fervently wished that the ground would open and Satan would emerge from his sulfurous realm to claim the other neighbors, who still thought of her as a child.

She pulled slightly at her short skirt, somewhat a bit too flouncy for her taste and age but nevertheless following the iron-clad dictates of fashion, for in her new world all claim to individuality was submerged in the desire to be exactly like everyone else in it, otherwise it was possible to be mistaken for an outsider. She instinctively walked over to Harold, who was talking to a man she had never seen before, but who, in spite of his somewhat malevolent teddy bear appearance, seemed almost intelligent with the blond bimchette in the bondage gear nesting beside him. "Harold? Have I missed anything?"

"No, I was just talking to Arthur Malacoda here. He's an author."

Kathy smiled. Her round face, heavily made up, was topped by a mop of blond hair which contrasted extremely unfavorably with the straight look of Paula's. Paula hated her instantly.

"I think I may even have heard of you, Mr. Malacoda," she said trying to sound sophisticated, like a fifteen year old visiting a relative in college.

"I hope someone has," Malacoda joked. He could not believe that his friend was throwing a party for this idiot. Paula could drive him nuts at times, but this chick was too much even for his catholic taste in women. "I was telling your friend here that he's probably the only one in this room who's ever seen your work."

Kathy grinned. "I think Basil has, but you're right. I generally only show on the west coast. It was really nice of Basil to have this party for me."

Malacoda smiled. "Basil is a puritan at heart. He needs an excuse to have a good time."

"Are you a friend of Basil's?"

"I've known him for about thirty years. Give or take a decade."

"That long?" Kathy gushed with enough insincerity to sink a peace conference of European cowards.

"That long," Malacoda responded. "Harold here tells me you came back to take of your mother."

"She's been a little ill. Father's dying upset her terribly and she needs company for a while. I'm going to set up one of the spare rooms for my painting."

Malacoda grinned slightly, trying to hide his glee at the prospect for mischief. "That seems to make sense. Of course, I've worked out of my house forever."

"Do you have a house, or an apartment?"

"I have a little house in an inner ring suburb. Paula lives there with me," pointing her out with a wave of his right hand.

"How nice," more gush. "Have you been together long?"

Paula felt obliged to answer. "A while." Then walking up to Malacoda she wrapped herself around his right arm. "He's such a sweetie."

Malacoda choked on a laugh. "That's not what you called me the other night!"

"Well, you were being mean."

"I have an image to live down to."

Basil came walking up to the group. "Kathy, your mother would like to see you for a second," he said quietly.

Kathy Gunski rolled her eyes up. "Excuse me for a second, will you."

"Of course," Malacoda answered. And she walked away towards where her mother was sitting.

Malacoda took Basil aside and set his empty glass on a table. "That's going to be a fun relationship. I'll bet mother and daughter haven't said a friendly word since daddy died."

"It shows, doesn't it."

"That chick has had too many mashed avocados."

"Living in California rots the brain muscles."

"I could almost feel sorry for that poor, crazy woman."

Basil chuckled. "You never feel sorry for anyone."

"Not true. Often times I have felt sorry for myself."

"I forgot."

"Well, please try to remember before making inaccurate generalizations about the greatest writer in the world."

"Who is, of course, noted for his great humility."

"That goes without saying."

"Especially if we do not wish our noses to grow."

Malacoda laughed slightly. "Basil, did you ever review one of my books under a pen name?"

"No, not that I recall?"

"Just wondering. Where did Pig get to?"

"I think she's getting another beer."

"I hope she remembers that going to the bathroom may be a little difficult for her."

"I was wondering what you had her wearing under that outfit."

"A simple harness, but guess who has the keys."

"I don't need to."

The author grinned a malevolent grin. "In a way, it's a pity I didn't have her come naked. I would love to have seen the look on the priest's face."

"So would I. And the poor captain."

"Speak of the devil."

Captain Slovino had been sitting with Mrs. Gunski when she had wondered where her daughter had gone off to. Basil had walked by just at that moment and the captain had

motioned him over and whispered in his ear that Mrs. Gunski was starting to feel uncomfortable. Basil, being the perfect host he was noted for, went off to find Kathy and now the captain was coming again.

Basil wondered what was wrong.

Captain Slovino came up to the pair and smiled. "Thanks for getting Kathy. Mrs. Gunski was getting nervous with all the people around."

Basil smiled. "No trouble, Captain. Is she all right now?"

"Just fine. A little stage fright, I think it's called."

Basil and Malacoda both laughed quietly. Basil turned and said, "Captain Slovino, I'd like you to meet an old friend of mine, Arthur Malacoda."

They shook hands. "A pleasure, Captain."

Basil went on. "Captain Slovino is in charge making sure we all sleep secure from thieves and killers."

Malacoda smiled. "Well, since Basil's house is still here and he's still alive, at least from the neck down, you must do a very good job, Captain."

Captain Slovino indulged in his first good laugh of the evening. "We try," he said.

Basil smiled. "It was good of you to bring Mrs. Gunski. These affairs can get a little strange, especially with writers at them..."

Malacoda made a shocked face and exclaimed, "Basil! That joke was for me, Captain. I have this bad habit of putting one word after another in the usually vain hope of making a coherent whole."

Captain Slovino nearly choked on his smile, to say nothing of the vodka and tonic he was holding. His luck with writers had never been all that good. And these days...

Malacoda caught the momentary glitch. "Don't worry, Captain," he said soothingly, "I don't write police procedure stories."

Captain Slovino laughed. "That's good. You're not a journalist are you, I hope?"

"No. Grave robbing was never my style."

The Captain gave a laugh, a hearty laugh like he had not laughed in weeks. For a man who had never had any use for journalists himself and who viewed writers in general as a

nuisance at best and surplus population at worst, he found that he was actually going to like this jolly man with his weird girlfriend, bondage gear and all.

The author smiled and then laughed with the officer, sending his darker thoughts diving to his soul. "So, old lady Gunshit is here, eh? Well, we'll just have to have a little fun later." And then to Captain Slovino, "I take it you care little for the gentlecreatures of the press."

Captain Slovino nodded with energy. "If you had any idea of trouble they cause me. Take this affair the other night..."

Malacoda put on his best face of absolute puzzlement. "Uh, what affair, mon capitain?"

"Haven't you heard? We had a suicide epidemic in the city about a week ago."

"Oh, that. Yes, I remember it now. Created quite fuss and the news is, I believe, still trying to milk it."

"The damned reporters won't let us alone for a minute. We don't have enough work as it is without half the city trying to kill itself."

"Maybe something got in the water?"

"That's a serious possibility. God knows what kind of strange drugs people are making now. Anyway, how the hell are we supposed to be able to stop something that we don't even know is likely to happen?"

"You're not. But you have to remember that the news business exists to make people nervous. Just look who sponsors the shows. Bran flakes and stomach medicine. If the public doesn't worry, then they don't get indigestion and the sponsors go broke. Of course the public generally knows better and watches old game shows and reruns anyway, unless there's something juicy, like a good war or an earthquake, something to laugh at."

Captain Slovino felt a great comfort at meeting someone who was so understanding of his problems. He wondered what precinct he lived in. "That was a hell of a night, I'll tell you. Father Skroudas over there was so busy giving last rites that he ran out of holy water."

Malacoda could not help but laugh at that. "The local vampires must have been overjoyed."

The captain, not to be outdone chuckled, "Naw, people around here eat lots of garlic."

Now it was Malacoda's turn to laugh again. "Curses! Back to the coffin! But seriously, Captain, does anyone have any idea what caused it?"

"Not a soul. Some of people in Social Services think it was some sort of mass hysteria, but the people in social services sleep with crystals under their beds."

"Does that keep the Communists away?"

"How the hell should I know? They're all idiots anyway. Take poor Mrs. Gunski over there" he changed his voice to a near whisper, "She's having some mental problem right now, that's why her daughter came back, though I don't see what good that airhead is gonna do, and she keeps coming to the station looking for help. But if I let Social Services handle her, she'll end up drugged in a dumpster somewhere. So I sort of look out for the old lady."

"She can't be that old with a a daughter that young."

"You're right, but the daughter is older than she looks and as for Mrs. Gunski, well she looks about twice her real age, but her husband was a good friend of everyone at the station, so we kind of owe her. Hell, I got a couple of officers who played with her kids. I can't let her get tossed aside because of some latest theory."

"I see."

"I'm glad you do. My desk sergeant, he'd put her in a loony bin if they still had them, but I have to shave in the morning and it's kind of hard to do that and not be able to look in a mirror."

Malacoda nodded in agreement, but thinking of a tombstone engraved "God does work

miracles now and then. Here lies a cop who was an honest man."

Captain Slovino continued. "My sergeant would also have a fit for telling a writer this, but it's no secret. She comes into the station almost every night complaining about her voices."

"Voices?" Malacoda let his voice rise, trying to sound incredulous.

"She hears voices that tell her that her husband's in hell and she's doing a lot of evil things."

Malacoda nodded. "Sound like something I'd put in a bad novel. Does her daughter know what she's come back to?"

The captain sighed "I hope so. All I need is two nut cases on my hands."

Malacoda raised his eyebrows slightly. "Don't spread this around, but I think the daughter is already one. Have you met her yet?"

"At the mother's house. I feel sorry for her boyfriend."

Malacoda chuckled and motioned with his head over to Harold the gallery owner. "I don't. He makes my publisher look honest by comparison."

"A real sleazeball?"

"Yes. A real one. I just had a talk with him."

"I think he was in the cab that dropped Kathy off at home and then he went on to his hotel."

"No doubt. They're welcome to him. I wonder if he smokes cigars?"

"Why?"

"Because I've always wanted to give an exploding cigar to someone and he seems like the best candidate."

"I'm not sure that blowing someone up with a cigar is legal."

"That's what lawyers are for."

"Still, for a good laugh, we might just not be looking when you give it to him."

"I'll see what can be done, but if he's from the land of fruits and nuts exploding tofu might be more appropriate."

"He doesn't look like that kind of nut. I'll bet he doesn't even run."

Malacoda chuckled again. "Then I have something in common with him. There are only two things that can make me run."

"What are they?"

"Being chased by something with large teeth and if my pants are on fire."

Captain Slovino gave a good laugh, took another belt from his glass and looked over at Mrs. Gunski. "I think I better get back to the old lady. Don't want her having an attack here."

"A pleasure meeting you, Captain."

"You too," and he walked back across the room.

Paula came up to Malacoda and put her arm around him. "Having fun, master?"

"This is getting more interesting by the moment. I just had a fascinating talk with a cop."

"That is strange."

"I think this night may prove stranger than anyone thinks." Reaching into his jacket pocket, he pulled out a cassette. "Ask Basil to put this in the stereo, will you?"

Paula took the tape and looked at it. "Do I know this group?"

"Just something interesting I taped off the radio the other day. I think Basil and some of this heap of humanity may like it."

Paula made a small gesture, indicating that it really did not matter to her one way or the other and walked over to Basil. Malacoda stood alone, for the first time that evening, watching in silence as Basil took the tape and looked at it much the way Paula had, then laughing as he walked over to the cabinet with the music machines in it to change the cassette. He hoped Basil would not run out of ice.

Paula walked back to Malacoda, smiling. "He just changed the tape."

"I know, I could see from here."

"You know, you really didn't have to make the saddle strap so tight. If I get any hornier, I may try to rape you in front of all these people."

"I don't think the good Captain and the good Father would appreciate that, seeing as they are here to protect the fragile sanity of poor, old lady Gunski."

Paula looked around. "Is that why they're here? I wondered why Basil would invite them."

"Actually, Mrs. Gunski did. And the Captain isn't such a bad fellow, in spite of his occupation. Of course, if he saw our basement he might have a stroke, but he's not stupid. He knows what your--er--jewelry means."

The music from the tape began to filter through the room, just barely audible over the conversations which created a background din of barely recognizable voices, saying words that could not be understood from more than a few feet away. Malacoda smiled and looked down at Paula, wishing that he had brought her naked, so that everyone in the room could die of jealousy at his good fortune.

Captain Slovino felt his throat get dry, which surprised him because he had been lubricating it for the better part of an hour. He finished his drink in one gulp and went over to the bar and helped himself to a new one, with more vodka and less tonic. Mrs. Gunski was avoiding alcohol that evening, out of fear of what it might bring on, and was drinking orange juice. She suddenly felt that the juice was not making her less thirsty, but more and she asked her daughter if she could put just a little shot of something in it for her.

Father Skroudas put his next wine cooler in a somewhat larger glass.

Malacoda smiled as he looked at the crowd moving back and forth around the bar. Basil was certainly puzzled and Mary felt that her outfit was just a bit too warm but was not willing to take it off. Of all the guests, only the author and Paula were unaffected. Malacoda smiled when he thought of Paula the night before, strapped down across the coffee table in the living room with the stereo headphones on. She looked genuinely funny, but she was being inoculated, as it were, against the subliminal that he had just spent a couple of hours creating, the one that was being played in the room at the very moment.

Just then Basil walked up to the couple and asked, "Do you think something's wrong with the heat? I checked the thermostat, but it's roasting in here."

"I'm fine," Malacoda answered with disarming nonchalance. "Pig, are you hot?"

"No more than usual, even with all these clothes on," she answered with a laugh.

Basil shook his head. "I don't know," he said, "if it's the heat or I had something salty for supper, but I'm getting damned thirsty."

"Better stick to seltzer and lemon or you might not be able to see your guests."

"I know. I think our police officer friend just filled his glass with solid vodka and then added a shot of tonic."

"He's got a rough job."

"Guarding Mrs. Gunski's no picnic."

"That too. But I think you better get more ice before your bar runs dry."

Basil looked over at the gathering mob and walked into the kitchen.

Malacoda laughed.

Paula looked up at Malacoda and chuckled. "Why do I think that this is some prank of yours?"

Malacoda looked down malevolently. "And why do I think someone is going to be kneeling on the pebble mat later?"

The pebble mat was just what the name implied, a mat with pebbles glued to it. A couple of weeks before, Malacoda came home to find Paula standing naked in front of the window where the neighbor's children could see her.

"You little imbecile!" he thundered as he closed the drapes. "Have you lost all your marbles?"

Paula gave him one of her little-girl looks and said, "I just wanted to see what was outside. I thought I'd put my bathing suit on and sit in the yard for a while."

"Yeah, and the kids decide our window is the local theater! Save the exhibitionism for parties, my love. It's safer."

"They didn't see anything."

"And you're not going to see anything for a while." And with that he pulled her to the basement, blindfolded her, gagged her with the harness gag, strapped her wrists behind her over her elbows so that her arms were tied in double hammer-lock and made her kneel on the pebble covered mat. He then strapped her ankles to her thighs and left her there for a time. When he finally released her, her face was covered with tears and he held her for an hour. It is not easy to love a masochist, especially if one is a sadist.

Paula put her hand over her mouth in an imitation gag and Malacoda nodded with a smile.

Basil emerged from the kitchen carrying a large bag of ice which he deposited in a chest behind the bar.

"I've always wondered," Malacoda said to Paula, "why our friend has never bothered to invest in a small bar refrigerator. It would save him tons of trouble."

"Probably for the same reason you haven't. He just never needed it before."

"That's true, but I never throw parties like his."

Paula giggled and whispered, "And I never have to wear clothes at yours."

"I never let you."

"I know. That's why I love you."

Malacoda looked around the room and decided to do something just a little bit different. "Stay put," he said to Paula and then he walked across the room to where Captain Slovino and Mrs. Gunski were standing.

Captain Slovino grinned as he saw the author coming and said, "Hello. Decided to leave your corner?"

"Wanted to see how the other half lives. How are you Mrs. Gunski? I haven't seen you since you conned Basil and me into hauling your furniture."

Mrs. Gunski smiled and was about to respond when a voice exploded in her brain.

"You know who I am now, don't you--you stupid bitch!"

Mrs. Gunski, instead of replying with the usual polite nothings gave out a terrified scream and fainted.

XI

Captain Slovino looked absolutely dumbfounded and Father Skroudas, his balance by now somewhat adversely affected by a profusion of wine coolers, tripped over several pieces of furniture as he raced across the room to reach the fallen creature. Kathy Gunski, discussing various matters of pricing with Harold the Gallery Owner, looked over to the corner and the gathering crowd, which had abandoned the bar temporarily, and said in a voice of mild disapproval, "Well, looks like I'm going home soon."

Malacoda, his eyes widened to the point of popping out of their sockets looked down at the woman and shook his head.

"I've had bad reviews before, but this..."

"It's not your fault, Art," Basil was saying. "We were all a little afraid something like this might happen."

"Well, I wish you had warned me," Malacoda said softly in Basil's ear as Kathy Gunski came over after disengaging herself from Harold.

"Mother!" she whispered sharply into the ear of the woman on the floor, "you're making us look like idiots!"

"I don't think she can hear you," Father Skroudass said in Kathy's ear as he nursed a wounded knee with his left hand. "What happened?"

Malacoda looked at the priest and wondered if his roman collar was too tight. "I just got the worst review of my life."

Captain Slovino added, "We don't know. She took one look at Mr. Malacoda here and had the worst attack I've seen her have."

Kathy stood over her mother and shook her head. "Could somebody help me get her into the bathroom. I think she dirtied herself."

Malacoda winced more at the euphemism than at the smell rising from the carpet. Basil was going to have a fit in the morning. "I'm surprised I didn't," Malacoda said softly under his breath. And then thought, "Damn, I should have been an actor. This is great!" Hiding the inner smile was very hard indeed.

Basil was running around the room trying to calm the neighbors, who by now were convinced that poor Mrs. Gunski could greatly benefit from a stay in a nice, quite room with lots of padding and regular jolts of electricity. The opinion was catching. Even Malacoda was wondering what Paula would look like in a straitjacket and quietly resolved to buy her one.

Captain Slovino, Father Skroudass and Mary helped to carry the limp but slowly recovering form of Mrs. Gunski to the bathroom while someone called for a paramedic truck. Malacoda made his way back to Paula and watched the show as people stood around, drinking even faster as the music played and tried to decide if they should leave or if that would be too impolite. Paula wondered aloud what they were doing in the bathroom and Malacoda told her that she did not want to know.

This impasse went on for about ten minutes until the paramedics arrived and were ushered into the bathroom, gurney, radio telephone, telemetry, medications and all. Malacoda, who knew how small Basil's bathroom was, had visions of a very crowded space and was by now trying very hard not to laugh at the image in his mind of people falling into the bathtub and tripping over the wastebasket next to the toilet.

That would have been very bad form.

They were in there for a very long time and Malacoda, who had limited experience in such matters, wondered if the fun was going to be over too soon. Suppose the creature had had a heart attack and died. That would not do at all. Suffering, according to the foolish doctrines that the Mrs. Gunskis of the world believed, was supposed to be good for the soul and Malacoda wanted her soul to get all the good it had coming. It was the Christian thing to do.

After about forty-five minutes, the paramedics wheeled Mrs. Gunski to the waiting truck, followed in turn by Kathy, Father Skroudas and Captain Slovino, the last of whom turned to Malacoda and said, "She'll be all right. They just want to take her in for some tests."

Malacoda managed an insincere look of concern. "That's good. I've never scared anyone to death before." But it was sure fun to do it now!

The captain glanced at the floor and said uncomfortably, "She hasn't been well."

"I know. You told me."

"That's right, I did. Well, I better go along and keep the good father from giving her the last rites. It's become a habit of his."

As the little troop walked out of the house, Basil stood holding the door and shaking his head. Mary was clearly shaken and the rest of the partygoers were sobering up faster than they wanted to.

The gathering did not last long after that. In small groups, the neighbors first, they said their good-byes and went home, some walking, not as steadily as usual and some driving, not as safely as usual. There was a banging noise down the block and Basil assumed that a couple of his guests had had an unexpected reunion and was thankful that the state legislature had banned lawsuits against private individuals over drunks at their houses, one of the few acts of sanity from that most inept of bodies. Finally, all that was left of the crowd were Basil, Mary, Malacoda and Paula. As Basil and Malacoda surveyed the littered room containing more than the normal after-party detritus, Paula and Mary both took the opportunity to shed their unwelcome garments and were soon both merrily naked.

"Well, my old friend," Malacoda said from his usual perch in the old chair. "This may not have been the best party you've ever thrown, but it was certainly the strangest."

Basil, who had pulled off his shirt, leaving Malacoda the only one still fully clothed, was still in shock. "I've never had anyone shit in my living room before."

The author had a hard time concealing his merriment and satisfaction with the evening. "And with luck you never will again, at least not until you're in your nineties and then let us fervently hope you are well supplied with diapers."

"I'm not going to live that long," Basil growled as Mary came over and put her arms around him and gave him a hug which was supposed to be comforting but did not quite work.

"Come on, it wasn't that bad," the model said, soothingly.

Basil shook his head and took a long drink of beer and looked steadily at his old friend. "The scream that woman gave out. She must've imagined you were the devil come to claim her worthless soul."

Malacoda chuckled. "Well, I've been called that. I don't know what got into her and neither do you. But everyone says she's going nuts and tonight she must've just snapped completely."

"I guess so. But that damned priest nearly wrecked my coffee table when he fell on it." The artist was now surveying the room, looking at the tipped furniture as well as the litter.

Malacoda was still enjoying the afterglow of all the fuss. "I never saw a drunken priest try to run through a crowded room before. In fact, I don't think I've ever seen a sober one try. But then, never having been Roman Catholic I don't know that many of them."

Basil patted Mary appreciatively on her rear. "It was pretty funny. And that disgusting daughter of hers. I can't believe I threw a party for her. She spent the entire time she was here hanging on that--what's his name?"

"Harold," Malacoda answered watching Paula try to adjust her harness.

"Yeah. I wonder if he wears women's' underwear," Basil grumbled.

Mary brightened at the thought. "Well, let me see. His name is Harold, but he's not mayor," she said with a giggle.

Arthur chuckled slightly. "And no sun tan."

"Comforting. It would've been fun to see his lingerie show. But I can just imagine what's going on in the hospital."

"So can I."

"Maybe this time they'll put the old bat away forever."

Malacoda put on his shocked expression and leaned forward. "Basil, that is just a bit unkind. Considering that a while ago she was a guest in your house."

"I'm lucky to have a house. And the poor neighbors. I can think what they're saying. Probably blaming me."

"For what? Trying to be nice to an old lady and not realizing how sick she is? Don't be silly. They'll probably all feel real sorry for you and offer to mow your lawn or something."

Basil laughed. "My neighbors don't offer to breathe unless someone is paying them to."

Malacoda got up and paced the room a little. " Unless they're feeding sausage to you, if I remember. Reminds me of my Uncle Willy."

"I didn't know you had an Uncle Willy."

"Probably because I didn't until a second ago, but don't ruin my point with mere facts."

"Ok, go on."

"Anyway, Uncle Willy is so cheap that he put a pay toilet in his house."

"Did he make any money?"

"Not directly, but he saved a lot on toilet paper."

"I don't get it."

"Well, he never had change for the toilet, so he spent a lot of time fertilizing the bush behind his house."

"God no!" Mary shrieked with a laugh.

"His neighbors were very impressed. Said he had the best looking bushes on the block."

"Really?"

"As long as they stayed upwind."

Basil roared and leaned back so far in his chair that he almost fell over. Paula heard the noise and came running into the room to see what was so funny.

"I see," Mary said reprovngly to Paula, "that once again you've missed a good one."

Malacoda was chuckling and managed to stop himself long enough to say, "I was just telling Basil about my cheap Uncle Willy."

Paula cocked her head sideways, opened her eyes all the way and then shook her head. "I didn't know you had an Uncle Willy."

"I don't."

Mary shook her head in mock disapproval. Turning to Paula she said "You're living with a madman."

Paula turned to show her still red bottom, now showing the signs of bruising, and the locks on her harness. "I know, it shows."

The ride to the hospital was a nightmare for Captain Slovino. He did not know which emotion was stronger, worry about poor Mrs. Gunski, who seemed to have finally lost all touch with reality, disgust for the daughter, embarrassment at the thought of what the desk sergeant would say when he found out and the less than comforting presence of Father Skroudas next to him who was wondering aloud if they had enough evidence to get the bishop to approve an exorcism.

"Father," Captain Slovino growled softly.

"Yes my son."

"Will please do me a favor and shut up about the stupid exorcism."

Father Skroudas did not realize that his words had a minor slur to them as he responded, "If I remember correctly, a few days ago you were the one who brought the subject up in the first place."

At that moment, Captain Slovino fervently wished that Mrs. Gunski was a Methodist. "That was then. Right now I want to get to the hospital without having an accident and then having to explain to the press why I had a drunken priest in the car next to me."

"I'm not drunk."

"Then, Father, with all due respect to your calling, you are doing a very good imitation of it."

The captain maneuvered the car through the evening traffic with care. He could have put on his flashing lights and used the siren, but there had been a terrible wreck a couple of weeks before and the department was a little sensitive to such matters, especially as he was feeling the effects of the vodka. Besides, he would get to the hospital soon enough as it was. It was not likely that Mrs. Gunski would be going anywhere.

After what seemed to him to be the longest ride of his life, they pulled into the emergency room parking lot and stopped. Captain Slovino got out of his car, took a breath mint and then went over to the passenger side to help out the limping Father Skroudas who had not yet recovered either his full sobriety or from the unfortunate encounter with the coffee table. He shoved a breath mint into the priest's mouth and whispered, "Don't say anything and for God's sake don't go giving the last rites to anyone who's not dead yet."

"But you're supposed to do it before they die."

"Only if you're sober. All I need is an angry bishop in my office," Captain Slovino spoke in harsh whisper thinking that maybe he should leave the priest in the car, and then thought better of it and decided they would all be safer if he was dragged along.

They sort of walked/staggered into the emergency room to be confronted by an officious looking old bat behind the desk. Captain Slovino pulled out his badge and made sure that Father Skroudas' collar was showing, then he said, "Did the ambulance with Sophie Gunski and her daughter arrive yet?"

The receptionist looked at the cop and the priest and decided that being too official was not the best course of action at the time. "They're working her up now. If you would care to take a seat I'll have the doctor come and talk to you."

"Thank you."

The two went into the dingy waiting room and sat down. No sooner had they found a couple of People Magazines that were less than a year old when an intern wearing a turban came into the waiting room.

"Are you be Captain Slovino and Father Skroudas?" he asked with a barely understandable accent.

"We are," Captain Slovino responded almost saying "We be."

"I be Dr. Hamadi. Miss Gunski go to make phone call and be right back but said you two be coming."

"That was good of her. How is Mrs. Gunski."

Dr. Hamadi remembered that he was supposed to be comforting. "She is having very bad shock, something scare her half to dying, but her vital signs seem good. We're concerned about heart attack, but right now no sign seems there of being one."

Captain Slovino did not know whether to be relieved that Mrs. Gunski was not having a heart attack, or to be terrified of the thought of the type of care she might get.

Father Skroudas was about to say something and Captain Slovino kicked him lightly.

"I think we should head for home," Malacoda said to Paula. They had been sitting with Basil and Mary for the better part of two hours and all were getting tired.

Paula nodded assuming that her night was not going to be over for a while. "If you want to. Do you two need any help cleaning up?"

Basil shook his head. He feared for his poor carpet. "No, we can finish in the morning. I hope that stain remover works."

Mary laughed. "It worked when my sister had her baby over to the house."

"You brought an infant here?" Malacoda asked, his voice a mixture of incredulity and horror.

Mary shook her head. "No, it was at my house. And she left the kid on the rug."

"And nature took its course."

"Doesn't it always?"

Malacoda rose from his chair shaking his head. "And to think, there are still people who object to child abuse."

Mary laughed quietly. "The world is going to hell."

"And Art here wants it to get there faster," Paula put in with a laugh.

"You don't know what hell is yet," Malacoda answered as he helped Paula pull on her clothes.

"I'm sure you'll show me when we get home."

"When we get home I'm going to get some sleep."

Paula really laughed at that and started to put her clothes back on. "Now that would be hell!"

"You think I'm kidding. Just wait."

"Well," Basil put in, "you two can have all the fun you want. I still have a mess of stuff to put away before we get to bed."

Malacoda looked around the room as he put Paula back on her leash and locked her hands behind her. "Mess is the word for it. I hate to say it, Basil, but your neighbors are real slobs."

While Malacoda and Paula were driving home, Captain Slovino was sitting in the emergency room with Kathy Gunski, who was thoroughly upset that her party should end the way it did, and Father Skroudas who was wondering when he could give Mrs. Gunski the last rites and go home to his housekeeper. It was not a happy group and they would have been quite scandalized to hear the laughter coming from Basil's house.

"Even her own daughter won't be much help now," the captain thought as he looked through the ancient National Geographic for the tenth time. "I wonder why she had her attack when she did? That poor writer guy really got a shock."

A nurse came up to the small group, which was by now sitting in a corner avoiding the smell of the derelicts and gunshot victims that were beginning to filter in off the street in the usual evening collection. "We'll be putting her in a room soon so if you want to see her, you can come in, but only two at a time please."

Kathy did not really want to see her mother. She had never really been fond of her since early adolescence, for reasons that were as mysterious as compelling, but the sense of obligation that had dragged back across the country was too strong and she rose from the battered couch, followed by Captain Slovino.

"If you don't mind?" he asked, quietly.

"Not at all, Captain. You'll make this easier."

"Thank you."

As they walked through the short corridor to the emergency room proper, Captain Slovino said to Kathy, "I hate to see your mother like this. She's a real nice lady."

Kathy Gunski tried to control her real feelings about the relative niceness of her mother. "A lot of people think that, Captain. Of course, they never had to live with her."

"You did come home to take care of her," the captain said as they walked along thinking that he might have stepped into something he really did not want to.

"True. Mother-daughter bonding, I guess, or bondage most likely. My brother thinks we should commit her for a while, if we can. I didn't agree but I don't think I can handle a repeat of tonight."

"I don't see how you can, either," agreed the captain. "But commitment is expensive and time consuming and you have to get her to agree to it. I mean there's no way anyone can say she's a danger to anyone except to their hearing."

"That was one hell of a yell, Captain. She needs better help than I can give."

"I don't want to call anyone from the department's social services if I can avoid it. They do more harm than good, like all do-gooders, but maybe we can find some way to help out. For your father's memory if nothing else."

Mrs. Gunski looked worse than Captain Slovino could remember ever seeing her. She was laying barely conscious with an IV tube going to her left arm and several monitor gadgets hooked up to her chest. The monochrome screen overhead showed a

continuous, strong heartbeat and the blood-pressure meter kept showing numbers that made no sense to the captain. He could only hope that the staff understood them and could speak English.

Dr. Hamadi came over to them and spoke quietly, trying to sound reassuring. "She is resting well and will probably be better. Everything be looking good. But her mental state is, how say this, not so good."

"We know that, Doctor," Captain Slovino answered, his hands fisted in his trouser pockets as he wondered what to do next.

"We have good social worker on staff who should be coming in about two hours, if you would like talk with her."

"I think we would like to see Sophie in her room first, Doctor and then, if Kathy here isn't too tired, talk to the social worker."

"Of course, Captain. They tell me room is getting ready soon, but that means hour at least here."

Captain Slovino chuckled for the first time since the disaster. This doctor might talk strange, but he was the first honest man he had met in a hospital in a long time. "Well," he mused, "the department sends a lot of business to this hospital. I hope that counts for something or we may here all night."

Doctor Hamadi laughed softly. "It has be known to happen. I will talk to someone and trying to speed things up."

A nurse with a face that would kill anyone conscious enough to see it and a gold cross around her neck came up and checked the machines by Mrs. Gunski. She did not say a word, merely looked at her charts and then moved on to the next patient, who was hidden behind a drawn curtain making annoying moaning noises in time to the beeping of a machine. The captain listened to the moaning and remembered a case, still unsolved, a few years before, where a patient in this hospital had been yelling almost continuously until one afternoon he was found smothered by his pillow. It was assumed that one of the staff had killed him but the captain had never believed it. If he had been murdered by a doctor or nurse, he would most likely have been given a lethal injection of some sort. The captain always assumed that it was someone who was visiting another patient on the floor, but there was never any real evidence to go on, only his hunch as a cop and there was at this very moment a strange hunch appearing again. He could not quite understand why Mrs. Gunski would have her attack the moment she was confronted by the author. It was most likely a pure coincidence, but the captain had this weird feeling that something very strange was going on.

But at the moment, the strangest things were in the hospital, where Kathy had left the bedside of her mother to allow Father Skroudas to come in. Father Skroudas decided that

it would be nice to pray over the stricken woman, but he also decided to pray aloud, very loud. Captain Slovino said, "Father, there are other people here, remember?"

"And a little prayer might help them as well."

"Perhaps it might help them better if it were a little less noisy. If one of these foreigners slips with scalpel, the department will probably blame me."

Father Skroudas, his conscience pricked, modulated the volume of his invocation to the level he would use at a high school football game when calling on divine favor for the home morons at the expense of the godless foe. It did little for the nerves of Captain Slovino or the poor nurse who came by to see if they needed anything, like a tranquilizer for the priest.

"No, I'm afraid he's tranquilized enough, nurse," Captain Slovino said with obvious sarcasm, immediately regretting it when he saw the look of shock on her face. "The Father has had a very rough night taking care of Mrs. Gunski."

"I see," she answered, not really seeing it at all.

"I hope so. He's been working very hard with the suicide thing this week and all and we thought he'd like to come with us to a party and relax a little. I think he may have relaxed a little too much and then Mrs. Gunski here had her attack."

The nurse was now clearly shocked. "She was at a party? In her mental state?"

Captain Slovino felt indignation rise in him at her attitude. "The party was in honor of her daughter. It could hardly have been held without the mother there, especially as it was in the house across the street. And she wasn't in this state, as you put it, until a couple of hours ago!"

Chastened, the nurse said a soft "Oh. Well, the room is almost ready."

Captain Slovino escorted, almost dragged, Father Skroudas back into the waiting room and sent Kathy back to sit by her mother. With the priest securely seated, Captain Slovino said firmly, "I think I should get you a cab. Mrs. Gunski is going to be fine, so there's no need for you to stay up any longer. I'll see the daughter home." And he thought, "What a way to spend my night off!"

It took a little persuading, but after about ten minutes, Father Skroudas was by the door of the emergency room waiting for the taxi that the Captain had called and within a half-hour he was heading back to the parsonage wondering how he was going explain all this to the housekeeper.

It was another hour before the room was ready for Mrs. Gunski. An orderly wearing a printed badge that proudly proclaimed "Transportation" appeared and the old woman was

bundled into the antique wheelchair, which looked like it was bought sometime during the First World War, and with Kathy Gunski and Captain Slovino following like attendant spirits, wheeled to an elevator. This elevator had been one of the first built into the hospital, just after it was decided that hauling the patients up and down in a dumbwaiter was not a good idea. It had once been wood paneled, but the wood was gone and replaced by some sort of padded plastic. The lighting was from a single bulb, actually hanging from the wire in the center of the ceiling.

The orderly pushed the button for the fourth floor and the doors began to close, decided not to and opened again. The orderly repeated the procedure and this time the doors stayed closed. Then a grinding noise came from the elevator shaft and the car began to move up, very slowly and haltingly, pausing every few seconds with a jerk. The orderly was used to this and paid no attention. Kathy was not and began to sweat in embarrassing places. Captain Slovino was wondering how he was going to explain to his wife that he was trapped in the elevator with a crazy woman, the woman's daughter and an idiot orderly who obviously was too stupid to understand the gravity of the situation.

And as the car moved farther up, gravity became a serious consideration for Captain Slovino.

Finally, after what was probably a number of seconds but which seemed at least ten minutes, the ordeal was over. The elevator stopped, and stayed stopped and the door opened, to reveal that the car was several inches over the floor. Captain Slovino looked skyward and shook his head.

The orderly carefully wheeled Mrs. Gunski out of the car, making sure that she did not drop out of the chair as they went down the small step. Kathy Gunski almost did fall, but caught herself on the door, which insisted on trying to close on Captain Slovino, trapping him for God knew what fate.

The captain pushed the door back with a bit more violence than he thought necessary, but he was having a bad night, and followed the wheelchair to the room. As Kathy and the captain waited outside, the orderly and several nurses put Mrs. Gunski into bed, awakening the other woman in the room, who began cursing loudly. The nurses and the orderly had to abandon Mrs. Gunski for a few minutes while they tied the other woman into the bed before she could get up and strangle someone, call for a doctor to prescribe something and get the tranquilizer injected.

Mrs. Gunski, now more conscious, was certain that she had descended into hell.

The orderly and the nurses returned to Mrs. Gunski, finished tucking her in, checked her IV tube and inserted her prescribed injections and then went out to the hall. One of the nurses, an attractive, short redhead with the type of large breasts that made Captain Slovino wish he was thirty years younger, went up to the pair.

"She'll be sleeping in a few minutes. You can go in for a little bit if you want, but she won't know you're there."

Kathy was about to go in, but the captain put his hand on her arm and stopped her. "You need to get home and get some rest after this. Your mother's not going anywhere for a while."

Under normal circumstances, Kathy Gunski would have wheeled around and told the captain to take himself home, but this night had been too much as it was and she merely nodded.

One ride in the creaking elevator was enough for them and they walked down the four flights of stairs to the main floor and went out the emergency room exit. They rode back to the Gunski home in the captain's car, in virtual silence. Kathy was trying to decide if she should sell the place and put her mother away for good. Meanwhile, the captain was puzzling in his mind the nagging, gnawing problem of the timing of Mrs. Gunski's attack.

As he rode home alone, noticing that the vodka was finally wearing off, he wondered even more. It was an instinctive wondering, a cop's hunch and he was sure that this time his hunch had to be wrong. To even suspect the author of such a thing was madness in the extreme.

XI

Captain Slovino looked absolutely dumbfounded and Father Skroudas, his balance by now somewhat adversely affected by a profusion of wine coolers, tripped over several pieces of furniture as he raced across the room to reach the fallen creature. Kathy Gunski, discussing various matters of pricing with Harold the Gallery Owner, looked over to the corner and the gathering crowd, which had abandoned the bar temporarily, and said in a voice of mild disapproval, "Well, looks like I'm going home soon."

Malacoda, his eyes widened to the point of popping out of their sockets looked down at the woman and shook his head.

"I've had bad reviews before, but this..."

"It's not your fault, Art," Basil was saying. "We were all a little afraid something like this might happen."

"Well, I wish you had warned me," Malacoda said softly in Basil's ear as Kathy Gunski came over after disengaging herself from Harold.

"Mother!" she whispered sharply into the ear of the woman on the floor, "you're making us look like idiots!"

"I don't think she can hear you," Father Skroudas said in Kathy's ear as he nursed a wounded knee with his left hand. "What happened?"

Malacoda looked at the priest and wondered if his roman collar was too tight. "I just got the worst review of my life."

Captain Slovino added, "We don't know. She took one look at Mr. Malacoda here and had the worst attack I've seen her have."

Kathy stood over her mother and shook her head. "Could somebody help me get her into the bathroom. I think she dirtied herself."

Malacoda winced more at the euphemism than at the smell rising from the carpet. Basil was going to have a fit in the morning. "I'm surprised I didn't," Malacoda said softly under his breath. And then thought, "Damn, I should have been an actor. This is great!" Hiding the inner smile was very hard indeed.

Basil was running around the room trying to calm the neighbors, who by now were convinced that poor Mrs. Gunski could greatly benefit from a stay in a nice, quite room with lots of padding and regular jolts of electricity. The opinion was catching. Even Malacoda was wondering what Paula would look like in a straitjacket and quietly resolved to buy her one.

Captain Slovino, Father Skroudas and Mary helped to carry the limp but slowly recovering form of Mrs. Gunski to the bathroom while someone called for a paramedic truck. Malacoda made his way back to Paula and watched the show as people stood around, drinking even faster as the music played and tried to decide if they should leave or if that would be too impolite. Paula wondered aloud what they were doing in the bathroom and Malacoda told her that she did not want to know.

This impasse went on for about ten minutes until the paramedics arrived and were ushered into the bathroom, gurney, radio telephone, telemetry, medications and all. Malacoda, who knew how small Basil's bathroom was, had visions of a very crowded space and was by now trying very hard not to laugh at the image in his mind of people falling into the bathtub and tripping over the wastebasket next to the toilet.

That would have been very bad form.

They were in there for a very long time and Malacoda, who had limited experience in such matters, wondered if the fun was going to be over too soon. Suppose the creature had had a heart attack and died. That would not do at all. Suffering, according to the foolish doctrines that the Mrs. Gunskis of the world believed, was supposed to be good for the soul and Malacoda wanted her soul to get all the good it had coming. It was the Christian thing to do.

After about forty-five minutes, the paramedics wheeled Mrs. Gunski to the waiting truck, followed in turn by Kathy, Father Skroudas and Captain Slovino, the last of whom turned to Malacoda and said, "She'll be all right. They just want to take her in for some tests."

Malacoda managed an insincere look of concern. "That's good. I've never scared anyone to death before." But it was sure fun to do it now!

The captain glanced at the floor and said uncomfortably, "She hasn't been well."

"I know. You told me."

"That's right, I did. Well, I better go along and keep the good father from giving her the last rites. It's become a habit of his."

As the little troop walked out of the house, Basil stood holding the door and shaking his head. Mary was clearly shaken and the rest of the partygoers were sobering up faster than they wanted to.

The gathering did not last long after that. In small groups, the neighbors first, they said their good-byes and went home, some walking, not as steadily as usual and some driving, not as safely as usual. There was a banging noise down the block and Basil assumed that a couple of his guests had had an unexpected reunion and was thankful that the state legislature had banned lawsuits against private individuals over drunks at their houses, one of the few acts of sanity from that most inept of bodies. Finally, all that was left of the crowd were Basil, Mary, Malacoda and Paula. As Basil and Malacoda surveyed the littered room containing more than the normal after-party detritus, Paula and Mary both took the opportunity to shed their unwelcome garments and were soon both merrily naked.

"Well, my old friend," Malacoda said from his usual perch in the old chair. "This may not have been the best party you've ever thrown, but it was certainly the strangest."

Basil, who had pulled off his shirt, leaving Malacoda the only one still fully clothed, was still in shock. "I've never had anyone shit in my living room before."

The author had a hard time concealing his merriment and satisfaction with the evening. "And with luck you never will again, at least not until you're in your nineties and then let us fervently hope you are well supplied with diapers."

"I'm not going to live that long," Basil growled as Mary came over and put her arms around him and gave him a hug which was supposed to be comforting but did not quite work.

"Come on, it wasn't that bad," the model said, soothingly.

Basil shook his head and took a long drink of beer and looked steadily at his old friend. "The scream that woman gave out. She must've imagined you were the devil come to claim her worthless soul."

Malacoda chuckled. "Well, I've been called that. I don't know what got into her and neither do you. But everyone says she's going nuts and tonight she must've just snapped completely."

"I guess so. But that damned priest nearly wrecked my coffee table when he fell on it." The artist was now surveying the room, looking at the tipped furniture as well as the litter.

Malacoda was still enjoying the afterglow of all the fuss. "I never saw a drunken priest try to run through a crowded room before. In fact, I don't think I've ever seen a sober one try. But then, never having been Roman Catholic I don't know that many of them."

Basil patted Mary appreciatively on her rear. "It was pretty funny. And that disgusting daughter of hers. I can't believe I threw a party for her. She spent the entire time she was here hanging on that--what's his name?"

"Harold," Malacoda answered watching Paula try to adjust her harness.

"Yeah. I wonder if he wears women's' underwear," Basil grumbled.

Mary brightened at the thought. "Well, let me see. His name is Harold, but he's not mayor," she said with a giggle.

Arthur chuckled slightly. "And no sun tan."

"Comforting. It would've been fun to see his lingerie show. But I can just imagine what's going on in the hospital."

"So can I."

"Maybe this time they'll put the old bat away forever."

Malacoda put on his shocked expression and leaned forward. "Basil, that is just a bit unkind. Considering that a while ago she was a guest in your house."

"I'm lucky to have a house. And the poor neighbors. I can think what they're saying. Probably blaming me."

"For what? Trying to be nice to an old lady and not realizing how sick she is? Don't be silly. They'll probably all feel real sorry for you and offer to mow your lawn or something."

Basil laughed. "My neighbors don't offer to breathe unless someone is paying them to."

Malacoda got up and paced the room a little. "Unless they're feeding sausage to you, if I remember. Reminds me of my Uncle Willy."

"I didn't know you had an Uncle Willy."

"Probably because I didn't until a second ago, but don't ruin my point with mere facts."

"Ok, go on."

"Anyway, Uncle Willy is so cheap that he put a pay toilet in his house."

"Did he make any money?"

"Not directly, but he saved a lot on toilet paper."

"I don't get it."

"Well, he never had change for the toilet, so he spent a lot of time fertilizing the bush behind his house."

"God no!" Mary shrieked with a laugh.

"His neighbors were very impressed. Said he had the best looking bushes on the block."

"Really?"

"As long as they stayed upwind."

Basil roared and leaned back so far in his chair that he almost fell over. Paula heard the noise and came running into the room to see what was so funny.

"I see," Mary said reprovingly to Paula, "that once again you've missed a good one."

Malacoda was chuckling and managed to stop himself long enough to say, "I was just telling Basil about my cheap Uncle Willy."

Paula cocked her head sideways, opened her eyes all the way and then shook her head.

"I didn't know you had an Uncle Willy."

"I don't."

Mary shook her head in mock disapproval. Turning to Paula she said "You're living with a madman."

Paula turned to show her still red bottom, now showing the signs of bruising, and the locks on her harness. "I know, it shows."

The ride to the hospital was a nightmare for Captain Slovino. He did not know which emotion was stronger, worry about poor Mrs. Gunski, who seemed to have finally lost all

touch with reality, disgust for the daughter, embarrassment at the thought of what the desk sergeant would say when he found out and the less than comforting present of Father Skroudas next to him who was wondering aloud if they had enough evidence to get the bishop to approve an exorcism.

"Father," Captain Slovino growled softly.

"Yes my son."

"Will please do me a favor and shut up about the stupid exorcism."

Father Skroudas did not realize that his words had a minor slur to them as he responded, "If I remember correctly, a few days ago you were the one who brought the subject up in the first place."

At that moment, Captain Slovino fervently wished that Mrs. Gunski was a Methodist. "That was then. Right now I want to get to the hospital without having an accident and then having to explain to the press why I had a drunken priest in the car next to me."

"I'm not drunk."

"Then, Father, with all due respect to your calling, you are doing a very good imitation of it."

The captain maneuvered the car through the evening traffic with care. He could have put on his flashing lights and used the siren, but there had been a terrible wreck a couple of weeks before and the department was a little sensitive to such matters, especially as he was feeling the effects of the vodka. Besides, he would get to the hospital soon enough as it was. It was not likely that Mrs. Gunski would be going anywhere.

After what seemed to him to be the longest ride of his life, they pulled into the emergency room parking lot and stopped. Captain Slovino got out of his car, took a breath mint and then went over to the passenger side to help out the limping Father Skroudas who had not yet recovered either his full sobriety or from the unfortunate encounter with the coffee table. He shoved a breath mint into the priest's mouth and whispered, "Don't say anything and for God's sake don't go giving the last rites to anyone who's not dead yet."

"But you're supposed to do it before they die."

"Only if you're sober. All I need is an angry bishop in my office," Captain Slovino spoke in harsh whisper thinking that maybe he should leave the priest in the car, and then thought better of it and decided they would all be safer if he was dragged along.

They sort of walked/staggered into the emergency room to be confronted by an officious looking old bat behind the desk. Captain Slovino pulled out his badge and made sure that

Father Skroudas' collar was showing, then he said, "Did the ambulance with Sophie Gunski and her daughter arrive yet?"

The receptionist looked at the cop and the priest and decided that being too official was not the best course of action at the time. "They're working her up now. If you would care to take a seat I'll have the doctor come and talk to you."

"Thank you."

The two went into the dingy waiting room and sat down. No sooner had they found a couple of People Magazines that were less than a year old when an intern wearing a turban came into the waiting room.

"Are you be Captain Slovino and Father Skroudas?" he asked with a barely understandable accent.

"We are," Captain Slovino responded almost saying "We be."

"I be Dr. Hamadi. Miss Gunski go to make phone call and be right back but said you two be coming."

"That was good of her. How is Mrs. Gunski."

Dr. Hamadi remembered that he was supposed to be comforting. "She is having very bad shock, something scare her half to dying, but her vital signs seem good. We're concerned about heart attack, but right now no sign seems there of being one."

Captain Slovino did not know whether to be relieved that Mrs. Gunski was not having a heart attack, or to be terrified of the thought of the type of care she might get.

Father Skroudas was about to say something and Captain Slovino kicked him lightly.

"I think we should head for home," Malacoda said to Paula. They had been sitting with Basil and Mary for the better part of two hours and all were getting tired.

Paula nodded assuming that her night was not going to be over for a while. "If you want to. Do you two need any help cleaning up?"

Basil shook his head. He feared for his poor carpet. "No, we can finish in the morning. I hope that stain remover works."

Mary laughed. "It worked when my sister had her baby over to the house."

"You brought an infant here?" Malacoda asked, his voice a mixture of incredulity and horror.

Mary shook her head. "No, it was at my house. And she left the kid on the rug."

"And nature took its course."

"Doesn't it always?"

Malacoda rose from his chair shaking his head. "And to think, there are still people who object to child abuse."

Mary laughed quietly. "The world is going to hell."

"And Art here wants it to get there faster," Paula put in with a laugh.

"You don't know what hell is yet," Malacoda answered as he helped Paula pull on her clothes.

"I'm sure you'll show me when we get home."

"When we get home I'm going to get some sleep."

Paula really laughed at that and started to put her clothes back on. "Now that would be hell!"

"You think I'm kidding. Just wait."

"Well," Basil put in, "you two can have all the fun you want. I still have a mess of stuff to put away before we get to bed."

Malacoda looked around the room as he put Paula back on her leash and locked her hands behind her. "Mess is the word for it. I hate to say it, Basil, but your neighbors are real slobs."

While Malacoda and Paula were driving home, Captain Slovino was sitting in the emergency room with Kathy Gunski, who was thoroughly upset that her party should end the way it did, and Father Skroudas who was wondering when he could give Mrs. Gunski the last rites and go home to his housekeeper. It was not a happy group and they would have been quite scandalized to hear the laughter coming from Basil's house.

"Even her own daughter won't be much help now," the captain thought as he looked through the ancient National Geographic for the tenth time. "I wonder why she had her attack when she did? That poor writer guy really got a shock."

A nurse came up to the small group, which was by now sitting in a corner avoiding the smell of the derelicts and gunshot victims that were beginning to filter in off the street in the usual evening collection. "We'll be putting her in a room soon so if you want to see her, you can come in, but only two at a time please."

Kathy did not really want to see her mother. She had never really been fond of her since early adolescence, for reasons that were as mysterious as compelling, but the sense of obligation that had dragged back across the country was too strong and she rose from the battered couch, followed by Captain Slovino.

"If you don't mind?" he asked, quietly.

"Not at all, Captain. You'll make this easier."

"Thank you."

As they walked through the short corridor to the emergency room proper, Captain Slovino said to Kathy, "I hate to see your mother like this. She's a real nice lady."

Kathy Gunski tried to control her real feelings about the relative niceness of her mother. "A lot of people think that, Captain. Of course, they never had to live with her."

"You did come home to take care of her," the captain said as they walked along thinking that he might have stepped into something he really did not want to.

"True. Mother-daughter bonding, I guess, or bondage most likely. My brother thinks we should commit her for a while, if we can. I didn't agree but I don't think I can handle a repeat of tonight."

"I don't see how you can, either," agreed the captain. "But commitment is expensive and time consuming and you have to get her to agree to it. I mean there's no way anyone can say she's a danger to anyone except to their hearing."

"That was one hell of a yell, Captain. She needs better help than I can give."

"I don't want to call anyone from the department's social services if I can avoid it. They do more harm than good, like all do-gooders, but maybe we can find some way to help out. For your father's memory if nothing else."

Mrs. Gunski looked worse than Captain Slovino could remember ever seeing her. She was laying barely conscious with an IV tube going to her left arm and several monitor gadgets hooked up to her chest. The monochrome screen overhead showed a continuous, strong heartbeat and the blood-pressure meter kept showing numbers that made no sense to the captain. He could only hope that the staff understood them and could speak English.

Dr. Hamadi came over to them and spoke quietly, trying to sound reassuring. "She is resting well and will probably be better. Everything be looking good. But her mental state is, how say this, not so good."

"We know that, Doctor," Captain Slovino answered, his hands fisted in his trouser pockets as he wondered what to do next.

"We have good social worker on staff who should be coming in about two hours, if you would like talk with her."

"I think we would like to see Sophie in her room first, Doctor and then, if Kathy here isn't too tired, talk to the social worker."

"Of course, Captain. They tell me room is getting ready soon, but that means hour at least here."

Captain Slovino chuckled for the first time since the disaster. This doctor might talk strange, but he was the first honest man he had met in a hospital in a long time. "Well," he mused, "the department sends a lot of business to this hospital. I hope that counts for something or we may here all night."

Doctor Hamadi laughed softly. "It has be known to happen. I will talk to someone and trying to speed things up."

A nurse with a face that would kill anyone conscious enough to see it and a gold cross around her neck came up and checked the machines by Mrs. Gunski. She did not say a word, merely looked at her charts and then moved on to the next patient, who was hidden behind a drawn curtain making annoying moaning noises in time to the beeping of a machine. The captain listened to the moaning and remembered a case, still unsolved, a few years before, where a patient in this hospital had been yelling almost continuously until one afternoon he was found smothered by his pillow. It was assumed that one of the staff had killed him but the captain had never believed it. If he had been murdered by a doctor or nurse, he would most likely have been given a lethal injection of some sort. The captain always assumed that it was someone who was visiting another patient on the floor, but there was never any real evidence to go on, only his hunch as a cop and there was at this very moment a strange hunch appearing again. He could not quite understand why Mrs. Gunski would have her attack the moment she was confronted by the author. It was most likely a pure coincidence, but the captain had this weird feeling that something very strange was going on.

But at the moment, the strangest things were in the hospital, where Kathy had left the bedside of her mother to allow Father Skroudias to come in. Father Skroudias decided that it would be nice to pray over the stricken woman, but he also decided to pray aloud, very loud. Captain Slovino said, "Father, there are other people here, remember?"

"And a little prayer might help them as well."

"Perhaps it might help them better if it were a little less noisy. If one of these foreigners slips with scalpel, the department will probably blame me."

Father Skroudas, his conscience pricked, modulated the volume of his invocation to the level he would use at a high school football game when calling on divine favor for the home morons at the expense of the godless foe. It did little for the nerves of Captain Slovino or the poor nurse who came by to see if they needed anything, like a tranquilizer for the priest.

"No, I'm afraid he's tranquilized enough, nurse," Captain Slovino said with obvious sarcasm, immediately regretting it when he saw the look of shock on her face. "The Father has had a very rough night taking care of Mrs. Gunski."

"I see," she answered, not really seeing it at all.

"I hope so. He's been working very hard with the suicide thing this week and all and we thought he'd like to come with us to a party and relax a little. I think he may have relaxed a little too much and then Mrs. Gunski here had her attack."

The nurse was now clearly shocked. "She was at a party? In her mental state?"

Captain Slovino felt indignation rise in him at her attitude. "The party was in honor of her daughter. It could hardly have been held without the mother there, especially as it was in the house across the street. And she wasn't in this state, as you put it, until a couple of hours ago!"

Chastened, the nurse said a soft "Oh. Well, the room is almost ready."

Captain Slovino escorted, almost dragged, Father Skroudas back into the waiting room and sent Kathy back to sit by her mother. With the priest securely seated, Captain Slovino said firmly, "I think I should get you a cab. Mrs. Gunski is going to be fine, so there's no need for you to stay up any longer. I'll see the daughter home." And he thought, "What a way to spend my night off!"

It took a little persuading, but after about ten minutes, Father Skroudas was by the door of the emergency room waiting for the taxi that the Captain had called and within a half-hour he was heading back to the parsonage wondering how he was going explain all this to the housekeeper.

It was another hour before the room was ready for Mrs. Gunski. An orderly wearing a printed badge that proudly proclaimed "Transportation" appeared and the old woman was bundled into the antique wheelchair, which looked like it was bought sometime during the First World War, and with Kathy Gunski and Captain Slovino following like attendant spirits, wheeled to an elevator. This elevator had been one of the first built into the hospital, just after it was decided that hauling the patients up and down in a dumbwaiter was not a good idea. It had once been wood paneled, but the wood was gone and replaced by some sort of padded plastic. The lighting was from a single bulb, actually hanging from the wire in the center of the ceiling.

The orderly pushed the button for the fourth floor and the doors began to close, decided not to and opened again. The orderly repeated the procedure and this time the doors stayed closed. Then a grinding noise came from the elevator shaft and the car began to move up, very slowly and haltingly, pausing every few seconds with a jerk. The orderly was used to this and paid no attention. Kathy was not and began to sweat in embarrassing places. Captain Slovino was wondering how he was going to explain to his wife that he was trapped in the elevator with a crazy woman, the woman's daughter and an idiot orderly who obviously was too stupid to understand the gravity of the situation.

And as the car moved farther up, gravity became a serious consideration for Captain Slovino.

Finally, after what was probably a number of seconds but which seemed at least ten minutes, the ordeal was over. The elevator stopped, and stayed stopped and the door opened, to reveal that the car was several inches over the floor. Captain Slovino looked skyward and shook his head.

The orderly carefully wheeled Mrs. Gunski out of the car, making sure that she did not drop out of the chair as they went down the small step. Kathy Gunski almost did fall, but caught herself on the door, which insisted on trying to close on Captain Slovino, trapping him for God knew what fate.

The captain pushed the door back with a bit more violence than he thought necessary, but he was having a bad night, and followed the wheelchair to the room. As Kathy and the captain waited outside, the orderly and several nurses put Mrs. Gunski into bed, awakening the other woman in the room, who began cursing loudly. The nurses and the orderly had to abandon Mrs. Gunski for a few minutes while they tied the other woman into the bed before she could get up and strangle someone, call for a doctor to prescribe something and get the tranquilizer injected.

Mrs. Gunski, now more conscious, was certain that she had descended into hell.

The orderly and the nurses returned to Mrs. Gunski, finished tucking her in, checked her IV tube and inserted her prescribed injections and then went out to the hall. One of the nurses, an attractive, short redhead with the type of large breasts that made Captain Slovino wish he was thirty years younger, went up to the pair.

"She'll be sleeping in a few minutes. You can go in for a little bit if you want, but she won't know you're there."

Kathy was about to go in, but the captain put his hand on her arm and stopped her. "You need to get home and get some rest after this. Your mother's not going anywhere for a while."

Under normal circumstances, Kathy Gunski would have wheeled around and told the captain to take himself home, but this night had been too much as it was and she merely nodded.

One ride in the creaking elevator was enough for them and they walked down the four flights of stairs to the main floor and went out the emergency room exit. They rode back to the Gunski home in the captain's car, in virtual silence. Kathy was trying to decide if she should sell the place and put her mother away for good. Meanwhile, the captain was puzzling in his mind the nagging, gnawing problem of the timing of Mrs. Gunski's attack.

As he rode home alone, noticing that the vodka was finally wearing off, he wondered even more. It was an instinctive wondering, a cop's hunch and he was sure that this time his hunch had to be wrong. To even suspect the author of such a thing was madness in the extreme.

XII

Malacoda and Paula got into the car, with Paula strapped in as before and blindfolded except that she was barefoot. Malacoda had relented and let her carry the sandals in her now bound hands back to the car. They drove home, laughing at the discomfort of Basil and the way the neighbors must be feeling about the poor, stupid, old cleaning lady down the block. Malacoda was actually tired, and wanted nothing more than to go to bed and have a good night's sleep. Paula, feeling the effects of the strap between her legs wanted to go to bed as well, but sleep was not exactly a priority.

The streets were virtually empty and the ride home took about half the usual time. Malacoda backed the car into the garage and went over to Paula's side to unhook her seat belt. He released her wrists and ankles and helped her out of the car. Then, to her surprise, he said, "Take your clothes off."

"Again?" she thought and stripped off her top and skirt. It was not easy, blindfolded, but she managed without backing into the hot hood of the car or the radiator and in a matter of moments stood up again, naked except for her harness and blindfold.

"Your going to stay out here for a while, honey, while I work on something."

With that, Malacoda led Paula under a hook over a rafter and lifted up her hands to lock them to a short chain that went up to the hook. Then he bent down to strap her ankles together and tie them to a ring set in the concrete floor. He went over to a radio gadget, like the ones used in infants bedrooms so the parents can monitor them and turned it on, so if she needed him she could call him to come back and then went out of the garage and into the house.

Shaking his head at the thought of the nature of his relationship with Paula, he unlocked the door and went down the stairs into the basement. Off to the side of the large, paneled

room, there were several doors that led to the storage and laundry areas. There was also a side room that was kept locked. Paula had never been in it, not even blindfolded and she did not have the key. She knew where the key was, of course, but she never had any desire to use it. In fact, she was never even able to go near the door. Whenever she approached it, she was filled a strange feeling that she had something better to do with her time, either to start cleaning, or do some cooking. There just never seemed to be any time to look in the hidden room and never any reason to do so.

Malacoda opened the door and turned on the ceiling light. It was small room, paneled like the large one, and had originally been part of an L-shaped alcove. It contained a small desk with a lamp and several tables covered with tape recording equipment and a mixer. Spread on the desk were photographs, most prominently that of Mrs. Gunski.

There was a desk chair, the type secretaries and typists use, as opposed to the captain's chair behind his work desk in his office. Malacoda sat in this chair and swiveled it away from the tape decks to face the desk. Malacoda turned on the desk lamp and leaned back. He switched on the portable radio unit he had taken with him from the garage and listened. Paula was being quiet. Sometimes she would talk to herself or even sing, but not tonight. Well, that would make his work easier. The fewer interruptions he had the better. A little work on the old lady and then to bed.

He looked over the photographs on the desk. He would need one of the daughter, just in case, but that could wait. Under the pile, just sticking out, was one of Basil, but he had never used that, never expected to, and wondered why he did not put it away. The pile was growing unmanageable and he picked out the photo of his friend and put it in one of the side drawers of the desk, along with a few other pictures in what he considered to be his inactive file.

As he rummaged through the remaining photos on his desk, he found several of Paula, all naked and most in some form of bondage. He put all of them in the same drawer. He had the feeling that the game was getting interesting and he would want as few distractions from that game as possible.

He set what was left to one side and sat back to consider two pieces of data. First, Mrs. Gunski now knew who he was. She would not be able to forget that. Second, it was a possibility that the cop, Captain Slovino, was ultimately going to have some suspicions, even though he was not likely to know what they were or how to act on them. Therefore there were two necessary courses of action. First, he had to totally incapacitate the old bat. Then he had to prepare his defense against the captain. He did not seem to be a man as stupid as he looked unlike most cops who were never brighter than their buttons, and it was never wise to underestimate the enemy.

So now the game took a new turn. Mrs. Gunski had been fun to torment, but Malacoda had to consider if she was worth the trouble of further work, other than finally eliminating her. His spirit of fun rebelled against the thought that Mrs. Gunski might be liberated too soon from the pain of life. It was infinitely better that she suffer as much as possible, as

after all true joy was only found in the sufferings of others unless one was like Paula. But the possibility that Captain Sloboda, or what ever his name was, might get too close too quickly, was a serious matter, one which had to take a large place in the calculations.

In his original plan, formulated the day of the funeral for her husband, which Basil had gone to but had avoided the lunch because he had a contract for a painting which was due the next week and he was already behind, Malacoda intended to test the Vasiliev technique until the woman was completely insane and then order her to commit suicide. It was a simple plan and simple to carry out.

First, it was essential that the woman be hypnotized. Vasiliev had claimed to be able to hypnotize strangers on a bus without them knowing it, but if that was true, then Vasiliev was an extraordinarily gifted man, with talents that had died with him.

The more promising aspects of his experiments had caused his subjects to be hypnotized and then put back under later by distant influence, otherwise called telepathy. The Soviets, always looking to advance their strategic aims had invested vast sums and time into trying to duplicate the first part, with little success, though the total indecision of the Carter presidency could be put down to something other than natural Southern incompetence, and little into the second part, largely due to the obvious difficulty in putting a Western leader under the influence. In any event, the failed Soviet efforts were such that most Westerners who studied the Vasiliev work were convinced that he had somehow corrupted his experiments with a post-hypnotic suggestion of some sort. Either that or Vasiliev, not wishing to join the Great Siberian Migration, futzed his data to make his work appear more successful to Comrade Stalin than it really was.

Malacoda had visited Basil several times, tape in pocket, without any appreciable opportunity. After all, he could hardly just walk across the street and say, "Hi! I'm Arthur Malacoda and I'd like to put you under for a few minutes."

If it had been possible, he would have aimed an amplifier at her house and done it by long distance, but that would have required Basil's help and Malacoda knew Basil well enough to know his friend would go into Gran Mal at the thought of such a thing. And the fewer people who knew of his hobby, the better. Even Paula, who was rapidly becoming indispensable to him, would never know the full extent of his work. That was essential.

The thought of Paula caused him to look up at the clock. He did not want to leave her in the garage too long.

Returning to his problem, he looked long and hard at the picture of Mrs. Gunski.

"I'm gonna need a picture of the daughter too," he thought with a frown creasing his normally smooth cheeks. "It may be necessary to deal with her as well."

That, however would have to wait. He put the photo of Mrs. Gunski under the light and looked at it. "I wonder what you're doing now?" he asked the picture.

Malacoda knew something of hospitals. He had been in one often enough to visit sick parents and grandparents and had little use for them or their bureaucracy. He viewed the attitudes of the staff as being either syrupy or obnoxious and he was convinced that most of the patients were better off dead. Certainly relatively few of them would ever be worth the time and expense involved in the healing process. He could never watch the news, which wasted so much valuable air time which might be spent in more entertaining ways showing so-called medical miracles without wondering why anyone would even bother. In the view of Arthur Malacoda sick people could either get well or die. It did not matter either way to him.

Health was for fools.

But the matter of Mrs. Gunski definitely related to hospital care. It meant that suicide was not likely to be the most doable means of disposing of his victim. Some other method would have to be found.

He looked up again at the clock. Pig had been out in the garage for an hour and while he had left her standing in the basement all night once, he did not know how cool the evening was going to get and he had no desire to have her ill. Realizing that he was not going to be able to work out his problem while worrying about her, he got up from his desk and left the workroom, locking the door behind him more as a matter of habit than necessity and went out the back door.

His intuition had proven correct. The air, warm when they had arrived, was cooling rapidly in the clear darkness. He opened the garage and went up to Paula, feeling her hands and smiling that they were warm, which meant that the circulation had not been impaired. He had not expected it to be, but it was good to check anyway. He kissed her and she responded. Then he untied her ankles and took her down from the chain to lead her back into the house.

Once inside, he led her, still blindfolded, into the bedroom, removed her harness and had her lay down on the bed. He left her wrists locked in front of her and kissed her again.

"Honey, I've got a little work to do."

Paula smiled. "Ok."

Malacoda put his finger on the center of her forehead and said, "Sleep."

Paula's breathing changed perceptibly. It became shallower and quieter. She was, in fact, sound asleep, the perfect love slave who had no capacity to disobey even that command.

Malacoda kissed her gently on the cheek and went back down to his workroom. A plan began to form itself in his mind. He would have to get into contact with the daughter. That, given the fact of the party, might actually prove to be easier than getting near the mother had been. That had ultimately turned out to be a stroke of luck. The old woman had needed some help with her furniture and Malacoda had merely had to offer to play some music to haul couches by. The music had contained the subliminal message that she would respond to any telepathic message sent by Malacoda. After hearing the tape for a half hour while he and Basil had moved furniture, she was more than ready. All that had remained was to test it.

One of the difficulties in dealing with subliminals, is that no matter how well crafted, no single message will work on everyone. There will always be those who do not respond in any way, more who will partially respond and those who are totally controlled. Usually, Malacoda put a physical response command in so that he could tell that the subject was responding but in this case that was not possible. He would have to test the response by sending a message.

When the tape finished, he and Basil were drinking coffee on the new couch as Mrs. Gunski was telling them about the wonderful funeral her late husband had had. It was not Malacoda's, or Basil's for that matter, favorite subject but it was a rule that widows had to spend a tremendous amount of time for the first five years after the death's of their husbands talking about such things, at least until an offspring decided that enough was enough and told mommy to cut it out, that no one was interested and she was only boring everyone to death. Malacoda had experienced that with his own mother until he came to appreciate the classic Hindu custom of burning the widow and used his hypnotic skills to put her mind to more pleasant things, like spending the small fortune that his father had left her.

Malacoda took a few deep breaths, focused his vision on the center of Mrs. Gunski's forehead and replicated one of Vasiliev's most famous experiments. He commanded her to sleep.

Basil assumed that it was simply the fact that she had been working too hard and was under the emotional strain of losing her husband that caused Mrs. Gunski to drop off for a second, in spite of the caffeine she had consumed.

Malacoda knew better, and knew that he could continue with his experiment.

The rest had been so simple. It was obvious that the woman kept early hours. She could hardly stay up late at night and expect to catch her early bus to work. Nothing was easier for Malacoda than to visit Basil in the evening and watch to see when the lights went out across the street. From then on, at that time, or a little later, the author went down to his workroom and gazed intently at the picture of Mrs. Gunski until the image was fixed in his mind. Then, with all the malice his creative mind could muster, he would transmit his words to the unfortunate creature, telling her that her husband was burning in hell, that he was transmitting from Mars and she was going to join her husband in eternal fire and, a few nights before, when it became obvious that his little error with his machine had caused more people to end this life's pain than he had planned when he left Paula to clean up and put the radio on, hearing the news, telling her that she was the cause of their deaths.

That had been another stroke of good fortune. He had only intended to do in the clod in the pick-up truck, not half the city. But one takes what the gods provide.

He could not transmit long, because it would wear him out and once she was occupied with running to the police station, more out of blind instinct than reason, for hers was a generation that was trained to respect uniforms, he could no longer expect her to respond as well. But that did not matter. The damage of the short transmission was more than sufficient for his purposes.

It was most likely that the woman would be sedated and it would probably be some time before she would be in a room, therefore, Malacoda put her picture aside for a time and pulled out the pictures of Captain Slovino.

"And what are you thinking, you poor cop," Malacoda thought with infinite malice. He really had no objection to police as a species. They were merely a fact of nature, like flies at a picnic, only it was a little harder to swat them. But he had never had any difficulty with them, except many years before there had been one in town who had made a habit of hassling the local adolescents. But he had come to a bad end, walking in front of a train. The autopsy could never show the results of a post-hypnotic suggestion. What was the technique he was playing with in those early days? Malacoda thought for a second and then laughed. Of course, how could he have forgotten that is was called disguised hypnosis. It was based on the simple idea that while you could supposedly not hypnotize someone against his will, you could do it without his knowledge. It was the fundamental basis of all his work, all his play.

Then there was the little matter of Pig. She was his joy in life and Malacoda, who once had not cared if what happened to himself as long as he had fun in the process, now

found that he did care. He could not bear the thought of leaving her. And he had made damned sure that she would never even think of leaving him.

"Hypnotize someone against their will?" Malacoda mused for a second. Actually, he knew it was possible but first the will had to be virtually demolished. The method was commonly known as brainwashing and while Malacoda had no use for clean-mindedness in any of its boring manifestations, he thought it might be fun to try someday, if he could get the right victim and be sure of getting away with it.

But his thoughts came back to the problem of getting rid of old lady Gunski. She was no longer able to kill herself, therefore someone would have to do it for her.

Who would have contact with the victim?

The nurses were the first, and obvious choice. But they present the difficulty of getting one alone long enough to give the preliminary command to. Even his method of disguising that opening under music would be difficult to manage in the hospital setting. If a nurse were caught napping, she would not have the chance to kill a patient, no matter how deserving.

Who else?

There was the daughter. She would probably visit her mother every day and Malacoda knew that there was enough pent up anger in her to murder a hundred Mrs. Gunskis.

And then there were the Bobbsy Twins, Captain Sloboda, or whatever his name was, and the whiskey priest, or wine cooler priest whatever his name might be. That would be truly entertaining.

"Old lunatic murdered by drunken priest!" He could see the headlines now. It would be hilarious. And very difficult to manage. The cop was another matter. He would have to be eliminated eventually anyway and what easier way to do it than have him kill Mrs. Gunski. After that, he could be as suspicious as he wanted, no one would listen.

Still, that would end the game too quickly. It was bad enough that the old bitch, as he thought of her, would have to be killed so soon.

Malacoda chuckled with all the malice of the devil he had been called. He had solved his problem, at least the first stage of it and now he could relax. But first he had one small thing to do.

He sat comfortably in his chair, breathing slowly and regularly. He picked up the photograph of Mrs. Gunski and looked at it, staring at it until he could close his eyes and hold every detail, every small line of her face. He knew, beyond any doubting, that she was in her room, sedated and sleeping. He could feel the heaviness of that drugged slumber and he began to work.

"Mrs. Gunski," he spoke to her in his mind, "you are going to wake up in a few minutes. I will tell you when but before that I must tell you that Satan himself will be in your room standing beside your bed. You will see him quite clearly. He is six feet tall and very dark. He is the Devil himself and he is coming to take you to hell for killing all those people. You will see him immediately upon awakening and you will know who he is and why he is there.

You will awaken in five minutes. When you do, you will see Satan."

Malacoda opened his eyes and laughed softly. He wished he could be in that hospital as he looked at the clock.

The author carefully put the pictures in a pile again, with Mrs. Gunski under that of several neighbors, and turned out the desk lamp. He rose from his chair, pushing it back under the desk and left the room, turning out the ceiling light and locking the door behind him.

In the bedroom, Paula was sleeping, soundly. He gently unlocked her wrists and unlocked the cuffs, placing them on the table. He removed the blindfold and put it next to the cuffs. She stirred quietly, barely waking.

He undressed and lay beside her, putting his arms around her smooth shoulders and drawing her to him. She awakened and put her arms around him in return. He let himself rise and enter her willing body as she pulled him to her. Half asleep, she responded with an instinct that did not have to be trained.

As they made love, all hell broke loose in a hospital in the city.

XIII

The nurse on duty was scanning a chart wondering if her children were getting into any more trouble that night. She had been trying for several months to get transferred to the day shift so that she could stay home in the evenings and keep her two teenage sons from having their friends over and getting drunk. The hospital administration was not exactly sympathetic to her problem and she had been stuck in her present job. Of course, it usually had its advantages. There were, except when someone was dying, no family member running around the floor demanding stuff for the sick relative, no inebriated friends from the bowling league or Legion hall puking in the bathroom and thus there was lot of free time to gossip and compare the size of engagement rings. It was not a bad life, but then there were nights like this.

The blood-chilling scream that came from room 412 sent everyone on the floor, nurses, doctor and orderlies running at the same time to the door, all trying to get in simultaneously. When they sorted themselves out and actually got into the room they saw a terrified, screaming Mrs. Gunski frantically trying to get out of bed, IV tube, monitor wires

and all. As they fought with the furious woman, trying to tie her into the bed and get a tranquilizer into her, she kept screaming that "He's here! He's coming to take me!" and then she lapsed into something in Polish.

The one nurse asked the orderly sitting on Mrs. Gunski's legs if he knew what she was saying.

"Hell, no!" he shouted over the tumult. "Maybe it's something about changing the family lightbulb!"

Everyone had a good laugh at that.

They needed one.

Mrs. Gunski struggled and fought so hard that they had to give up trying to get a needle into her and the nurses concentrated on keeping her from bleeding from the point that used to be where the IV tube went in. It was a hell of a battle.

The bed rolled around the room, bouncing off the wall several times and knocking over the small table that normally was next to it. One nurse tripped over the fallen table and landed on Mrs. Gunski with a loud "oof!", knocking the wind out of both of them. That was the end of the brawl.

The doctor, who had wisely gotten out of the way of the fighting, stood in the door surveying the wreckage and wondered if his brother had not been right after all in trying to get him to join the Peace Corps and travel to the relative peacefulness of Rwanda during massacre season. The room, never really neat at the best of times, was now a mess. The doctor wondered what set the old woman off the way she went. One minute she was sound asleep and the next she was berserk. He walked back to the desk at the nurses' station and picked up her charts.

There was no sign, so far, that anything physical was wrong with her. Her heart rate was a little high and her blood pressure was up some, but considering her behavior, that was normal. Clearly something was affecting her mind.

"Well," he thought with contempt, "that's what psychiatrists are paid for, not internists. Let them worry about her."

"Doctor?" one of the nurses, who had a large new bruise on her left arm, asked, "should we call the daughter?"

He looked up from the chart and shook his head. "No. She might need her sleep after tonight. Does anyone know why this woman was brought in?"

The nurse looked around and seeing that no one else was going to answer, spoke. "Just what it says on the chart. Fainted after an attack and they decided to keep her."

"Well, make a note for whoever's handling this to talk to the daughter about transferring her to a psychiatric ward. We aren't set up for this here."

In the dark room, strapped down in ways that even Malacoda had not thought of, Mrs. Gunski stared into the darkness. She had looked into the face of Hell itself and knew, beyond any shadow of doubt, that it was prepared for her. Her mind, what was left of it kept repeating prayers in Polish, a language she had not spoken since childhood, because she could no longer remember the words in English.

Kathy Gunski crawled into her bed. It never stopped surprising her that her mother kept her room the way she had left it. Maybe the old bitch knew that her daughter would have to come back to it. Of course the idea that her daughter might come back as a successful anything must have been a terrible surprise to the old woman. She had told Kathy often enough that she would never succeed at anything she would try and that art was a waste of her time. Kathy had given up trying to reason with her mother and had simply cut off most communication, only staying briefly after the death of her father before heading back to Los Angeles and her new friends.

"What the fuck did she want me to do?" Kathy thought with vehemence at the memory of their arguments. "Be a cleaning lady with some rag around my head?"

She sat on the edge of her bed and munched on a sprout sandwich. She could just see the look on her mother's face at that. But at least her mother had not tried to keep her fat. She had had just enough brains to avoid doing that to her daughter.

"I just can't understand her and she can't understand me," Kathy thought as she finished the last of her sandwich. "Now this!"

Back in the hospital, the nurses looked in on Mrs. Gunski with some trepidation. The last thing they wanted to was to walk in and see the bed levitate or get spewed with green slime. One of the orderlies suggested that they call in the chaplain, but he was busy with paperwork and did not want to be spewed with green slime either. It was all very difficult.

The cleaning staff worked carefully around the bed, making strange gestures and fingering various religious objects. To the doctors, it was all very funny.

To some of the nurses, it was going to be a royal pain in the rear.

"I still think they should call the daughter," one of the nurses told the orderly who had helped tie the Mrs. Gunski down. "Why should we have to be the only ones to put up with this?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"Because the place across town just lost that big lawsuit. That's why. Remember. They called the family about three in the morning because one patient developed a runny nose and they all piled into the car, half asleep and then had a terrible wreck. They collected ten million. That's why we don't call families unless the patient is likely to be dead in five minutes."

"Well, it doesn't do us a lot of good and maybe the daughter could have calmed her down."

"And maybe not. Remember that family we had a couple of months ago."

"Which one?"

"The old man, he had a big fight with his wife and tried to kill her with the visitor's chair."

"I missed that."

"You were lucky. I had to help pull them apart."

"That must have been fun."

"You think that old bitch is bad? You should have fought with him. For someone who was supposed to be dying, he had the strength of a horny bull."

"If you say so. Me, I can live without the violent ones, or the ones who miss the bedpan."

"I think I'd rather have them violent."

"I'd like to find a different job."

"Wouldn't we all. At least a different hospital."

"Did anyone see who came in with her, besides her daughter?"

"I just talked to one of the interns in the ER. The funny one with the turban, what's his name?"

"Hamadi."

"Anyway, I guess she came with a cop from around here and a priest."

"A priest? What happened, the exorcism fail?"

"How the hell should I know. The priest went home, I guess he was drunk because the cop put him in the cab."

"This is crazier than any of us think."

Kathy Gunski lay in bed, unable to sleep. "I wonder where I can put mom?" she thought.

"I can't take care of her this way and I won't give up my career. I think I'll try to call Bob tomorrow, if I can find out what country he's in now."

Captain Slovino finally pulled into his garage. His wife was already sound asleep and his daughter was actually snoring. "She'll be a surprise for some man, someday," he thought with a chuckle. "At least Terri doesn't snore. Nag yes, but snore, never. She lets me do that."

The captain was tempted to pour himself a small brandy, but decided that he had drunk enough this night. The last thing he needed was to go to the station still hung over. The men would never let him live it down.

He sat in the kitchen for a while, trying to be quiet, reading the paper again. He always wondered what the point was of getting a morning paper so early that the news was old and the scores weren't even in. He missed the old days of afternoon newspapers, but they had gone the way of the trolley. Captain Slovino was not a young man, but he was still just a bit too young to miss that, though he did have some childhood memories of them.

He put the newspaper down in disgust and noticed a supermarket tabloid laying next to it. "What's Terri reading now? More flying saucers or did someone see Elvis in the grocery store?" he thought with mild disgust.

He picked it up with a quiet laugh at the strange things his wife was known to believe and looked at it. It was at least good for a laugh and who knew, maybe celebrity hemorrhoids were caused by martians.

The thought of Martians brought his mind back to Mrs. Gunski. There were too many things that just did not figure.

He still could not understand how Mrs. Gunski could have known about the suicide epidemic before the media reported it. And he knew she rarely watched the news on television anyway, only to see the weather and leaving the sound off during the rest of the broadcast.

How could she have known and why did the voices blame her? His visit to Father Skroudas had been less than fruitful, but the truth was that he had not really expected him to be of much more than moral support and that apparently only when he was sober. Drunk, the priest was worse than useless.

Absentmindedly, the captain paged through the paper until he glanced for a second at something which caught his eye.

"Woman attacked by mad psychic kills children!"

The captain winced at the headline. People did not need any help to do dreadful things. He knew that from thirty years of dealing with them. And the idea the some crazy psychic could make somebody kill their own children was too ridiculous to believe.

As read the article, it was obvious that the courts agreed, for not only had they refused to indict the psychic in question, they were about to award him a huge libel judgment against a local clergyman who had made the charge in the first place.

Still, there was the little matter of Mrs. Gunski's reaction to the author. She had not liked him one little bit.

"You've been awake too long, Eddie boy," the captain thought as he shook his head. The old girl is simply nuts, purely and simply, no ifs, ands or buts about it. And you'll probably have to help her daughter find some way to get her into a nice, quiet room with lots of padding on the walls. Now put down this crazy paper before you end up as superstitious as your wife."

With a sigh, Captain Slovino folded the tabloid and went upstairs. He kept his pajamas in the bathroom, so he could change into them when he got off work without having to wake up his wife, who by now was so used to him coming in that she no longer woke up when he climbed into his twin bed next to her. The captain could remember when they were young and he would come home to find her up and waiting for him, every night, no matter what she had to do the next day. But that was before the birth of their daughter and when she started school, her mother had to be awake to send her off. So the captain came home to a microwave oven and a newspaper and a wife who was sound asleep. Not that he begrudged her that. His hours were strange enough without expecting his family to conform to them, but a pair of warm arms after a bad night would not be all that unwelcome.

Mrs. Gunski was finally sleeping again. The drugs in her system made total wakefulness virtually impossible anyway and she would not dream much under their influence.

For that small blessing the night staff, now changing over to the early morning shift, was extremely grateful. A young nurse, just hired out of school, bounced onto the floor and almost collided with the nurse who had to deal with Mrs. Gunski as she was preparing to go home for the day and see what type of damage her children had done.

"Anything fun happen last night?" the younger one asked, like she always did.

"Not much," replied the elder. "We got a patient who thinks the devil himself came into her room to take her to hell, but otherwise things are pretty much as a they are. And you got a new Gomer in 422 who thinks the bedpan is a bowl of soup. Nothing much."

The young nurse lost none of her enthusiasm. "You must've had some night."

The other nurse sighed and continued to pack up her stuff. "Tell me about it. The woman's in 412 and she's crazy as a june bug. It took five of us sitting on her to get her strapped into bed, that is after the devil tried to take her. Personally, I think he's welcome to her."

"She can't be that bad."

"Wait until you see how we had to strap her in. I've never seen anything like her before."

Captain Slovino rolled over as he wife got up. He was so used to her rising, that he did not wake up anymore. It was hard for anyone not in a relationship like theirs to understand how they could live together for so many years, but the Slovinos managed without any real difficulty. It made life very peculiar for their daughter, but at least she still had both her parents, even if one of them was a cop, and so her friends considered her to be either very lucky or very unusual. Maybe even a combination of the two.

The captain's dreams were not pleasant. Mrs. Gunski had a way of haunting him like no other case he ever had. And on top of that he knew it was not a case! There was no crime being committed, except inside the head of the old woman and there was the little matter of the suicide epidemic. If there was a connection between the cause of that and the strange voices in Mrs. Gunski's brain, then something illegal must be going on. Of course he would never be able to persuade the State's Attorney of that and no court would ever take him seriously. He dreamt of standing before a judge, who was far from sober, with bribe money falling out of the pockets in his robes and testifying to a laughing courtroom against a two-headed someone wearing green antennae.

His wife came back into the room to find him mumbling and groaning so loudly that she woke him up.

"You're having a nightmare," she said, softly as he opened his eyes with some pain from the left-over vodka.

"I'm living a nightmare," he groaned as he looked up. "Wait 'til I tell you what happened to me last night."

"How was the party?"

"Horrible!"

"What happened?"

"I ended up having to take the poor woman to a hospital. She had an attack in front of everyone."

"Oh God!"

"God had nothing to do with it. Now let me get some sleep."

"OK, honey. I just wanted to make sure you were all right."

"I'm all right."

XIV

Malacoda bounced out of bed, gave Paula a messy kiss and began to get dressed. Paula rolled, groaned slightly and said, "You're full of energy today. Didn't that party wear you out completely?"

Malacoda laughed lightly. "Why? We didn't do anything except watch Basil's neighbor go nuts and then you helped him clean up a little."

"Then why am I still tired?"

Malacoda gave her quick kiss and then a small swat on her ass. "Because it's morning and you do mornings even less well than I do."

"Ouch. It's still tender."

"I find that difficult to believe."

She made a face of mock anger. "You didn't have to sit on it."

"That's true."

"So what's up for today?"

"I'm not sure. I think I'll let you clean the house up or watch television or something while I do some writing. Somebody has to pay the bills around here."

Paula sat up in bed and gave Malacoda a large hug. "I've got a better idea."

"What?" he asked trying to pry himself loose.

"Let's go downstairs and make wild, passionate love on the floor."

"We just made wild, passionate love when I got into bed last night."

Paula bounced up and down on the bed and nodded madly. "I know. But it was so much fun I want to do it again."

Malacoda groaned and smiled at the same time. "At my age, we're lucky if we do it more than once a month."

"Your age isn't that old."

"Thank you, but I get sore."

"And I'll bet you don't even like getting made sore, not like little pain-crazed me?"

"I will confess that you are without a doubt the most dedicated masochist I've ever seen. And after five hundred years I've seen a lot of them."

Malacoda finally managed to get dressed and sat in his office with his breakfast apple looking at the screen of his computer. He was writing an historical novel, to take place in the late Roman Empire and in reviewing his latest work gave himself a good laugh because he had just done to the heroine for real what he did to Paula for fun.

"A hell of way to do research," he thought. "Speaking of which, I think I should see how my dear friend Basil has recovered from the festivities and if his neighbors are speaking to him."

He put Basil from his mind for a time and stared at his screen, wondering how long the old computer was going to last before he had to buy a new one. The words did not come easily, for some reason, and Malacoda decided that if he were conned into teaching a creative writing class again, he would remind his students that writer's block was a permanent state which was only overcome by lots of booze or lots of sex, two things which were known to rot the brains of lesser men but were an absolute necessity to writers. Who was it, he tried to remember, told him that Hemingway never spent a sober day in his life? Malacoda did not know if it were true, but no one would let bulls chase him if he were sober.

"Hemingway," he chuckled. Malacoda could never understand how anyone could consider that old bore a great writer. How did the joke go? Malacoda remembered it now. "What did the mayor of Chicago and Ernest Hemingway have in common?" The answer, "Both wore women's underwear."

Malacoda wondered if he should swear off sobriety. Of course that might ruin his other projects and he would not want to do that. And he did not want to play with Pig drunk. Injuries were not fun.

Malacoda had strong rules against injuring people he liked and he liked Paula very much. He wondered what his life would be like if he had not met her. Probably not much

different, but one hell of a lot less fun. Well, there was work to be done and the screen would burn in if he did not start to put words on it.

A couple of hours later, he saved his words and turned off the machine. The project was moving slowly, but moving and his agent would be happy to hear the news that he would get a copy of the book by the end of the month. Malacoda leaned back in the large, captain's chair and stared at the ceiling remembering when he was just out of college writing his first novel on a manual typewriter. And a terrible novel it was, with characters carved out of rock. But what the hell, it was better than working for a living.

That was before he learned how much work writing really was. But he was lucky. He found a formula, actually a couple of them under different names, that sold and he was able to break out of what was called the middle list relatively early. Which fact meant, of course, that he had been spared the necessity of finding a rich wife.

He looked up at the clock. It was almost lunch time. "Pig!" he shouted out the door.

"What?"

"Much as I hate to suggest it two days in a row, get some clothes on. We'll go out for lunch."

"Where?"

"Pepe's."

"OK. Let me put something on."

"That was the idea. And try to look neat."

"Hey! Who's the one who always talks about living down to an image?"

"That's my line!"

"And I just stole it."

Malacoda roared with delight, "Plagiarism is a sin. You'll burn in hell."

Laughter, musical laughter, came from around the corner. "I'll take the chance. Are you hungry?"

"Ravenous. And we want to get there before noon. Otherwise we get caught in the lunch crowd."

"I'll hurry."

They drove a short way to what was probably the strangest restaurant in the world. Part of a franchise, Malacoda could never understand how the owner of the place kept from losing it. It was a madhouse, with one corner of the ceiling covered by a row of spittoons, another one full of toys and large photographs of the owner blown up to poster size. Malacoda loved the place. And Paula, who enjoyed watching the author as he ate looking around the room, liked the food. And she did not have to cook, which did not really matter very much since Malacoda actually did most of the cooking. He was better at it than she was, though she was improving.

"So do you want to drop in on Basil this afternoon?" he asked while putting a lime into his beer.

Paula shook her head and chuckled a little. "After last night? Maybe you should let him recover. Besides, he might not be home."

"He's contracted for a painting and he's behind already, which for Basil is normal. He'll be home."

Paula put some rice on her fork, only to have it fall off before it reached her mouth, which caused both her and Malacoda to laugh. She gave it another try and succeeded. A quick chew and swallow and then, "You should let him work, then. I know how mad you get if someone disturbs you while you're writing."

There was no way that he would let that one get by. "But I'm creating work of lasting cultural import, while Basil, friend though he is, makes coverings for walls."

Paula laughed hard, but quietly and almost dropped her fork. "Basil would paint you if he heard that."

"He has tried. I keep telling him that he should do real art. Big sculpture, you know the kind of stuff that you find outside public buildings that has great symbolic import."

"I always thought they were nothing but piles of rust."

"That's the symbolism, you little idiot. They stand for the decay of civilization."

"They do?"

"Of course, my little love bug. If our civilization were not in a state of decay, no one would spend money on such utter crap."

"What, oh grand guru of culture, would they spend money on?"

"My books, of course."

"You're incorrigible."

"Basil keeps telling me that. He'll be happy to know you agree with him."

"Besides," Malacoda thought to himself, "I need to make a special tape, maybe a couple of them." Then to Paula, "You're right. I should at least give him a day to recover and then bother him tomorrow."

Paula ceremoniously dropped her fork onto her plate and threw her hands in the air in a gesture of divine supplication. "My God! You admitted I could be right about something!"

"Don't let it go to your head. I'll tell you what. I'll stay home and do some writing. You can keep yourself busy this afternoon."

Back home, Paula could not wait to get out of her clothes. Malacoda was thankful that the neighbors were not in the habit of dropping in or they might get a good shock to see his girlfriend plumped naked on the couch, watching her soap opera. Well, it kept her out of trouble and he had work to do.

He went into his office, as was his custom, and sat in the big chair. He swiveled it around to face a table next to the desk and looked at a thick book laying on it. His face twisted into a small grimace and then took on a frown of work. This was going to take some figuring.

The first problem was to get Kathy to kill her mother. If the display the night before was any indication she should have enough conflict floating around in her to make that relatively easily. It was a simple matter of suppressing all emotions but anger to the point that pure, unalloyed hate would take over and the kill command would become activated. The human subconscious was nothing more than a computer and the system was designed to follow an ordinary if...then...goto command structure. Once that fact was realized, the rest would naturally follow.

The cop was another matter. Malacoda was not certain that he would catch on, but the possibility had to be considered, and prepared for. Not nearly as stupid as he looked, Captain Slovino was quite likely to become suspicious at any time. Eliminating him would be more difficult, but not impossible.

So first the daughter.

Malacoda sat at his computer. This had to be done right the first time, because the file could not be saved. It was necessary to operate under the assumption that he could be suspected at any time. But that would leave the problem of his workroom. Well, a tape similar to the one he used on Pig could protect that. He could even make one that would prevent the cop from even suspecting him, but that would spoil the game. No, it was better to let him begin to think the unthinkable. That would make things much more interesting.

The command for Kathy took some time to work out. He had to phrase the thing just right, or it might not work. That was the problem with commercial subliminals. They had to be created in such a general manner that it was impossible for them to be truly effective for at least half the people who bought them. Even his generic suicide subliminal wired to his motorcycle did not affect everyone and everyone has a death wish somewhere.

He wrote down everything he knew about the artist. And everything he thought he knew. The relationship between her and Harold the Gallery Owner was not clear, so he doubted that that could be used. He would have to concentrate on the obvious hostility she felt not only at her mother, but the fact that she was dragged from her work to take care of her. If that hostility could be increased, turned into blind wrath, well, dig the hole and throw the old bat in.

Malacoda knew that all people are motivated by much the same emotions, only in different mixtures. In some, compassion plays such a strong role that they are almost paralyzed by the thought of hurting something else. In some, that is limited, as in his own case to animals and his friends. In some, it is not present at all, or in such minute quantity that it has no effect. Some people have very strong senses of loyalty and this can also be the cause of conflict. Some feel great anger. Some hate themselves for something they did as children but have no memory of, or allow the memory to subconsciously get in the way.

The classical case of that was in the overrated fifties bore Adlai Stevenson, who seemed to never quite get as far as he could because of some insignificant accident as a child when he shot his brother or something. Guilt is a great weakness.

Malacoda had never felt guilty about anything in his life, at least not that he could remember and he had one hell of a good memory. Nor did he feel any real anger. He never expected most people to be anything other than what they were, stupid, brutish and, for the most part, useless. With a few delightful exceptions, of course.

He leaned back in his chair. "OK," he thought. "I know that Kathy Gunski dislikes her mother, for some reason. Probably the usual Electra conflict from dear old Uncle Sigmund. Or maybe it could be something cultural, immigrant versus human. That isn't important. What matters is finding the right key. I need to know more about her. Not much more, but some. Just enough and then I have her."

"The first question is susceptibility. I don't know how much she drank last night, unlike that idiot priest who could not stop drinking and the cop with his vodka. I need to run another test on her. Of course if there were some way to get her under without Basil around..."

If cartoons were reality, a light bulb would have appeared over Malacoda's head. He leaned farther back in his chair and laughed at his own brilliance, a ripping, terrible laugh. He had the bitch!

He reached over and picked up the phone, punched the code on the automatic dialer for Basil and waited as the line rang. After three rings, Basil's voice came from the other end.

"Basil."

"Art. What's up?" the voice on the other end had a quality about it that seemed to anticipate disaster.

"I got an idea for an article. Do you know how I can get in touch with that weird gallery owner you had at the party last night?"

"I think so. What do you want to do to him?" Basil asked with an inner feeling of relief at the thought that his friend was not coming up a new scheme that would get him embarrassed.

"Set fire to his underwear. No, seriously, I think your neighbor's daughter might make an interesting article."

"That's something new for you. I thought you didn't write short stuff any more."

"I don't. But I feel a little guilty about what happened to her mother and I thought a little press might make it up to her."

Basil felt nervous again. "What did you drink last night? You never feel guilty about anything."

"I never had anyone scream and faint in front of me before. I didn't know my writing was that bad."

"It was probably your ugly face."

"My face is very handsome, while yours is, in fact, beyond help."

"OK, I'm too tired for this. I know Harold is in town somewhere. Suppose I find him and get back to you."

"OK, but we better work fast, because I don't know how long either of them'll be in town and I hate to travel."

"I know. How's Paula?"

"Watching the soaps. Mary?"

"Still nursing the hangover. We sort of emptied a few bottles after you left. You know, it's funny. I don't think I've ever been that thirsty."

"Well, I'll let you get back to your painting. How's it coming?"

"No better than yesterday. Is writer's block catching?"

"I hope not."

The author hung up the phone and chuckled thinking it was a good thing that Basil had not seen him exchange cards with King Harold of the Gallery. It was turning into a very good day. He swung the chair around to the computer desk and turned on the word processor. There was lots of work to do.

XV

Captain Slovino pulled himself out of bed and dressed to find his daughter gone to school and his wife out shopping. He had suggested that she might want to take a job, but she said that as long as they did not need the money she was quite content to stay home and let him do all the work. And the fact was the hours he worked were such that he was happy to have her home. If she had normal working hours, he would never see her.

But one advantage to his shift was that he never had to wait for the bathroom. He went in and washed, changed into his clothes and sat down with the newspaper again. It was a daily ritual of his and even on those nights when he came home so late that the paper was already delivered, he never wavered from it. It would seem like an unthinkable blasphemy. Besides, there was always something he might have missed. He shook his head and wondered how he had managed to get himself involved in this mess in the first place. If only Mrs. Gunski's late husband had never brought a single donut into the station, none of this would matter.

But the man had, and the ties of loyalty were such that he could not forget them. He would have to put up with the difficulty until it was resolved one way or the other.

He looked up at the kitchen clock, so old that it had been bought with Green Stamps. It was still running, after all those years. He felt a kinship with the clock. It had been one of the first things he and his wife had bought together and it had seen them through every trouble that had beset their lives, from being passed over for a promotion twice before making captain, to his brief affair with a receptionist downtown. He still remembered his wife crying as he told her about it and he found himself crying with her. It was the only time in his adult life he had shed a tear.

Now he and the clock were marking time together. The clock towards the day when its old motor would give out and it would be replaced by something with batteries, that did not have to be reset every time there was a power failure or a fuse blew and the captain towards the day he would retire, with his watch and his pension and lots of kind words about what a good cop he had been and then hopefully forgotten.

The clock had looked down on good days and bad ones, but the captain had to admit that it had seen more good than bad, and his life could have been a lot worse.

If only Mrs. Gunski would go away. He wished he were a doctor. To them, Mrs. Gunski would be just a name on a bill, a warm body, something to treat but never to be personally involved with in any way. But a cop doesn't think that way. His was a world of loyalties, strong and lasting, sometimes more trouble than they were worth. Like when one of his men went bad and he had to lie for him even though he wanted to kill the bastard himself, but the loyalty was always dominant. He owed it to Mrs. Gunski to care what happened to her. He owed it to her husband who was not around to deliver his nightly bag of donuts anymore. Mrs. Gunski would not go away.

He looked up at the clock and knew that he had enough time to visit her in the hospital before going to work. He went to the refrigerator and pulled something in a box out of the freezer. It was ready-made sandwich, just waiting to be nuked in the microwave. He dutifully, for duty was the driving force in his life, set the machine for the proper time, opened the box and put the sandwich and its plastic plate in the machine, closed the door and pushed the button. And he laughed, for he realized that his lunch was being cooked in a glorified speed trap.

"You've been a cop too long, Eddie boy. You just gave that thing a speeding ticket," he thought with a grim laugh.

He finished his sandwich with a leisurely speed. He was in no hurry and given a normal choice would probably have done all he could to postpone his trip. But he had to do it and he went upstairs to finish putting on his necktie and coat, stick his revolver in his holster, not that he would be likely to use it today, in fact had not used it in almost ten years except for target practice, and added the extraneous merchandise that all men carry with them like his wallet and keys. He was just about to walk out the door when his wife came in with a bag of goodies and he was able to kiss her goodbye before going out to the garage.

"Off to work, dear?" she asked, knowing the answer.

"Yep. Gotta stop at the hospital first."

"Who's sick?"

"Mrs. Gunski. She had an attack at that party she dragged me and Father Skroudias to last night. We helped her daughter get her to the hospital."

"Well, I'm glad you didn't enjoy yourself without me," she joked.

The captain grinned. "I never enjoy myself without you. Met some real odd people, though. Artists and a writer."

"A writer?"

"Yeah, what was his name. You might know it, Malacodo, or Malacoda or something."

His wife beamed. "Arthur Malacoda. He writes historical stuff, you know, the things I like."

"Really?"

"You should have gotten his autograph for me."

"If I see him again, I will." And he gave her a large kiss on the cheek. "But I've got to go. I'll try not to work late."

He went to the garage and noticed that the doors needed painting again. It was a great annoyance because it always seemed to rain on his days off and the work never got done. Last time, he dragooned his wife and daughter into doing it and they had not been pleased about the job.

He sat in his car and shook his head. What would he say? What if they had already transferred the old lady to the psycho ward. Hell, it was where she belonged but he hated to admit that. It was funny, him meeting his wife's favorite author. Well, the world could be smaller than any of them knew.

The hospital had a number of parking lots. The one closest to the main entrance was a pay lot. It cost fifty cents to get the gate to open and let the car in. There was an electric sign outside the gate that said if the lot was full. The light was on, even though there were a number of empty spaces available. As Captain Slovino was about to put his money in, he was approached by a security guard who motioned for him to go to one of the farther lots. The captain was not in a generous mood and he took out his badge, almost shoving it in the face of the officious fool.

The security guard choked a little and pushed a button on the side of the gate, allowing the captain to enter without paying anything.

Once inside the hospital itself, the captain found himself waiting outside an elevator in the main lobby. Once it had been the custom for visitors in hospitals to get passes from the front desk before visiting patients, but that custom had long since disappeared as people simply ignored the formality and the hospitals, not wishing to alienate the people who might file malpractice suits when their loved ones died, as they usually did, made no attempt to enforce the rule. So the captain waited outside the interminably slow elevator with several other people all going to see the sick folks.

It could be extremely depressing.

Then there was the moment of fear that the elevator might be the same one they rode in the night before and he would never get to the fourth floor alive.

Finally, as he felt his beard beginning to grow, the little red arrow turned off and a minute later the door actually opened. The group outside entered silently and pushed buttons, speaking only to ask for a particular floor.

The car was a different one from the previous night, but it looked almost as bad, the only real visual difference being the light fixture set into the ceiling rather than the hanging bulb. But the walls still had the dirty padding and the door did not quite open flush with the floor it was supposed to. The captain had the sneaky suspicion that this was done deliberately so people would trip and become customers themselves.

He chuckled slightly at the thought and remembered one time he and his wife had been suckered into going to a bingo night at the local American Legion hall. It had been one of the most hilarious nights of his life, watching the utter seriousness with which the buzzard food, or senior citizens, played their games, with ten or more cards spread in front of them and beyond them a plethora of good luck charms. It was all too silly for words. Even his wife, whom the captain would admit was hardly the soul of worldly sophistication, could barely keep from laughing. The low, or high point of the evening, depending upon the individual's point of view, came when the assistant of the local undertaker made the rounds, visiting the more decrepit of the oldsters and the captain, whose patience had long since been completely exhausted, asked him in a jovial tone if he was drumming up business.

The people who ran the game were probably as happy to see the Slovino couple leave as they were to get out alive and in one piece.

He walked down the hall to see one of nurses arguing with what must have been one of the relatives of a patient who was sitting in a chair in the hallway. The relative was livid, charging the nurses with putting the person on display. Captain Slovino barely suppressed a laugh at the thought. It was not, after all, totally impossible that a hospital in the never-ending quest for more money might threaten to put certain patients in a sort of zoo, for the edification and entertainment of the public unless the patient, his family or insurance was willing to pay extra for the privilege of not being shown off to the curious public.

On second thought, he was certain that the insurance companies would insist that the patient be exhibited if it would hold down their costs and give them an excuse to raise the premiums.

As he walked past the angry relative and the frustrated nurses, he suddenly realized that he had forgotten Mrs. Gunski's room number. but, being the good cop that he was, and always remembering the need for records, he had written it down the night before in his notebook, next to a list of major crimes that might be worth studying some day.

His wife had looked at his notebook once and told him that he had spent too many years reading Dick Tracy. The captain agreed, noting that it was the old Crimestoppers

Textbook that caused him to want to become a police officer in the first place, an extremely unusual motivation in a profession that seemed to exist for the benefit of those who wished to make life difficult for their fellows. He remembered once he had been confronted by a lawyer who contended that the only difference between the police and the criminals was that the police wore uniforms. The captain had been vocal in defence of his profession, but deep inside he knew that in the vast majority of cases, the lawyer had been right and in his experience the average cop was no better than a common thug.

But Captain Slovino had been lucky. He had usually worked with men and women who were not average.

He looked down at his notebook and then began to look at room numbers. He cursed slightly to himself because he had been so busy watching the argument in the hall that he had passed room 412 almost as soon as he had climbed out of the elevator.

He entered the room and almost collapsed from shock. The Mrs. Gunski who had served him coffee and strudel in her living room was strapped tightly to the bed, unable to move or help herself in any way. She was still heavily sedated and made no motion of recognition as the captain stood by her bedside. He did not say anything. He had no words, only shock and sorrow, and just a little anger at the staff of the hospital who had done this thing. He put his badge in his pocket, so that it showed and stalked out of the room to the nurses station, planted himself firmly in the vision of the poor woman manning the monitors and asked to see whoever was taking care of Mrs. Gunski.

"That would be Doctor Podolski, officer. If you would have a seat in the solarium down the hall, I'll have him come to you."

Captain Slovino was considering bellowing "Now!" but thought better of it and lumbered to the solarium, a small room with big windows that contained old, plastic covered couches and a table with reading material provided by the American Cancer Society, the Red Cross, several local temperance organizations and many religious tracts. He snorted and sat down, crossing his arms over his chest, wondering how many hours it would be before the good doctor would favor him with his august presence.

It was a surprise to the captain when in came the desk nurse and a young physician. He was quite tall, and with the thinness that only the young can get away with. The nurse whispered something into his ear as he came through the solarium door and the captain became immediately suspicious.

The doctor walked over to the captain, who rose out of courtesy and the doctor shook the extended hand.

"I'm Doctor Podolski and you...?"

"Ed Slovino."

They sat down, the doctor facing the cop, towering over him even seated.

"You are a friend or relative?"

"A friend."

"I see. May I ask what you know about Mrs. Gunski's condition?"

The captain wondered where this was leading. After all, he was supposed to find things out, not be interrogated himself. "Only that she collapsed last night at a party for her daughter and I came here today to find her trussed like my daughter's first baby sitter."

Doctor Podolski laughed softly. "I was referring more to her mental state."

Captain Slovino looked down at his shoes and noticed that they still needed shining. "I know she's been having some problems since her husband died. Why?"

The doctor pursed his lips for a second and nodded. "I see. Perhaps I should have told you immediately, but I didn't know how you'd react. I'm a psychiatrist and your friend had a very severe psychotic episode last night."

Captain Slovino gave out a long sigh. "I was afraid of that. Could you tell me what happened?"

Doctor Podolski leaned back in his chair and folded his hands behind his head. He took a couple of deep breaths, as if he did not know quite where to begin and then said, "About an hour or two after she was moved into her room she awakened convinced that the devil was in the room with her coming to take her to hell."

Captain Slovino closed his eyes for a second, wishing that the floor would open up beneath him. "OK, doc. I better tell you all of the story. Sophie's turned into one of our problem cases at the precinct. She comes in every night claiming to hear voices, unfriendly voices. Normally we would have let our bright wonders at social services handle her, but, you see, she's kind of special. We all knew her husband and, well, this is what we wanted to avoid. So when her daughter came back to town to look after her, a neighbor decided to throw a party and Sophie asked me and the local priest, Father Skroudas, to come with her. At the party, she had an attack of some sort and collapsed, so we called the paramedics and they brought her here. Has the daughter been in yet?"

The doctor nodded. "As soon as we opened this morning, but she couldn't tell us anything. She was almost as out of it as her mother."

"I can imagine."

"So, since the daughter's no help and Mrs. Gunski is now utterly unable to communicate, I was hoping you might give me some clue about what's happening to her mind."

"Well, she's a kind of case we get a lot of, the whole department, I mean. My station doesn't get that many. She thinks that she hears voices from Mars broadcasting into her head. And, from what she says, they tell her that her husband is in hell and she should join him, evil things like that. But Doc, you know the weirdest was last week."

"Oh?" Doctor Podolski asked leaning forward.

"Were you on duty the night we had all the suicides?"

The doctor chuckled. "I still haven't recovered my sleep. I was up for almost forty-eight hours. Haven't done that since I was an intern."

"Well, she came into the station like she always does, and you must realize that this was a normal thing every evening. She was driving the desk sergeant loony, so I had her brought into my office and she tells me that this suicide thing is going on and her voice is telling her that she's the cause. But the weird thing about it is that the thing was just starting and no one knew it was going on. I mean the press, which descends on us like mosquitoes at a picnic, hadn't even walked in the door, and didn't until after I sent her home. She had no way of knowing that people were killing themselves all over the city!"

Doctor Podolski looked at Captain Slovino intently enough to make the Captain wonder if he was not going to be hospitalized next. "I see. Paranormal phenomenon is not all that uncommon in these cases," the doctor said calmly, as though nothing unusual was said.

"What?"

"Oh, sorry. Just thinking out loud. We don't like to talk about it very much, our reputation as serious scientific type people and all, but things that most people call 'psychic' are not all that unusual in cases of severe psychosis. Of course the nature of the illness often masks paranormal knowledge and it is very rare that someone says something that can be verified. But I've seen a few things that almost made me bald."

"Really? What?"

"well, again, we don't talk about this very much, but levitation is not that uncommon. Not that it happens every day, but one time I saw someone float off the bed and it took fifteen of us to hold him down, otherwise he would have gone right to the ceiling."

Captain Slovino felt the blood leave his face. "You're kidding."

"I had fourteen witnesses. It was the scariest day of my life. So I'm not all that surprised. Of course, last night it was only a case of great strength and that was simple adrenalin, like the woman lifting the truck off her squashed baby, but it took five staff people to get her strapped into the bed."

Captain Slovino just sat for a few seconds, utterly dumbfounded. "And did you tell the daughter all this?" he asked, quietly.

"No. Just the part about her mother's attack. We'd like to transfer her to psychiatric unit as soon as we know that there's no physical danger."

A deep sigh left the captain. "In other words, you want to commit her."

Doctor Podolski tried to sound soothing, but it did not work very well. "We try not to put it quite that way, Captain, but you're right. We think her present condition is serious enough to warrant it."

Captain Slovino nodded his head. If the situation was as bad as the doctor said, there might be no other choice. The woman was clearly dangerous, at least to herself, if not to anyone she might be deluded into thinking was the Devil.

"Of course," Doctor Podolski continued, "your aid would be invaluable at the hearing. You were there when she had her first attack and you've been present while she was complaining about her delusions."

"If they were delusions?"

"Just what do you mean, Captain?"

"I know this sounds crazy, but would it be possible that someone were really transmitting to her and making her behave the way she is?"

"It's theoretically possible, but I know of no case where it actually has happened. Are you referring to some sort of telepathy?"

The captain shook his head. "I don't know what I'm referring to. It was just a sort of off the wall idea I got from reading one of those silly newspapers they sell in grocery stores. My wife is always bringing them home."

"Well, it probably is just one of those silly ideas. I know it's been tried by every government with two cents to rub together but like I said, there's no conclusive evidence that you can cause this kind of condition without some very serious physical intervention, what we usually call brainwashing."

"I see."

"It's natural, Captain, to wish that someone we're close to is not suffering from something we cannot help. You're a police officer and you naturally think in terms of culprits. But I'm afraid in this case, it is not very likely and even if it were the case, there is little that could be done to stop it without knowing the source and even then, I don't know what legal

remedies there might be. Courts refuse to take charges of witchcraft very seriously, for obvious reasons."

The captain nodded again. "I see what you mean. I can just hear the State's Attorney if I came in with a case like that."

"No, Captain, I fear that your friend has a perfectly natural, if highly unpleasant, ailment, caused by something in her own life or maybe a chemical imbalance in her brain. If that proves to be the case, of course, we can treat it quite easily. But if it's something else, well, the outlook is not that good."

"So when would you transfer her?"

"Not soon. We would want to keep her here for observation and tests first and that will take a couple of weeks at least. It is, of course, not impossible that the change in environment itself might cure her, but we have no way of knowing."

Captain Slovino rubbed his chin for a second and then asked, "Doctor, could you tell me why she had her attack when she saw a particular person last night?"

"Not right now. Who was the person?"

"A guest at the party, a friend of the man giving it, an author, famous I think."

"That's interesting. I can't say. Maybe he reminded her of something long in the past, looked like someone. Right now we just don't have enough to go on, but its interesting. I'll try to pursue it when I can talk to her."

"Then you expect her to be able to talk?"

"Oh, definitely. These spells don't always last long. Sometimes it takes medication or other means to break them, but usually the patient comes out on his own."

"That's the best thing you've said yet."

"Well, don't get your hopes too high."

"I'll take any hope I can get. We don't get a lot of it in my business."

"I understand."

"In the meantime, Doctor, is there any chance of her being released from those straps?"

Doctor Podolski smiled slightly. "It can be very disconcerting to see that, I know, but it is necessary, at least until she becomes lucid or we know what medication to use. It's for everyone's protection, Captain, not just hers."

Back at the station, the sergeant asked the captain how the party went and almost got his head bit off. The sergeant went back to his desk wondering if the captain had been caught fooling around by his wife again and resumed the day's paperwork. He was falling behind again and had gotten into the habit of scratching his bald head over it, which caused him to get some bleeding in the scalp and look like he was suffering from a rare form of leprosy.

Captain Slovino sat quietly at his desk and pondered. His cop sense told him that something was not right in what the doctor had said. Someone may very well have caused this attack. Maybe the old woman had some enemies that nobody knew about. And why had she collapsed at the sight of that writer? That was the key to the affair, but how could he prove it? As things stood now, even if he had the absolute knowledge he would need to do anything, no court would listen to him. He would be made a fool of in the press and all across the country. He would be finished as a cop, for all practical purposes. Besides, his job was administrative now, and he knew he had no business personally going after a case that may not even exist. He was, distasteful as it was, going to have to do nothing but wait until something happened.

XVI

Kathy Gunski sat on an old, plastic chair among various unhappy people in the hospital waiting room trying to recover from the shock of seeing her mother. She had been told it would be unpleasant, and that her mother's mind was in bad shape, but she had never expected what she had seen. It was a horror beyond her comprehension.

She sat for a while and then went to the telephone to call her answering machines, first in Los Angeles, and then the one she had brought for her mother's house. The one in California yielded nothing but the usual stuff, nothing she would have to worry about or even return the call. The answering machine at her mother's had a message from Harold that the writer she had met the night before would like to write an article about her. He thought it would be a good idea, to have a best-selling author give her some publicity.

Kathy sat back down and waited for a while. She had talked to the doctors, both the internist who told her that her mother would have to be kept for a while to make sure there was nothing physically wrong with her, at least from the neck down and the psychiatrist, Doctor Podolski, (the last thing she needed, another dumb polack in her life!) who virtually told her that her mother would have to be put away.

It was a great shock, coming so quickly. She had arrived two days before, to sit up with her mother, who was obviously greatly disturbed but unwilling to tell her daughter what was bothering her, then the disaster of the party, when she got drunk and her mother had her attack, and now this. It was too much to bear and she left the hospital in a cab.

Back at the house, she looked out the window across the street to see that Basil had added another flamingo to his lawn. "He's as crazy as mother," she thought as she went back to sit on the living room couch. It amazed her how neat the house was. With her mother being sick, she would have expected it to be a ruin, but her mother, no matter what her problems, had never forgotten her trade and the house was spotless. She remembered as a child joking with her father about her mother's radar-directed feather duster. Hell, she even washed down the street in front of the house with a garden hose.

She picked up the phone and punched a number, got the hotel and called Harold's room. The phone rang a couple of times and then he answered with a gruff, "you got me out bed" "Yes?"

"Hal, it's Kathy."

A little less gruff, but still groggy, "Oh, Hi. How's your mother?"

"Nothing new. I talked to the doctors and she seems to have a bad case of busted brain. Anyway, about this article..."

"Yeah. The writer, what's his name, had Basil Johnson get in touch with me through the gallery and asked if you'd like to be interviewed."

Kathy looked at the message book next to the phone for a second, more out of nervousness than expecting to find anything interesting and then asked, "Why didn't he do it himself?"

"I dunno. Writers are weird that way. Like to work through other people when they can. You know, like that one really strange guy who's never even been photographed."

"Yeah, who the hell is that?"

"I can't remember his name. But anyway, I know this is kind of a rough time for you, but it might be a real good idea, especially if we want a national, even international, market for your goods."

"He gets that kind of following?"

"His books make money. And that means people read him. I did a little checking and his last one was on the paperback list for ten weeks."

She choked for a second. "My god! He must be rich. You wouldn't know it from the car he drives."

"He's a writer. He probably puts all his money into ink stock."

"So you think I should call this guy?"

"Yeah, give Basil a call and tell him to set it up. I think doing something different'll make things a little easier for you."

"You're probably right. I'll get in touch with Basil right now and call you later."

"Do that. I plan on finishing up this business tomorrow and then I'm on to New York for a few days. I'll stop by on the way back."

"Bye."

"Bye."

She hung up the phone and went to look back out the window. She remembered that she hadn't painted a street scene since college and Basil's house looked strange enough to be worth the trouble. It was way out of her usual style, but something different might be fun and it would keep her mind occupied. But first there was the little matter of the interview.

She went back to the phone and picked it up, held it for a second and then realized that she did not know the number and Harold had not told it to her. Well, it was a neighbor, maybe mother had it written down somewhere.

Knowing her mother, it would be in her book, she never was so disorganized to leave a phone number anywhere else, so that meant the only remaining problem was to find it. That took some rummaging through drawers for while her mother was a highly organized person, to the point of obsessiveness, nobody else could figure out her system. After about ten minutes of serious digging through every drawer in the living room and kitchen, Kathy found the little, red book, with its yellowed pages filled with phone numbers of people who had died. But under Basil (her mother always filed under first names) she found the number for the artist across the street. She knew that it would be the right number because it was the one her mother had used to answer the invitation. Kathy thought, for a second, about calling the cop and the priest, but decided to hold that off for later and went back to the phone to call Basil.

This time the phone rang about five times before Basil's voice came out the receiver, even gruffer than that of Harold's. "Hello," he growled.

"Mr. Johnson?" she asked softly, not really in the mood for a fight.

The voice softened. "Yes,"

"It's Kathy Gunski. Harold asked me to call you."

"Yes. I was going to call you myself but I managed to mislay your mother's phone number in the mess from last night and I didn't want to take the time digging it out. I'm a little behind schedule with a project I promised someone."

Kathy could imagine the mess he was talking about. "Anyway, Harold said you wanted to know if I'd do an interview for a friend of yours."

"Oh the thing Art has in mind. I've been so busy working I almost forgot. And how's your mother doing?"

"Not real good. They think its something, well, mental."

"I see. Art has lousy timing about these things, always has. So if you think it's not a good idea to do the interview with your mother being sick and all..."

"No, no. I want to do the interview. It might help take my mind off this."

"I understand. So can I give him your number and let him call you?"

"I'd really appreciate it."

"Fine. I'll call him now, before I get paint all over my hands again."

Malacoda was sitting in front of his computer watching the words play over the screen as his fingers typed. It was a strange, detached feeling he had when he wrote with this machine, like he was only a spectator watching his mind work while he just sat aside, like there were two people at work in his body at the same time, one doing the thinking, always far ahead, and one doing the physical work of typing.

The ringing of the phone disturbed his creative reverie. He picked up the phone on his desk and said "Hello?"

The extremely familiar voice on the other end asked, "Art?"

"Hi, Basil. What's up?"

"I got Kathy's number for you. She wants to do the article. But Art, I think her mother's in real bad shape, so try not to do anything dreadful."

"Me? Dreadful?"

"Yeah, like have her walk in and see Paula tied up or something. I don't think she's up to it."

Malacoda remembered the last time he had done that to someone. "Basil, my friend, you have only one weakness. You worry too much about other people. You should be like me and let them worry about you."

"Very funny. She really is going through hell, right now, and I know you don't see that real well."

The author tried not to laugh. Miss Gunski did not know what hell was yet. "You're right, of course. Maybe I'll do the interview at her place if it'd make her more comfortable, or yours."

"If she wants to, just tell me when."

"Good, now do you have the number so I can get this started?"

"It was here a second ago. Ah, 555-6870."

"Thanks. I call her now."

He looked again at the number and punched it rapidly. The phone rang about three times before the voice came from the other end. "Hello?"

"Miss Gunski?"

"Yes."

"I'm Arthur Malacoda. We met at Basil's party last night and I suggested to him that I might want to do an interview. I'll tell you the truth (he lied), I didn't think you'd call him so soon. How's your mother?"

"She could be better. What do you want to interview me about?"

"Your life, your work. No one around here has seen it, except for Basil, I guess and I'm curious. Besides, I'm thinking it might expand my readership a little."

Kathy laughed. "That makes sense. Harold said it might sell paintings for me."

Malacoda enthused, "Then we both can profit. I know you're in the midst of a bit of roughness right now, so when would it be convenient for you?"

"It doesn't matter, really. Looks like mother is gonna be in the hospital for a long time. How about tomorrow afternoon?"

"Excellent! Where and what time?"

"My place, about one?"

"Let's see, that's the house across the street from Basil?"

"The one with the dreadful Virgin in the Bathtub, Our Lady of Cleanliness I used to call her."

"Bathtub? Oh that round thing standing behind it."

"Oh, didn't you know?"

"Know what?"

"How they make those stupid things."

"No. I'm not Catholic."

"They take an old bathtub and cut it in half. I learned that in a sculpture class years ago."

"Anyway, I think I know the house, now."

"It's kind of hard to miss."

"Not as hard as Basil's."

"True. I think he put out a new flamingo this morning."

"I worry about that man sometimes."

The conversation ended, Malacoda went upstairs to find Paula napping on the living room couch. He looked at her and tried to ignore the lust that always took control of his thoughts when he saw her that way. But it meant that he would not have to worry about her for a while.

He went through the house, turning the ringers off on the phones and turning down the volume on the answering machine. If Paula woke up, she would assume he did not want to be disturbed by the phones ringing, and it would make her waking less likely.

As well conditioned as she was to avoid the locked room, there was no point in taking chances. No conditioning was foolproof unless it went with the deep-rooted desires present in the person himself. Blocking curiosity went against that nature and thus had to be reinforced by precautions.

He went back downstairs and unlocked the door. Turning on the lights, he went to his recording machines and pulled out a tape of some generic, soft music. It was not the music that mattered, it was what was underneath it.

It was the much the same as the tape he had used on Paula in the park except that one command was different.

The next afternoon, Malacoda finished his lunch and went into the living room to find Paula watching her favorite soap. Chuckling at the thought of how their own lives would play on television, Malacoda drank deep at the sight of his girlfriend. He walked up to her, grabbed her head in his hands and kissed her.

"Got to be going, hon," he said as soon as he finished.

"Don't be too long. I'm going to make your favorite soup."

"Pig, much as I hate to deny your cooking skills, it's eighty degrees outside. I'm not even going to take the motorcycle."

"It doesn't feel that warm."

"That's because you don't have any clothes on."

She laughed softly and looked down at her body. "Is that why?"

"It might make a difference. Me, I'd roast in my leathers."

"You don't have to wear all that stuff just to ride a bike."

Malacoda laughed. "Have you ever seen someone who fell off a bike wearing shorts?"

"No."

"You don't want to," he said with finality.

He checked himself one more time before he pulled the car out of the garage. He had his tape and his notebook. It would be easier to use a small recorder instead of writing the notes, but he did not want anything to appear in the background of a tape. If all went well, it would be logical to expect at least some official curiosity, probably in the form of the captain, whatever his name was.

He drove down the expressway to his exit, which was a lot faster than the route he would have taken on the motorcycle. He turned down the third street to the left and parked in front of the house with the Lady in the Bathtub, a phrase he would never get out of his mind again. He looked across the street at Basil's front yard and waved at his friend's window, noticing that there was a new flamingo, this one purple, by the front step. "Sometimes I really do worry about him," Malacoda thought.

He walked up the short flight of steps to the front door and rang the doorbell. He was about ten minutes early, due to the light traffic, but the door opened and Kathy Gunski stood there, in a loose, sleeveless top and spandex tights. She was barefoot.

Malacoda looked at her with a friendly smile that hid the malice of his thought "She knows how to play this interview game. Well, I have a game of my own."

"Mr. Malacoda?" she asked in a voice that was too painfully trying to sound seductive.

"Art," he said looking in the door.

"Please, come in."

"Thank you. Of course, I didn't expect to have the door slammed in my face," he joked as he followed her in.

"I don't think I've ever done that," she answered.

"Not even to a Jehovah's Witness?"

"No, I just tell them I'm a witch, or a Satanist and they run away."

"My uncle does that. But then my uncle does a lot of strange things."

"Is he an artist?"

"No, he's a cheapskate."

"Then he's rich."

"Very. And very proud of his millionaire author nephew."

"It pays that well?"

"Sometimes. But my uncle is one of those unfortunates who only sees things in the color of the dollar sign. A sort of working-class Werner Erhardt thing. You know, value is determined by price. It makes good economics, but creates havoc with the creative process."

Kathy smiled and Malacoda noticed her makeup was a bit thick around the mouth. "Your uncle would like Harold."

"For some reason, I guessed that."

"So what do you want to know about me?"

"Oh, everything. How you decided to paint, as opposed to sculpt, what your work is trying to say, if anything, last time you were tied to a tree, that sort of thing."

"I don't think I've been tied to a tree since I was ten."

"That was supposed to be funny. And I brought some music."

"Music?"

"A little trick of mine. I found years ago that if I was doing an interview, it went faster and smoother with a little soft music in the background. Puts me at ease because I hate asking questions."

"Sounds like a good idea. As long as it isn't Frank Sinatra."

"I think it's George Solti," he said as he went over to a boom box sitting in the middle of the floor. It was obviously not the property of the old lady and he shuddered at what horrible noises it usually produced.

"How do you work this thing?" he asked as he fiddled with the buttons, trying to find the one that opened the cassette door.

Kathy walked over to her machine and pushed the right one, and then let Malacoda insert the tape, he hoped the right way.

As the music began, he and Kathy sat at opposite sides of the room while he worked to get his notebook out and his pen in hand, all the while watching her.

"So, mister writer, where do you want to start?"

"I'm curious about how you decided to become an artist in the first place. It's a good starting point and we can find the right angle from there."

She curled up in her chair, pulling her left leg under her and letting the right one sort of dangle over the edge in what was all too obviously an attempt to appear sexy. Malacoda grinned at the sight thinking, "Sorry, dear, I'm taken and besides, I'm too old at this game to fall for that."

She began. "I always wanted to be an artist. I think I was born with paint instead of blood."

"I've heard the same line from writers, except we use ink, or used to before word processors."

Kathy laughed. There was something juvenile and annoying about her laugh, especially when Malacoda realized that she had to be at least in her late forties. Either that or her mother had been prematurely aged before his little project began. He looked more closely at her face and began to find the small wrinkles and smile lines that were not immediately apparent. This woman worked very hard to hide her age and not without some success,

but the signs were there, a certain drooping of the eyelid and the shape of the fingers.
"She might even be older than I am, even though she's lying about her age."

"Anyway, when I was little, my parents practically lived at the church and made my brother and me get up at five in the morning every day to go to early mass."

He felt his eyebrows rise at the horror of it. "And that made you an artist?"

"Hardly, but I got bored real easy and to keep me quiet, father would give me paper and crayons so I could draw and not bother anyone."

"Makes sense."

"It worked. And I got the drawing bug. Of course as I got older, I became an artist. But that was when I was in college."

"You weren't an artist before then?" That was a stupid line and Malacoda knew it, but he needed more information about her youth.

"Not really. I mean I had more interesting things to think of. There was this cute guy that used to come around my girlfriends' place a lot."

"What about school?"

"The school was all girls back then."

"I see."

"Anyway, he and I got together and I wasn't really interested in much else for a while, until I went to college."

"In other words, except for the religion, you had a rather normal childhood."

"Well, there were some things I hated."

"Most children have a few."

"Well, my parents were really into this ethnic stuff. They had fled over here after the communists took Poland, and then they had me and my brother. But they never got over the old country."

"They were married in Poland?"

"I hope so. They never did it here."

They both laughed. "Good, my dear, keep talking about your parents and give me the key," Malacoda thought under his grin.

"Anyway, they were really into this immigrant thing and every time there was a parade, like you know, the one they have in May."

"I hear about it, but what's the holiday?"

"Polish Constitution Day, it's called. It's supposed to celebrate the constitution Poland had after World War I or some other war, I lose track, but of course everyone forgets that Poland became a dictatorship in the 1920's and the constitution became irrelevant."

"You kept an interest in Poland anyway."

"Just enough to argue with my parents about. But back to the parade. Every year they would make me wear these silly outfits, like I was some sort of East European peasant. You have to remember, my own grandparents never wore anything that ugly! And I had to march around dressed like that. Can I tell you something if you promise not to publish it?"

"Of course," Malacoda answered, putting down the note pad.

"When they first started the Solidarity thing, I was secretly hoping the Russians would go in and kill everyone. I was so sick of Poland!"

"Can I tell you a secret?"

Kathy smiled, "What?"

"Everyone around this area who isn't Polish was hoping the same thing. We all got sick to death of Poland." That was the truth. Lech Walesa was the only man who ever made Art Malacoda root for the communists. Many was the night he indulged in the pleasant fantasy of the activist hanging by his moustache in front of a Russian firing squad.

Kathy closed her eyes for a second and then opened them slowly. Malacoda smiled. The tape was taking effect.

She shook her head, like she was sleepy and did not want to be. "And you never had to live with it. Anyway, I went off to college and majored in art, more because I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life and I wanted to be relevant. That was back in the sixties, and you know everyone wanted to be 'relevant'."

Malacoda made a strange grin, remembering his own youth. "Not everyone. I wanted nothing less than to be relevant to anything but myself and I think we're about the same age."

"Really, I thought you were much younger."

"I sleep in preservatives," Malacoda answered wincing at his own line.

"I only eat them. But really, that was how I got into art in a big way. I was going to make art for the 'People', whoever in hell they were supposed to be."

"Anyone other than your parents, who were not, by definition, people."

"Of course not. They were white!"

Now they were getting somewhere. Hostility. "But so were, and are, you. It must have been confusing."

Kathy closed her eyes again, this time a little longer, and then reopened them. "It was that weird guilt thing. You must have felt it, being about the same age."

Malacoda grinned, remembering the fun he used to have at the expense of his classmates. "Never, sorry. Guilt is one weakness I've never had and back then when anyone tried to use it on me, I made a point of going in the opposite direction. It was very effective."

"It must have made you very unpopular."

"That's the funny part. It had a somewhat different effect. I tended to attract people. I even had a girlfriend who was in SDS."

"You're kidding."

"Nope. It was very strange. I think she was afraid of me, but I introduced her to bondage and that kept her mind occupied, such as it was. Of course, now that I'm a best-selling author, people crawl all over me who wouldn't have given me the time of day back then."

"It comes with the territory."

"I've been told that."

Kathy closed her eyes and nodded her head for a few seconds and then recovered.

"I don't know why I'm so sleepy these days."

"It must be from all that's going on. That must be quite a strain."

She shook her head, trying to fight off the desire to sleep. "Must be. But where was I?"

"You were studying art, trying to make art for some undefined 'People'."

"That's right. So I hung around with the art student crowd, got screwed by two professors, literally as well as figuratively, and finished college, looking for the Revolution, which of course never came."

Malacoda grinned nastily. "I must confess that I knew it never would."

"You were lucky. I hung around with some radical types for a while and got raped by two members of a street gang we had come to our building on a more or less regular basis. We had this stupid idea that gang members were working for their community instead of trying to destroy it."

"At this point I'm almost tempted to wonder if you considered a brain transplant," the writer said with a sigh.

Kathy Gunski looked up at the ceiling. "I should have. I mean, how dumb could we be? It wasn't the drugs, they didn't do that much damage. We just believed everything we were told."

"Just like your parents in church?"

"How did you guess that?"

"It seemed a logical conclusion," Malacoda answered over his pen thinking "Good, very good, identify your rape with your parents, then with your mother, very good."

"So I got out of that, about the time everyone else did."

"I would appreciate it if you would stop saying 'everyone'."

"Everyone I knew."

"That's better. I hate being a part of a generalization that doesn't apply to me."

"But then I didn't know what to do. I mean, I'm not a feminist. I don't want to spend my life painting giant vulvas. It's stupid. I went through that radical shit. I wanted something that had nothing to do with politics, so I took up painting. Except now it seems politics has caught up with me."

"Annoying."

"It is. It's like my damned mother every night telling me about the terrible communists. Well, Hell, they aren't here, are they?"

"And not there, not anymore. I imagine your parents thought that you were trying to bring them here."

"Of course. And we were. We didn't know any better."

The rising anger was a sign to the author. He watched as Kathy started to doze slightly again and then said quickly, "Sleep!"

It all went so smoothly, so quickly, that even the supremely self-confident Arthur Malacoda was stunned by it all. He guided Kathy deeper into her trance and took her back to every unpleasant event he could think of, from the rape by the gang members to the time her brother tied her up and her mother did not come to her rescue. Every little pain of childhood, every embarrassment, every real and imagined evil that lay in her subconscious he looked for, much as a therapist would, but instead of removing the pain, allowing her the chance to live with it, made the pain grow, to become a festering sore on her soul which would have to burst and burst soon.

He created the bomb and then, with a look at the clock on the wall, set it to ticking.

XVII

Kathy Gunski said goodbye to the author, who picked up his pad and walked out to his car promising to have a copy of the interview ready for her in about a week so they could go over it one more time in case she wanted to add anything or take out something she might find too distressing. She was amazed at how quickly the time had passed, nor really remembering most of what was said, but Malacoda had pages of notes from her and she must have told him her whole life.

The thing with her mother must have really been affecting her mind. That was something she was certain of. She was going to have to set up her equipment and start painting, and soon, or this whole situation was likely to unhinge her for good.

She made a quick glance at the clock and decided that she had time for a bite to eat before going to the hospital. It would take forever to get a cab anyway, there being some peculiar religious objection on the part of cab companies to sending cars to addresses other than downtown or the airport.

She called for the cab, found a dispatcher who spoke passable English, which was more than the driver would, and sat down to a salami sandwich. The writer was a strange man, not really very handsome and, to her annoyance, did not seem at all interested in her as a woman. It was an article of faith with her to at least attempt to seduce every man she met. Of course, she had seen his girlfriend and she knew that compared to Paula she must not seem very attractive, but it still galled. She noticed that her temper was shorter than usual these days, more sign of strain.

She took her time dressing to go to the hospital since she did not want to wear her interview outfit, ultimately having the most trouble deciding which pair of shoes to wear.

She ultimately decided on a pair of black high heels, which would at least go with the rest of her dark ensemble.

Then she waited for the cab. And waited. And waited. She had to call again after an hour and finally, an hour and a half after her first call, a dirty yellow car with faded letters appeared in front of the house. The driver had dreadlocks and smelled of some liquor, and she could barely get past his Caribbean accent, but he took off down the street in the general direction of the hospital.

It was rush hour by now and the cab driver made it very clear to her how lucky she was to even be in his cab because normally all the cabs were taken for several hours to come. While he told her this, for the seventh time, he just barely missed an emptying school bus and made at least one extremely senior citizen dive for dear life.

Kathy felt an anger rise in her that she had not felt in years. It was becoming very hard to control her temper. She had to work to overcome the urge to smash the driver over his head with her purse.

Finally, divine mercy took over and the cab reached the hospital, miraculously in one piece. Kathy got out and almost threw the money at the driver and walked through the front door of the waiting room. The door was designed to open automatically, but it had not worked right in years and she pushed it open with a violence that anyone who knew her would swear was alien to her basic nature.

She hoped Doctor Podolski would not be there. She had talked to him that morning and he had told her that they had removed the heart monitor from her mother but she was still heavily restrained and sedated. It seemed that the night before she had had another attack. Malacoda had been pleased to hear that the monitors were removed. It would make things easier for his scheme to work, but he had only told Kathy that he hoped it was sign her mother was improving.

She felt her left heel catch on the carpet and mutter a quick, "Oh fuck it!" as she jerked her leg free. People saw her coming and moved unobtrusively out of the way as she stormed towards the elevators.

The elevators were undoubtedly serviced by the same company that dispatched the taxis, because she waited for several angry, seething, blood-pressure raising minutes before the light went out, the bell rang and the doors slid open. She entered the car and punched the fourth floor button hard and then stood back to glare furiously at the other people who had the nerve to share the same elevator with her.

The door opened and she got out, almost tripping as the elevator did not quite match itself with the floor. She walked unspeaking past a startled nurse and went into the room.

The drape between the two women was drawn as usual. This was at the demand of the family of the other patient, who was disturbed enough without having to see Mrs. Gunski

tied to her bed continuously. There had been a bit of a scene about that the day before when the nurse on duty wanted to keep it open, but the other woman's family, aided by their doctor and several calls to the lawyers, prevailed. The drape was to be kept drawn.

That meant that Katherine Mary Gunski did not have to do it herself.

She sat down on the small chair next to her mother and looked around the room. The recliner, which normally the patient would use, was piled with bedding and pillows. There was a small closet, partly open, which held nothing at the moment except a pair of slippers which her mother might never need to use but which Kathy had brought the day before as a sign of daughterly affection.

The television was on, more as a pacifier than as entertainment. Kathy remembered once hearing a story on television by a former mental patient about how her treatments often consisted of being tied up by an orderly and left in front of the television. It was considered good therapy and less troublesome than exorcism.

Kathy said hello to her mother, sat down and watched the television. Her mother did not respond, still under the heavy drugs and Kathy did not really expect her to. She sat in the room, feeling very unpleasant, like there was something boiling inside her soul that she could not put her mind at rest.

Her mind exploded.

As she sat in the chair staring now at her mother, the television forgotten, she felt all of the anguish of her life rise up in her. Every single resentment, every painful episode became her mother's doing, even when her mother had nothing at all to do with it.

Kathy sat in the chair, paralyzed, at a crisis which she could not resolve, for in that bed was no longer someone she cared for, who had raised her and nurtured her, but a beast, a monster from the Pit, responsible for everything that she hated about her life, every feeling of guilt and despair, of anger and hate was the result of something this creature had done to her.

Kathy Gunski hated her mother more than she had ever hated anyone who had ever lived. The hate consumed her, held her motionless as she looked around the room, and then got up and looked out in the hall for a second, not long, just enough time to make certain that no one was coming towards the room. She checked the clock to make certain that it was not feeding time, not that she knew when supper was coming nor did she really care. It was a reflex action, all her actions now were reflexes. She no longer thought of anything but her hatred and her anger.

Her breathing became heavy and her eyes fixed wide and unblinking. She sat down and turned up the volume on the television and cast around the room. There was a tube going into her mother's nose from the oxygen outlet on the wall. She removed it and waited.

Nothing happened. Her mother, not really needing the oxygen but merely getting it so the hospital could pad her bill, kept breathing with perfect normality.

Kathy got up from the chair and began to pace, back and forth around her mother's side of the room. She took her shoes off so that the woman in the next room would not hear her walking. It was so important to be quiet, to attract no attention. Nothing must interfere, nothing whatever, with what she had to do.

She went back to look at her mother. Nothing! No change whatever had appeared in the face of the woman, the monster who had brought her so much agony in her life, an agony that not even her art could remove.

Kathy Gunski could wait no longer. Someone might come any minute and the old woman still did not die. She looked around, maybe there was something she could use. She thought for a second of picking up the small chair and smashing her mother's skull with it, but that would be too messy, too obvious. The small voice that controlled her kept saying "The pillows. Use the pillows."

Kathy Gunski walked over to the recliner and threw the bedding on the floor. She reached down and picked up a pillow, filled with some unyielding synthetic and walked over to her mother, glaring down at the old face.

"I've wanted to do this for years, you old bitch!," she said, very softly so that she could not be heard over the television. "I've waited and waited and ran away, but I always knew that someday I'd be able to give you what you deserve. I hate you. I hope you can hear me say this because I want you to burn in your stupid Catholic hell knowing that the last words you heard were that I hate you."

And with that, Kathy Gunski pushed the pillow down over the face of her helpless mother and held it.

The old woman could not struggle, could not fight back, not the way she was tied down. Her arms and legs twitched wildly, fighting their bonds as she struggled for air, but to no avail. Kathy held the pillow in place for a good five minutes after her mother was dead, then threw the pillow on the floor with the rest of the bedding, picked up her shoes and walked out of the room.

A nurse saw her as she walked towards the stairway door. "Is everything all right, ma'am?" she asked as Kathy stopped for just a second.

Kathy nodded quickly and then resumed her walk. The nurse went back to the nurse's station and stood before the other nurse who looked up and shook her head.

"That's Mrs. Gunski's daughter. I think she isn't taking it too well."

The first nurse nodded and sat down in front of the desk to continue eating her donut. "I see. Must be real hard on her."

"Well, at least she isn't having fits like the family from 432. I thought we'd have to call up security yesterday."

"It'd be a lot easier if they only let people in for one hour a day. We could hide until they left."

"It could have been a lot easier on you if Mrs. Gunski's daughter had come an hour earlier while you were trying to get the food down her mother's throat."

"I think we're gonna have to get a feeding tube in her. I don't know if I can go through that again."

"Maybe you should talk to Harrod and Podolski about it."

"I should. At least you can talk to Harrod. Podolski I'm not sure of. I always think he'd like to see me in a straight-jacket."

"He probably thinks you'd look sexy."

"Very funny. You know what the shrinks in this place are like. They're all kinky as hell."

The first nurse grinned and looked at a short nurse coming out of the bathroom. "Maybe we should set Marla up with him. She likes that sort of thing."

Kathy Gunski walked quickly down the four flights of stairs. She could not wait for the elevator. At the bottom, she walked out of the stairwell into the waiting room and went to the cab stand. In spite of the time it took for her to get a taxi to come and get her when she went to the hospital, there were always some by the door during the day to take people home. It was a lucrative trade for them, almost as good as the airport and the grateful families tended to tip heavily, sometimes too heavily if someone had just died and they were not up to counting their money.

She got into a waiting cab and told the address to the driver, who was a young man who actually spoke English without an accent. But he drove as madly as any foreigner and burned rubber as he squealed out of the parking lot, just missing the tail of an incoming ambulance.

"This is a bad place to come out of," he said cheerful at his near miss. "Saw a car totalled here the other day."

"That's interesting," Kathy said, looking blankly forward, not really hearing a word the driver said.

The driver decided that his passenger was not in a mood for conversation, which was not all that unusual among the recently bereaved, and drove her home in relative silence, only speaking to curse other drivers, wave and shout a greeting at a fellow cabbie and let out an occasional "Yeehaw!" at a close escape, including one with another bus.

Traffic was not as heavy as when she had come and the drive was much shorter. Apparently this driver actually knew where he was going, even though it was doubtful he could read the street signs. He certainly was color blind because he went through four red lights.

But the ride ultimately ended at the Gunski front door and Kathy got out, paid the driver, gave him a good tip and went in the house. She locked the door behind her and sat on the couch, staring out the window, unmoving for a long time, merely staring.

She had no memory of the trip to the hospital. She looked down at herself and wondered when she had changed clothes. She knew that she had just come in the door and had ridden in a cab, but that was all.

She was still carrying her shoes, holding them in her right hand, wondering why she was not wearing them. She looked up at the clock. She should have been visiting her mother today, at least by now, but she did not know where she had spent the last couple of hours. All she remembered was opening the door for the writer, what was his name? And from that point nothing.

In the hospital, the nurse went into the room and saw the pile of laundry on the floor. "That fucking housekeeper!" she muttered under her breath as she picked it up. She glanced over at Mrs. Gunski and noticed the eyes staring open, but did not investigate any closer. The old woman always looked that way. Besides, she had rounds to do and no time for crazy people. Visiting hours weren't over yet.

Kathy Gunski sat on the couch, a virtual robot. She felt that she had been through something, but did not know what. If she were back home, she would have called her analyst, but she was not back home and she did not know what to do. Then the second bomb went off.

The thought of the word "analyst" was the key. As soon as it entered her mind, in her house, the emotional nightmare began again, this time with guilt and despair as its hallmarks. Life no longer had any meaning, not that it ever had. It had been nothing but one great round of pain and failure, with nothing to show for it.

Kathy Gunski knew that she had no more reason to continue to encumber the earth with her worthless body. She was a piece of garbage, a worthless piece of human waste who had no justification for human existence.

It was time to get out!

All of the disasters of her life, every time she had been hurt, every time she had failed, every time she had even felt inadequate to the tasks at hand, no matter how simple, came before her memory and accused her, tried and sentenced her.

To death!

At the hospital, the nurse came in to try, and that was the operative word, to try to check Mrs. Gunski over, take her temperature and see if the old creature needed anything.

All she needed was a body bag.

The woman was dead, and had been dead for some time. She wondered why the other nurse, who had just gone off duty had not discovered it, and then realized that she had been upset about the laundry on the floor and had probably not noticed anything wrong. After all, in the condition the poor patient had been in it probably was not obvious.

She went out of the room and reported the death. The doctor came and made out the certificate while an incompetent at the switchboard called Kathy to let her know that her mother had taken an undefined "turn for the worse." which is usually hospital jargon for a bad fit of sneezing, but could actually, on very rare occasions, mean something serious, though never after two in the morning.

Well, she tried to call Kathy but got the wrong number three times because the danish she was eating kept getting in the way of the phone buttons.

When she got the right number, she got the answering machine, so she left the message and went back to her danish and racing form.

Kathy Gunski got up from the couch in a haze of internal agony. She knew that her father had kept a gun in the house, a revolver, but she had no idea where it was. She did not know that her mother had gotten rid of it the day after her husband had died.

She went into her parent's bedroom, where she had not gone since she was child, and began to rifle through the drawers, but there was no sign of the ancient weapon. Her agitation increased and she began to through things around the room, smashing antique knick-knacks and leaving whole drawers full of clothing on the floor. She even pulled the mattress off the bed-spring in her search. She found nothing.

She had to die!

Kathy went into the kitchen and tore open more drawers and found a length of extension cord. She looked up at the light fixture and decided it was not strong enough so she went down the stairs into the basement.

The basement had been finished into a recreation room, but there was the laundry area with its ceiling uncovered. She looked up at the rafters and measured. They would do.

She pulled a chair in from the recreation room and tied one end of the cord tightly around her neck. Then she climbed up on the chair, thought for a second and then got down. She did not want anything to interfere with what she had to do. She found a length of clothesline, longer than she would have liked, but it would have to do.

Kathy climbed back up on the chair and knotted the electric wire tightly around the rafter so that she almost had to stand on tiptoe. Then she knotted the clothesline around her waist leaving a slipknot in the back. She put her wrists through that and pulled, tying them in place.

She kicked the chair out from under her and began to strangle.

Her hands pulled at their bindings, to no result. Her legs kicked, trying to find something to stand on. Her tongue stuck out and her eyes pulled at their sockets.

The spasmodic jerking of her legs continued, but slowed, gradually as her bowels emptied.

She hung, motionless except for the swinging of her body. Upstairs, the phone rang as the hospital finally dialed the right number.

XVIII

Captain Edward Slovino looked out from his small window towards the parking lot of the station. He was not having a good day.

After leaving home to go to work, he stopped at the hospital to see if Mrs. Gunski was improving. She was not. In fact, she chose the moment of his arrival to have what was probably her worst attack yet. If she had not been so heavily restrained, she might very well have killed the poor nurse who was trying to remove the monitor electrodes from her.

Father Skroudas had also been in the room and had fled in terror, wondering if he should call the bishop and try to arrange for an exorcism after all. But Father Skroudas had not been in very good shape since the party at Basil's anyway. His hangovers had a bad habit of lasting for several days.

It was getting dark now, and the captain was glad that night would soon cover his precinct. Now that poor Mrs. Gunski was locked away and likely to stay that way, he could look forward to the usual round of criminals, mostly petty, but occasionally major, who would come through the station. It was nothing that he need concern himself with. He could settle back and read the latest articles in the law enforcement journals that kept coming in his mail and do what little paperwork was demanded of him.

And there was the normal entertainment provided by his officers, particularly Vitello, who had taken to eating veal and calling himself a cannibal for doing so. He had even gone out and bought a book, which was something that he never did. It was a not quite thick novel by his recent acquaintance, Arthur Malacoda entitled *The Armature*. He had begun reading it as soon as he got into his office and realized that his reading muscles were just a bit out of practice, at least as far as fiction was concerned. The novel had the quality of strangeness that lay just below the surface of the plot, something that indicated more about the author than most would notice, but Captain Slovino was used to reading people's words.

The hero was a gangster, a hit man, and he was drawn in such a sympathetic light that Captain Slovino could not but think that Malacoda was letting his wish-fulfillment fantasies run in the book. Well, most people wished that they could be hit men at one time or another. Usually when driving home in bad traffic or his own favorite, dinner with the in-laws.

Still, having met the man, and seeing the reaction Mrs. Gunski had to him, Captain Slovino wondered what he was really like. He seemed a pleasant enough man. But then the captain's own experience held that writers were a strange breed, to say nothing of potentially troublesome.

About eight, the Sergeant asked Captain Slovino to pick up his phone. It was the hospital with bad news. Mrs. Gunski had been found dead, they could not get hold of the daughter and the doctor who made out the death certificate was convinced the woman had been murdered.

"Murdered?" the captain asked, his voice rising a half-octave as he nearly let the phone fall out of his hand.

"That's what he says, officer. He just said it looked like she'd been smothered."

"I'll be right down."

Under other circumstances, charging into the hospital parking lot with the light flashing on his car and using his siren to scare the other drivers, at least those who did not have their stereos so high they could not hear him, would have been a joyous experience for the captain. But this was no pleasure. That Mrs. Gunski was dead was surprise enough, though given her mental state it was probably a mercy, but that she had been murdered? That was almost impossible to believe.

He walked into the room and took one look at the body and the face and then realized what the doctor had been talking about. There were obvious contortions in the muscles, set by rigor mortis, and the nose was bent. Not broken, but clearly pushed in by something and there was the characteristic puffiness around the face. He wondered why the body had not been removed.

"We just discovered her. We tried calling the daughter but just got the answering machine and then Dr. McMichael told us to call the police."

"I see. I'll have her taken to the morgue and let the Medical Examiner look at her, but I think McMichael is right. Now about the daughter?"

"We got the machine."

"You just said that. Was she in today?"

"Yes, she was in about an hour ago."

"Who saw her?"

"Jane, Rosalie, that's all I know about."

"Jane is a nurse?"

"Both are. Jane complained that the housekeeper dumped the used bedding on the floor."

"What did the housekeeper say?"

"Nothing, her shift ended hours ago."

"The bedding's gone?"

"Probably in the laundry."

"If it hasn't been washed, don't let them. Especially the pillows!"

"I don't know. It all jumbles together in the basket."

"Call down and find out. Let's see. I was in about three, and Father Skroudias was in with me. Did she have any other visitors?"

"Only the daughter."

"Where's Dr. McMichael?"

"In the bathroom."

"Not surprised. When he comes out, I want to talk to him. Where's a phone I can use?"

"You can use the one by the bed."

"Thanks."

The captain punched the number for his station and got the desk sergeant. "Sam, Slovino here. Can you go into my office and look in my file for the number of Basil Johnson? It should be on my desk. Yeah. And I think the daughter did it."

There was a wait for a few seconds and then the captain began to write the number in his book. "Thanks. No, he just lives across the street from the Gunskis and maybe he might be able to find her daughter."

Basil was finishing supper when the phone rang. "Yes. Captain, what can I do for you?"

"I was wondering if you've seen Kathy Gunski today?"

"Yes, she just got home about an hour ago. But let me look out the window. No, I don't see any lights. Why?"

"Mrs. Gunski's dead. We think she was murdered."

Basil actually dropped the phone and then picked it up. "Sorry. Did you say murdered?" his voice rising two full octaves.

"I'm afraid so. It looks like she was smothered with a pillow."

"That's horrible. Who'd kill that nice old lady?"

"That's what I'm paid to find out. But the hospital tried to call the daughter and only got an answering machine."

"Well, unless she snuck out the back, she hasn't left the house since she got home."

"I see. I think I better go there and look for myself. Normally I'd have some of the officers do it, but Mrs. Gunski..."

"You don't have to explain to me. I'll run over and ring her doorbell."

"No, don't do that. But tell me, was anyone visiting Kathy today?"

"Actually the only visitor she had was my friend, Art Malacoda. You remember, you met him at the party."

The captain felt a strange feeling in his head. "Yeah. I just started reading one of his books. Turns out he's my wife's favorite author. Wants me to get his autograph."

"He'll be flattered. He may even give your wife a whole set of his books. He interviewed Kathy for an article this afternoon. Was there for quite a while and then came over for a beer before going home to his girlfriend."

"Maybe I should talk to him about Kathy?"

"He'd be happy to help. I'll give him a call. Maybe he can meet you here?"

"No, just give me his number and I can go see him. It's something they drum into us at cop school."

"OK. I can give it to you now."

"Can you?"

"Sure. Got a pen?"

"Right here."

"Fine. It's 847 555-4545."

"Thanks. I'll call after we find out what happened to Kathy."

"I've got a number where you might be able to reach her gallery owner, you know, the guy who shows her stuff."

"Good."

"Let me see, where is that written? Ah, here, its 619 555-8971."

"Good. If we can't find her at home, I'll try that. Thanks for your help."

"Anytime."

Captain Slovino hung up the phone. "Malacoda saw her this afternoon and then she killed her mother? That's too big a coincidence. But it could still be just that, and most likely is," thought the captain, who had visions of making a mistake involving a best-selling author and spending his last days on the force sweeping the cells out. Well, he would just have to talk to the man and find out what he was like.

But first there was the little matter of bringing in Kathy Gunski on suspicion of murder.

Accompanied by a couple of rookies whose names he could not remember unless he looked at their tags, Captain Slovino drove to the Gunski house to find it as dark as the far side of the moon. Basil was sitting on his front porch across the street, nesting peacefully among the flamingos.

The two cars stopped and all emerged, the captain going across the street to speak to the artist.

"Have you been out here long?" he asked as he watched his rookies try the doorbell.

"Not really. But nobody's moving over there. That's for sure."

"I think you're right. I better see what my men are up to."

The captain walked quickly across the street and looked at his two officers.

"No answer, Captain," one of them, a tall blond with no body fat said shaking his head.
"What do we do now?"

Captain Slovino laughed softly. "Take a look around the back and shine a flashlight in some of the windows. Maybe we can see her, get her attention."

"Why not just break the door down?"

"Because we don't have a warrant and it would look bad on the television news. And I don't particularly care to have a mob of crazy artists picketing the station tomorrow. That would look even worse on the news and the commissioner would be very unhappy with all of us. Now look around the back."

"Right, Captain," responded the second officer, also tall and skinny but with dark hair and a very pointed nose.

Slovino looked in the front windows and saw, with some difficulty because his flashlight needed new batteries, the mess on the floor. His heart pounding, he went around to what other windows he could see into and tried to make out the shadowy images that looked as if there had been a real struggle going on.

It was the shambles of the kitchen that made up his mind. Commissioner be damned, he was getting in that house!

"Get back in front you two!" he shouted with less elegance and more excitement than he would have liked.

The two officers came running back to the front of the house to find Slovino across the street talking to Basil.

"Are you certain no one's been in this house since Kathy got home?"

"Well, it's possible. I haven't been watching it continuously. But no cars have pulled up and that I would've heard."

"Probably. Well, we'll have to break in. It looks like there's been a brawl or something in there."

"Oh my God!"

"You better get back in your house. There might still be someone in there."

Basil retreated through his front door and took up a position looking out his window, turning his lights out so he could see clearly across the street.

Going back across the street, Slovino confronted his officers with "Did you see anything?"

The blond answered with a frown, "No, but from what we could see, there was a hell of a fight in there."

"What about the back door?"

"Locked."

"Any sign of Miss Gunski?"

"None."

Looking at his first officer's name tag, "Joblowski, call in what we've got." then turning to the other man, "Miller, back me up. We're gonna have to break in."

"I thought you said..."

"Miss Gunski might be in serious trouble. There might be someone in there with her, so be careful and don't let anyone get behind me."

Going to the trunk of the patrol car, Joblowski withdrew a sledge hammer left in there from the last drug raid, the rather embarrassing one at the firehouse. At the captain's urging, he knocked in the lock of the front door and the captain kicked it open, holding his revolver out in front of him, hoping that he would not have to use it, or that Joblowski would not shoot Kathy Gunski.

Shouting "Police!" as loudly as their lungs would let them, they rushed inside to be greeted by a total silence that made Slovino pause and Joblowski actually step backwards for a second. Calling to Kathy, they moved around the house turning on lights as they found them, noticing that the place had been ransacked.

From the kitchen, they went down the stairs and found the person they were looking for.

The corpse of Kathy Gunski hung virtually motionless from the beam. "Call the meat wagon," Slovino ordered, his throat suddenly dry.

Joblowski took the microphone off his shirt and called it in. "Murder," he asked?

"No," Captain Slovino said, his voice very soft. "Suicide."

"But her hands..."

"She did that to herself. Look at that knot."

"And the mess?"

"She killed her mother and came home guilt and grief stricken. She tore up the house looking for something to kill herself with, the family gun most likely, not knowing that her mother had turned it in months ago and not finding that used the cord to hang herself with. I think you'll find that nothing's missing."

"Case closed?"

"Probably. There's a couple of people we want to talk to, but I think this is it."

Watching from his house, Basil saw the meat wagon come and take the body out and the two officers drive away in their patrol car. He went and turned on the lights as Captain Slovino came up his front steps and rang the doorbell.

"Come in, Captain. Have a seat."

"Thanks. I see you were watching us."

"Could hardly resist. After all, they were my neighbors. I imagine every house along the block was doing the same thing."

Captain Slovino gave a short laugh as he sat on the couch. "I know they were. I just need a few things from you, if you don't mind."

"Not at all. Would you like something to drink?"

"Not on duty."

"Of course. But some pop, or ice tea?"

"Thanks. I could use the ice tea."

Basil went into the kitchen for a second and then came out with two glasses and a pitcher. He filled them and took a sip, handing the second glass to the Captain, who took out his notebook.

"I want to be sure we have the times right. You said she got home about when?"

"About seven. She came in a Yellow Cab."

"I don't suppose you remember the number on the side of the cab."

"No, of course not. What happened?"

"Suicide, we think. But I want to be sure. How did she look going into the house?"

"Bad. She was very pale and walked funny, like she was being chased, but no one was near her."

"Well, that pretty well clinches it for me, but can I ask you a couple of other things?"

"Naturally."

"Now do you know if the gallery owner is still in town?"

"Not really. I think he was going to New York from here but he might still be at the hotel. Captain?"

"Yes?"

"Who's gonna take care of the funerals?"

Captain Slovino thought for a second. Someone would have to call the brother in Europe.
"I don't know. Do you know how to get ahold of the son?"

"Not really. But there should be an address in the house."

"Of course. It's been a bad day. And I'd like to talk to your writer friend. Maybe he can tell us something about Kathy."

"I'm sure he'll be happy to help you."

"He seems like the type. Helpful, I mean."

"He's got a weird sense of humor, I should warn you, but he can't resist flattery. Tell him he's your wife's favorite author and he'll give you anything you want. Except maybe his girlfriend."

"My wife would be very mad if I accepted that."

Basil took a long draught from his glass and looked up at the ceiling. "You know Captain," he said. "It's hard to believe that two nights ago we were all in this room celebrating."

"I know. One time we gave a retirement party for one of our officers and he got killed in a car wreck on the way home. It's something you never quite learn to handle."

XIX

"Of course, Captain." Malacoda said into the phone. "I'll have my notes photocopied for you by the time you get here. "

He gave the address to Captain Slovino and then said goodbye. With a sinister chuckle, the author went into his office and took the notes of his interview out of the folder he had put them in and ran them through the desk copier. "Let's see, if he leaves now, it will take him a good half-hour to get here. So I better take care of Pig first.

"Pig!" he shouted out the door.

"What is it?" she shouted back.

"Can you come in here for a second."

Paula came in, wearing her bikini bottom, on noiseless bare feet. "What's up? Who was on the phone?" she asked pulling the damp towel from her head.

"We're going to have a visitor. A Captain Edward Slovino of the city police department. Remember him?"

Her eyes popped as wide as they could without the eyeballs coming loose. "Wasn't he the cop at Basil's party?"

Malacoda nodded and shuffled papers. "He was. He's finishing up the investigation of a murder-suicide."

She almost dropped the towel. "My God! Who? Why call you?"

"Remember the old lady who went nuts at the party?"

"How could I hope to forget?"

"It seems her daughter, the artist the party was for, killed her mother in her hospital bed and then hanged herself."

Paula's eyes widened. "That's awful!"

"Well, it certainly made the headlines, so I'm told. We didn't watch the news last night and I haven't looked at the paper yet."

"I was a little tied up, if I remember."

"Yes, my love. And since I don't think the good officer is quite up to our little games, I think it would be nice if you would put the top to that thing on."

"Yeah, right. Is anything laying around we have to hide?"

"Not that I know of, but look around the living room, just to be sure. I'll bring him in here after he arrives and that way you can make yourself scarce."

"Ok."

The doorbell rang about an hour later and Malacoda had Paula answer it. Captain Slovino took a look at her and decided that he had chosen the wrong profession, if that was a benefit of being a writer.

"Come in, Captain. Art's expecting you," she said and her voice had the musical tones that had once been his wife's, years before.

"Thank you," he said, entering and looking around for anything incriminating through force of habit, if nothing else. There was nothing, of course.

"Paula, would you show the captain to the office?" the author's voice came from around the corner.

"Sure." And then to Captain Slovino, "It's just around that corner in the hall. He's been writing all day."

"Thanks," said the captain and he went into the short hall and turned into the open door. Malacoda rose from his desk chair and greeted him, shaking his hand and offering him a seat.

"If you'll excuse me for just a second?" the author said and slipped out the door. He walked quietly up to Paula and touched the center of her forehead. She went to the couch and sat down, her eyes closed. She would hear and remember nothing until the suggestion was lifted by Malacoda knocking four times on his office desk.

"Sorry about that, Captain. A little thing I had to tell Paula about supper."

"I understand."

"And," thought Malacoda, "that gave you time to look around my office to see if there was anything suspicious."

"So tell me, Captain, what happened. Basil called me last night and kind of told me, as best he could, but he was understandably upset. He liked the old woman."

"I know."

Malacoda continued. "Let me put on this tape. I get nervous without music."

"Certainly," responded Captain Slovino. "And get yourself relaxed enough to tell me if you really did do something to those poor devils," he thought.

"Did you know that Basil even dragooned me into helping her carry in a couch?"

"I think I heard the story somewhere."

"He's a good soul, but I sometimes wish he would confine his generosity to his own muscles."

Captain Slovino laughed. He had the feeling that his suspicions were unfounded.

The author returned to his chair and sat down, looking at the captain with unblinking eyes. "Basil also tells me that your wife is a fan of mine."

The captain tried to look embarrassed. "She reads everything you write."

"I hope not. Some of the things that aren't published are terrible. And some of things that are are worse."

"That's a good one."

"I hope so. I get paid for making them up. But seriously, it must be difficult having a family to take care of in your line of work, never knowing if some burglar is gonna use you for target practice."

The captain settled back in his chair, feeling a very relaxed glow settling over himself. "Well, I don't have to worry about that too much these days, but when I first started, it was a real problem. Wearing a uniform can be dangerous, but being a detective, let me tell you, that is really something."

Malacoda looked very interested and leaned forward over his desk. "You don't mind if I ask you about this, I hope. I was thinking of writing a police story and you're the first officer I've ever really talked to."

Flattery works both ways, especially when the flattered one is feeling as good and calm as the captain was beginning to feel. "Not at all."

"Good. So tell me, how does your family handle the danger, or did handle it?"

Captain Slovino looked up at the ceiling, cupping his hands behind his head. "Well, it took her a bit of doing. The first thing she wanted to do after we were married was make me quit the force."

"Really?" Malacoda tried very hard to sound interested in the subject.

"We had some good fights about it. She's never really accepted it, especially since the neighbors, or some of them, don't like her very much because I'm a cop and they don't like cops, which is understandable. I mean we always seem to be around when we're not wanted and never when we are, but we get along. Of course sometimes I wish I could talk about work with her, but she just doesn't understand."

"A common complaint," thought Malacoda. "But you've stayed together, so something must work."

"Sometimes I'm not sure what. I remember when I kept getting passed over for promotion. All she cared about was me not getting more money. I mean, guys years behind me, who never accomplished anything, were making captain and I was stuck as a lieutenant."

"Must have been annoying."

Captain Slovino thought back to those years of frustration. "Really! One night I was so mad at her that I almost shot her."

"Good thing you didn't. You never would've made captain."

"I know."

"Do you have any kids?"

"A son, whose married now and a daughter, in her twenties, college student. She's trying to go to school and work as a waitress, but she can be a problem. And she can leave any time, so you really can't say anything. I'd rather have her home. At least I know she's safe there. If she got her own place, I'd never sleep."

"Come on," Malacoda thought with frustration, "think of something about her you hate."

The captain gave a loud yawn. "Excuse me. I don't know why I'm so tired today."

"The strain of the Gunski matter."

"Must be. You know, both my wife and my daughter got mad at me for worrying about that poor woman. You'd think I was gonna have an affair with her."

"I wouldn't. I met her, remember?"

"And carried in her couch."

They both laughed at that for about two minutes. "And your wife and daughter ganged up on you for that?"

"Did they ever. We had a hell of a screaming match the day of the party. My loving wife and daughter did not even wait up for me."

"Now we're getting somewhere," thought Malacoda. He remembered his old psychology professor telling him that the real key to making people do what you want is to get them to remember the right emotions. People may like to think of themselves as being reasonable, rational even, God forbid, moral creatures, but when they act, it is the emotion that makes them act. If you want someone to be loving, bring out loving memories. If you want them to be angry, bring out memories that cause them anger. Once you know those events in a person's life, you can make them do anything you want.

The captain felt very tired now, and Malacoda's questions simply were a meaningless droning in his ears. He knew that he was answering them, but he had no idea what he was saying. He was drifting into a slumber and not realizing that he was.

Malacoda talked, very quickly but very softly. His questions became a monotone and the captain told him of his resentments and his angers, how he disliked his fellow officers, especially his desk sergeant whom he considered to be an incompetent waste of space. Finally, he nodded his head and Malacoda told him to sleep.

Captain Slovino's head dropped towards his chest and then leaned back, his eyes closed. Malacoda kept talking, telling him that he was going to go into a deeper sleep than he had ever been before and that he would not remember anything that was being said.

Then Malacoda started, for barely a second. He smelled no tobacco on the captain, but there seemed to be a box of cigarettes in his shirt pocket. "Are you carrying a recording device?" he asked not losing his stride.

"Yes," came the quiet answer.

"Hand it to me."

And the captain reached into his pocket and handed Malacoda a microcassette recorder. Malacoda accepted it in a hand covered by a handkerchief and put it on the table.

"Naughty piggy. And I was almost going to let you live." he thought while putting on a pair of disposable, latex gloves.

Then the author continued. "Now, you will sleep very soundly until you hear me tell you to hear my voice again."

Malacoda left the captain and removed the cassette. He took it into his locked room and ran it over a bulk eraser, congratulating himself on his good luck and trying to stop shaking. That had been close. He rewound the cassette and put it back in the recorder. Then he went back to the sleeping officer and carefully replaced it in his pocket.

"You will hear me now, Captain," he said.

"Yes."

Malacoda gave more commands, explaining to the captain that he was going to play a little practical joke on his wife, daughter and fellow officers. Then he told him that when he left the house he would discover that he forgot to turn on the recorder. The suggestions given, he awakened the captain and said, "I hope your men aren't gonna be too mad at you for being away so long. This material you gave me will be a real help."

"Well," responded the captain, "I hope it will. By the way, I know this may sound a little crazy, but could you give me your autograph, my wife would be overjoyed."

"I'll do better than that." And he went to a cabinet and took out a couple of books. "The author always gets a few copies to give to his friends. But I make most of my friends pay for them."

With that, he autographed the two volumes and gave them to the captain.

Captain Slovino accepted them gratefully. "Well, thank you. But you know, your artist friend told me you'd probably do this."

"Basil talks too much. He's always spoiling my surprises. Last month I got a present for my girlfriend and made the mistake of showing it to Basil first. Paula knew about it before I got home."

"A good thing you don't tell him many secrets," Captain Slovino led in good detective fashion.

"Writers don't have secrets, Captain. We couldn't keep them if we wanted to. After all, that's what goes into our books."

"Well, thank you for the books, surprise or not. And if I don't get back to the station, it may not be there long."

"I've driven by it. Isn't it that ancient building?"

"Ancient is the word for it. You wouldn't believe the office I've got."

"You're right. I probably wouldn't. But then, who would believe this mess?" Malacoda made a waving gesture around the room as he showed Captain Slovino out, knocking four times on his desk as he did so.

Paula awakened just as they came out the door and rounded the corner. "Leaving already, Captain?" she asked.

"Look at the clock, Hon. You dozed off."

"Yikes! I really did."

Malacoda laughed. "Well, it was interesting, Captain. Drop by again."

"Thanks. I might do that. And thanks again for the books."

Malacoda closed the door behind Captain Slovino, who felt his pocket and thought, "Damn! I bring this new toy of mine and forget to turn it on. I need my head examined. Besides, I was wrong about Art. He wouldn't hurt a fly."

Malacoda turned to Paula. "You really have to stop falling asleep like that. People will think you have sleeping sickness."

"I know. I just sat on the couch and passed out."

Malacoda went up to her and began to unlace her bathing suit. "I think you'd look better without this."

She smiled and looked down at her free breasts. "I feel better."

"You may not," he joked as he tied her hands behind her back with the top.

"Careful, you might ruin it."

"I'll buy you a new one."

"But I like this one. It's pretty."

"So are you," and he kissed her.

"Do you really love me?" she asked as he led her down to the basement.

Malacoda looked down at her and smiled. "Of course, my dear. Look at all the work I go through for you."

He tied her to the post and then sat down, laughing to himself about all the work he was going to make Captain Slovino go through.

XX

Captain Slovino, his eyes tired, drove home from the station. The two books for his wife lay on the seat beside him as he guided the car through the dark streets. There must have been a power failure because all of the street lights for two blocks were out. He felt very foolish. He should have known that there was no possible way that the author could have influenced the deaths of Mrs. Gunski and her daughter. He had simply been working too hard, letting himself get too involved in the situation. He had looked at the notes Malacoda had given him when he had gotten back to the station and it was obvious that the woman was so angry with her mother that it was a miracle she had not murdered her years before.

"Been reading too many of those supermarket papers the wife gets," he muttered to himself. "I'm gonna start seeing angels next."

The street lights were on on his own block and he relaxed a little as he turned the final corner before pulling into the alley behind his house. He laughed a little when he backed his car into the garage, remembering the times his neighbor across the alley had parked his boat in the alley, making it impossible for anyone to get through until he, the captain, had arranged for the boat to be towed. And of course there was no way the boat would survive the auto pound intact.

His neighbor had been less than amused.

He wished he could get back at the idiots in the station as easily. The desk sergeant was giving him "I told you so's" all night about the Gunski affair. But what the hell was he supposed to do? And Vitello with his stupid jokes, feeling up the prostitutes, was getting too much to bear. The captain was beginning to think he should try to get a job downtown, where he could hide behind a desk until the time came to collect his pension.

He climbed out of the car and walked out the garage door, only to remember that the books were in the car and go back for them. "They say the short-term memory goes first," he thought. First the tape recorder and now the books. He felt he really was getting senile.

The house was dark, except for the back light. Well, that was normal too. He thought that his wife and daughter were secretly looking forward to the night when he would come home and trip over some piece of furniture and break his neck. They would probably laugh about it all the way to his funeral.

He put the books on the kitchen table along with his revolver. There was a nagging something in his head about that gun, but he put the thought aside, figuring that he would remember it in the morning.

Captain Slovino mounted the stairs, quietly, so as not to disturb his wife and daughter, who was merrily snoring through dreamland. He undressed in the bathroom, as usual, went into his bedroom and lay down next to his wife, flat on his back. She did not even wake up.

Arthur Malacoda lay awake next to Paula, who was sound asleep. The day's work left a warm, satisfied glow in his mind. There was the tremendous feeling of comfort in the way he handled the poor, dumb cop and a feeling of relief in the fact that his nose was working for once. That had been too damned close for any fun. Of course it would be a pity about his wife, the woman being his fan and all, but he had a lot of fans and found that most of them were a damned nuisance. The knowledge that he was about to see the results of years of practice made him very happy and his content was contagious. Even Paula, who was so easily satisfied with her life could feel the merriment of Malacoda's soul that evening as she knelt beside him while they watched an old movie on his VCR. At times like that Malacoda wondered if she were more of a pet than a lover, but he enjoyed the moment nonetheless.

"What would my life be without you?" he thought as he stroked her hair.

Captain Slovino awakened the next morning, refreshed and full of the joy of the thought of another day. He was going to play a little prank that he had always wanted to and he could not wait to see the look on his officers' faces when he did it. Of course, most of them had been filled in in advance. He knew that. He knew that as well as he knew his own name.

He rubbed his hands together and chuckled with malevolent glee at the thought of what he was about to do. But first, he knew that he would have to play the same joke on his wife, his darling, bored, sleepy wife and his daughter.

He went downstairs and met them as they sat at the kitchen table, the wife finishing her breakfast and the daughter preparing something for school. He went over to the table and picked up his revolver, thinking of the gelatin capsules loaded in it instead of bullets and put it in his holster.

"Good morning, dears," he said with more cheer than he had felt in a year.

His wife and daughter both started and looked at the captain with surprise. "Well, good morning to you!" said his wife, happy that she had seen something other than a grump for once.

"Good morning, Daddy," the daughter said, smiling.

"Do you like the books?" he asked.

"They're wonderful. It was very nice of Mr. Malacoda to sign them for me."

Captain Slovino pulled his hand back to his holster. "I've got another surprise for you."

He pulled his revolver out of his holster and fired two shots, one to the head of his wife and one to the heart of his daughter. He saw the blood capsules break very nicely and they did a wonderful job of pretending to be really shot, which was just what he knew they would do. He did not see the bullet enter the head of his wife and pass through it, coming out with a large piece of skull and brain on the other side. Likewise he did not see the total extent of the wound on his daughter's chest.

"See, the gun is filled with these capsules," he said, seeing them play dead. "I can't wait to see the look on Vitello's face."

Then he went into the living room and lay down on the couch and slept. He slept until it was time for him to wake up and go to work.

Rising with a stretch, he laughed and walked through the kitchen, not seeing the bodies there, out the back door and to the garage. He greeted his next door neighbor, a man of about seventy and played the same prank on him. The old codger took it in good stead, falling to the ground and acting dead just like his wife and daughter had.

Captain Slovino had not had such fun in years.

Laughing, he walked into the garage and climbed in his car, just as his neighbor's wife looked out the window and began screaming. "This is great," he thought as he drove away. "Wait until he tells her he's fine. But I better not waste any more of these capsules. I've still got Vitello, Martinez and the sergeant."

The desk sergeant answered the phone and almost dropped it, a habit he was beginning to catch from the captain. "Are you sure?" he shouted, turning a ghastly shade. "Vitello!"

"Yeah, Sarg?"

"This lady on the phone says the captain just shot her husband!"

"She on drugs or something?"

"Says she's his next door neighbor and the number checks out."

"She call 911?"

"Yeah, and the meat wagon's on it's way. Then she called here."

"Why didn't they forward the call to us in the first place?"

"Those idiots? They probably haven't finished the paperwork."

"I'll get over there. This is crazy."

Captain Slovino drove happily towards the station. He was in the type of mood that even being cut off by a truck did not cause him to become upset. There was nothing to be upset about any more. The feeling of sheer contentment that overwhelmed him would be enough to carry him through a snow storm.

He sat at a stop light, waiting, whistling a tune he had not heard in twenty years. He was a rookie again, on his first patrol, wondering what interesting, exciting thing was going to happen, maybe even get a chance to make his first arrest. The city was going to be a lot safer with Edward Slovino on patrol.

The station was in an uproar. The desk sergeant was of a divided mind on whether to call the captain on the radio, or to use the radio at all. If the report was true, and the paramedics confirmed that the man was killed, then the last thing he wanted to do was let the captain know that anyone was on to what was happening. On the other hand, it must have been a case of mistaken identity. There must have been a burglar or something who looked like the captain. Well, Vitello would be there in a few minutes and then he could find out what was going on.

"We finally get rid of crazy, old lady Gunski and now this. Maybe I should become a shoe salesman," he thought with disgust.

"Sarg?" Martinez grumbled. "Do you really think the cap's lost it?"

Sergeant Kelly buried his face in his hands and leaned over the desk. "I don't know. I don't think insanity's catching."

"That's what comes of trying to help people. Maybe you should try to call his house, see if his wife knows anything."

"Yeah, I will." And the sergeant punched the number. He let the phone ring about twenty times before he gave up. "She must be out. Probably shopping again. You know how the captain's always complaining about her."

"Driving him to early bankruptcy, he says," Baccala said, laughing. "This has got to be one hell of a boo-boo. Maybe the old lady's nuts."

"That's all we need," Martinez laughed. "A Mrs. Gunski who sees murders."

"Committed by our own captain, no less."

"Yeah, with real dead people!"

"Hurry up, Vitello," the sergeant said under his breath.

"Sarg?"

"Yeah, Baccala?"

"I really hate to ask this, but what do we do if it's true?"

The sergeant noticed that his hands were shaking. "The same as any other case. But it isn't true."

"I hope not."

Captain Slovino put on his police radio. "Must be a quiet day," he thought. "No calls in our precinct. Well, it's early. Maybe I should pay a visit to the commissioner tonight. He likes a good laugh every now and then. Nah. He'd probably get mad about his suit being messed."

Vitello pulled up in front of the captain's house and ran next door to confront the paramedics. "This the man?" he asked with a voice higher than usual.

"Look at him. One shot through the heart. He was probably dead in two minutes."

"Where's the witness?"

"In the house, but we had to give her a real shot. She may not be too coherent for a while. Kept screaming that your captain did it."

Vitello shouted himself. "I know. That's impossible."

"Not to her it aint."

"Well, you guys take care of the stiff. I'll see if anyone's home at the captain's."

Vitello jumped over the back fence and rang the rear doorbell. Not getting an answer, he looked in the garage and saw that the second car was there. He went back to the house and tried the bell again, with no results as before. He went around to the front of the house and tried the front doorbell. Then he knocked, loud. But again there was no response. He paced around the front lawn for a second and then went to his squad car and radioed the station.

"Sarg, no one answers, but the other car is still in the garage."

"This is wonderful," thought the sergeant. "Did you look in any of the windows?"

"Not yet?"

"Do it. And see if the captain left a key under the mat or something."

The sergeant sat back, he was sweating more than usual. Could someone have broken into the captain's home and killed him and then the neighbor?

Captain Slovino pulled his car into the station lot just as Vitello looked in the living room windows. Seeing nothing, he walked around the back of the house and tried to look in the kitchen. He could not quite reach the windows, so he went and picked up a lawn chair. He climbed on the chair and looked inside the kitchen, screamed "My God!" and jumped off the chair and ran around the house to his car.

Captain Slovino sauntered into the station, his revolver in his pocket with his hand on it. "Hi!" he shouted.

"Captain!" Martinez shouted. "Are we ever glad to see you."

"Where's Vitello?"

"At your house." Martinez was going to finish the story but the captain spoke quickly.

"Then he'll have to wait for the surprise."

As Vitello managed to fumble with the radio and finally hold the microphone steady enough to speak into, Captain Edward Slovino, much decorated veteran of many years on the police force, collector of many bribes and an honest cop who only planted evidence twice in his whole career pulled out his revolver and shot the desk sergeant between the eyes. The capsules exploded with a satisfying pop and then Captain Slovino turned and shot Martinez through the stomach. As Vitello called in to the station, Baccala and Dumbrowski drew their revolvers and shot Captain Slovino. Baccala shot him in the side of the head and in the chest before he fell, while Dumbrowski shot him squarely in the chest cavity, penetrating the heart.

The sergeant died holding down the transmit button on the radio and Vitello heard the shots. He did not have to ask what happened. He knew.

"You talked to the captain the day before, didn't you?" the reporter was asking Malacoda in front of Basil's house the day after the funerals. Even Malacoda had gone to them all, though he hated funerals with a passion. The coincidences of the deaths of the Gunskis and the captain had excited the press for days and Malacoda was taking every opportunity to flaunt his books and get his face on television.

"Yeah, he came over to he house and we had a real nice, very long visit. He seemed like a real good cop, you know, the type you never hear about because they do their jobs and don't bother anyone but crooks. I never dreamed he'd do this. He was so relaxed he almost fell asleep while we were talking."

The reporter put on his most unctuous look. "Well, what do you think happened?"

"Look," Malacoda said to the reporter with mock impatience, while secretly enjoying every minute. "We're both in the word business. I'm a writer, not a shrink. I don't know why he'd do this terrible thing. Something just happened, who knows what and set off a bomb in him. And his wife was a fan of mine. He told me she'd read everything I ever wrote and I wouldn't wish that on my dear dead mother. It's terrible."

Back in Basil's house two days later, Malacoda sat in the easy chair in the living room, looking out at the Gunski house. Basil was looking out the window as well, both men ignoring Paula and Mary, whom Paula was fitting with a ball gag to shock Basil with and give Malacoda a good laugh.

"What's the priest doing?" Malacoda asked Basil as he watched Father Skroudas walk into the Gunski house carrying a little case.

Basil shook his head in sad disbelief. "I hear the son asked him to come and bless the house before he gets back from Europe. He should be flying back in tomorrow. He had to run back and clear up some things after the funeral. Probably develop new dimensions in jet lag."

"Think it'll do any good?"

"You kidding? Will anything? I feel like the survivor of a plague."

Malacoda shook his head and got up to look out the window, trying not to smile. "We all are, old friend. We all are."

Typhoid Malacoda, the King Pest, the plague carrier, looked out at the figure of the priest entering the house and grinned inwardly. He had removed a few pieces of useless humanity and had fun doing it. It had been a good game, a satisfying game, one he would enjoy playing again, someday, when Basil had new neighbors.

the end.