

The Janfia Tree

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Vampirism is a recurring theme in Lee's work. In this graceful, ambiguous tale, a woman with no hope invokes a dark god who may or may not exist, just to conquer her own indifference to life. Vampires often mesmerize their victims with their gaze. In a neat little twist the Janfia tree gives off a seductive, overpowering fragrance as a lure.

After eight years of what is termed "bad luck," it becomes a way of life. One is no longer anything so dramatic as unhappy. One achieves a sort of state of what can only be described as de-happiness. One expects nothing, not even, actually, the worst. A certain relaxation follows, a certain equilibrium. Not flawless, of course. There are still moments of rage and misery. It is very hard to give up hope, that last evil let loose from Pandora's box of horrors. And it is always, in fact, after a bout of hope, springing without cause, perishing not necessarily at any fresh blow but merely from the absence of anything to sustain it, that there comes a revulsion of the senses. A wish, not exactly for death, but for the torturer at least to step out of the shadows, to reveal himself, and his plans. And to this end one issues invitations, generally very trivial ones, a door forgetfully unlocked, a stoplight driven through. Tempting fate, they call it.

"Well, you do look tired," said Isabella, who had met me in her car, in the town, in the white dust that veiled and covered everything.

I agreed that perhaps I did look tired.

"I'm so sorry about—" said Isabella. She checked herself, thankfully, on my thanks. "I expect you've had enough of all that. And this other thing. That's not for a while, is it?"

"Not until next month."

"That gives you time to take a break at least."

"Yes."

It was a very minor medical matter to which she referred. Any one of millions would have been glad, I was sure, to exchange their intolerable suffering for something twice as bad. For me, it filled the quota quite adequately. I had not been sleeping very well. Isabella's offer of the villa had seemed, not like an escape, since that was impossible, yet like an island. But I wished she would talk about something else. Mind-reading, "Look at the olives, aren't they splendid?" she said, as we hurtled up the road. I looked at the olives through the blinding sun and dust. "And there it is, you see? Straight up there in the sky."

The villa rose, as she said, in the hard sky above; on a crest of gilded rock curtained with cypress and pine. The building was alabaster in the sun, and, like alabaster, had a pinkish inner glow where the light exchanged itself with the shade. Below, the waves of the olives washed down to the road, shaking to silver as the breeze ruffled them. It was all very beautiful, but one comes in time to regard mortal glammers rather as the Cathars regarded them, snares of the devil to hide the blemishes beneath, to make us love a world which will defile and betray us.

The car sped up the road and arrived on a driveway in a flaming jungle of bougainvillaea and rhododendrons.

Isabella led me between the stalks of the veranda, into the villa, with all the pride of money and goodwill. She pointed out to me, on a long immediate tour, every excellence, and showed me the views, which were exceptional, from every window and balcony.

"Marta's away down the hill at the moment, but she'll be back quite soon. She says she goes to visit her aunt, but I suspect it's a lover. But she's a dulcet girl. You can see how nicely she keeps everything here. With the woman who cooks, that's just about all, except for the gardeners, but they won't be coming again for a week. So no one will bother you."

"That does sound good."

"Save myself of course," she added. "I shall keep an eye on you. And tomorrow, remember, we want you across for dinner. Down there, beyond those pines, we're just over that spectacular ridge. Less than half a mile. Indeed, if you want to you can send us morse signals after dark from the second bathroom window. Isn't that fun. So near, so far."

"Isabella, you're really too kind to me."

"Nonsense," she said. "Who else would be, you pessimistic old sausage." And she took me into her arms, and to my horror I shed tears, but not many. Isabella, wiping her own eyes, said it had done me good. But she was quite wrong.

Marta arrived as we were having drinks at the east end of the veranda. She was a pretty, sunlit creature, who looked about fourteen and was probably eighteen or so. She greeted me politely, rising from the bath of her liaison. I felt nothing very special about her, or that. Though I am often envious of the stamina, youth, and health of others, I have never wanted to be any of them.

"Definitely, a lover," said Isabella, when the girl was gone. "My God, do you remember what it was like at her age. All those clandestine rumblings in gray city places."

If that had been true for her, it had not been true of me, but I smiled.

"But here," she said, "in all this honey heat, these scents and flowers. Heaven on earth—arcadia. Well, at least I'm here with good old Alec. And he hands me quite a few surprises, he's quite the boy now and then."

"I've been meaning to ask you," I said, "that flowering tree along there, what is it?"

I had not been meaning to ask, had only just noticed the particular

tree. But I was afraid of flirtatious sexual revelations. I had been denied in love-desire too long, and celibate too long, to find such a thing comfortable. But Isabella, full of intrigued interest in her own possessions, got up at once and went with me to inspect the tree.

It stood high in a white and terracotta urn, its stem and head in silhouette against a golden noon. There was a soft pervasive scent which, as I drew closer, I realized had lightly filled all the veranda like a bowl with water.

"Oh yes, the fragrance," she said. "It gets headier later in the day, and at night it's almost overpowering. Now what is it?" She fingered dark glossy leaves and found a tiny slender bloom, of a somber white. "This will open after sunset," she said. "Oh lord, what *is* the name?" She stared at me and her face cleared, glad to give me another gift. "Janfia," she said.

"Now I can tell you all about it. Janfia—it's supposed to be from the French, *Janvier*." It was a shame to discourage her.

"January. Why? Does it start to bloom then?"

"Well perhaps it's supposed to, although it doesn't. No. It's something to do with January, though."

"Janus, maybe," I said, "two-faced god of doorways. You always plant it by a doorway or an opening into a house? A guardian tree." I had almost said, a tree for good luck.

"That might be it. But I don't think it's protective. No, now isn't there some story... I do hope I can recall it. It's like the legend of the myrtle—or is it the basil? You know the one, with a spirit living in the tree."

"That's the myrtle. Venus, or a nymph, coming out for dalliance at night, hiding in the branches by day. The basil is a severed head. The basil grows from the mouth of the head and tells the young girl her brothers have murdered her lover, whose decapitum is in the pot."

"Yum, yum," said Isabella. "Well Alec will know about the Janfia. I'll get him to tell you when you come to dinner tomorrow."

I smiled again. Alec and I made great efforts to get along with each other, for Isabella's sake. We both found it difficult. He did not like me,

and I, reciprocating, had come to dislike him in turn. Now our only bond, aside from Isabella, was natural sympathy at the irritation endured in the presence of the other.

As I said good-bye to Isabella, I was already wondering how I could get out of the dinner.

I spent the rest of the afternoon unpacking and organizing myself for my stay, swimming all the while in amber light, pausing frequently to gaze out across the pines, the sea of olive groves. A little orange church rose in the distance, and a sprawling farm with Roman roofs. The town was already well-lost in purple shadow. I began, from the sheer charm of it, to have moments of pleasure. I had dreaded their advent, but received them mutely. It was all right, it was all right to feel this mindless animal sweetness. It did not interfere with the other things, the darkness, the sword hanging by a thread. I had accepted that, that it was above me, then why trouble with it.

But I began to feel well, I began to feel all the chances were not gone. I risked red wine and ate my supper greedily, enjoying being waited on.

During the night, not thinking to sleep in the strange bed, I slept a long while. When I woke once, there was an extraordinary floating presence in the bedroom. It was the perfume of the Janfia tree, entering the open shutters from the veranda below. It must stand directly beneath my window. Mine was the open way it had been placed to favor. How deep and strangely clear was the scent.

When I woke in the morning, the scent had gone, and my stomach was full of knots of pain and ghastly nausea. The long journey, the heat, the rich food, the wine. Nevertheless, it gave me my excuse to avoid the unwanted dinner with Isabella and Alec.

I called her about eleven o'clock. She commiserated. What could she say? I must rest and take care, and we would all meet further along the week.

In the afternoon, when I was beginning to feel better, she woke me from a long hot doze with two plastic containers of local yogurt, which would apparently do wonders for me.

"I'll only stay a moment. God, you do look pale. Haven't you got

something to take for it?"

"Yes. I've taken it."

"Well. Try the yogurt, too."

"As soon as I can manage anything, I'll try the yogurt."

"By the way," she said, "I can tell you the story of the Janfia now." She stood in the bedroom window, looking out and down at it. "It's extremely sinister. Are you up to it, I wonder?"

"Tell me, and see."

Although I had not wanted the interruption, now it had arrived, I was oddly loath to let her go. I wished she would have stayed and had dinner with me herself, alone. Isabella had always tried to be kind to me. Then again, I was useless with people now. I could relate to no one, could not give them any quarter. I would be better off on my own.

"Well it seems there was a poet, young and handsome, for whose verses princes would pay in gold."

"Those were the days," I said idly.

"Come, it was the fifteenth century. No sewers, no antibiotics, only superstition and gold could get you by."

"You sound nostalgic, Isabella."

"Shush now. He used to roam the countryside, the young poet, looking for inspiration, doubtless finding it with shepherdesses, or whatever they had here then. One dusk he smelled an exquisite fragrance, and searching for its source, came on a bush of pale opening flowers. So enamoured was he of the perfume, that he dug up the bush, took it home with him, and planted it in a pot on the balcony outside his room. Here it grew into a tree, and here the poet, dreaming, would sit all afternoon, and when night fell and the moon rose, he would carry his mattress on to the balcony, and go to sleep under the moon-shade of the tree's foliage."

Isabella broke off. Already falling into the idiom, she said, "Am I going to write this, or are you?"

"I'm too tired to write nowadays. And anyway, I can't sell anything. You do it."

"We'll see. After all the trouble I had with that cow of an editor over my last—"

"And meantime, finish the story, Isabella."

Isabella beamed.

She told me, it began to be noticed that the poet was very wan, very thin, very listless. That he no longer wrote a line, and soon all he did was to sit all day and lie all night long by the tree. His companions looked in vain for him in the taverns and his patrons looked in vain for his verse. Finally a very great prince, the lord of the town, went himself to the poet's room. Here, to his dismay, he found the poet stretched out under the tree. It was close to evening, the evening star stood in the sky and the young moon was shining in through the leaves of the Janfia tree upon the poet's white face which was now little better than a beautiful skull. He seemed near to death, which the prince's physicians, being called in, confirmed. "How," cried the prince, in grief, "have you come to this condition?" Then, though it was not likely to restore him, he begged the poet to allow them to take him to some more comfortable spot. The poet refused. "Life is nothing to me now," he said. And he asked the prince to leave him, for the night was approaching and he wished to be alone.

The prince was at once suspicious. He sent the whole company away, and only he returned with stealth, and hid himself in the poet's room, to see what went on.

Sure enough, at midnight, when the sky was black and the moon rode high, there came a gentle rustling in the leaves of the Janfia. Presently there stepped forth into the moonlight a young man, dark-haired and pale of skin, clothed in garments that seemed woven of the foliage of the tree itself. And he, bending over the poet, kissed him, and the poet stretched up his arms. And what the prince then witnessed filled him with abysmal terror, for not only was it a demon he watched, but one which performed acts utterly proscribed by mother church. Eventually overcome, the prince lost consciousness. When he roused, the dawn was breaking, the tree stood scentless and empty, and the poet, lying alone, was dead.

"So naturally," said Isabella, with relish, "there was a cry of witchcraft,

and the priests came and the tree was burned to cinders. All but for one tiny piece that the prince found, to his astonishment, he had broken off. Long after the poet had been buried, in unhallowed ground, the prince kept this little piece of the Janfia tree, and eventually thinking it dead, he threw it from his window out into the garden of his palace."

She looked at me.

"Where it grew," I said, "watered only by the rain, and nurtured only by the glow of the moon by night."

"Until an evening came," said Isabella, "when the prince, overcome by a strange longing, sat brooding in his chair. And all at once an amazing perfume filled the air, so mysterious, so irresistible, he dared not even turn his head to see what it portended. And as he sat thus, a shadow fell across his shoulder on to the floor in front of him, and then a quiet, leaf-cool hand was laid upon his neck."

She and I burst out laughing.

"Gorgeous," I said. "Erotic, gothic, perverse, Wildean, Freudian. Yes."

"Now tell me you won't write it."

I shook my head. "No. Maybe later, sometime. If you don't. But your story still doesn't explain the name, does it?"

"Alec said it might be something to do with Janus being the male form of the name Diana—the moon and the night. But it's tenuous. Oh," she said, "you do look so much better."

Thereby reminding me that I was ill, and that the sword still hung by its hair, and that all we had shared was a derivative little horror story from the back hills.

"Are you sure you can't manage dinner?" she said.

"Probably could. Then I'd regret it. No, thank you. Just for now, I'll stick to that yogurt, or it to me, whatever it does."

"All right. Well, I must dash. I'll call you tomorrow."

I had come to the villa for solitude in a different climate, but learned, of course, that climate is climate, and that solitude too is always precisely and only that. In my case, the desire to be alone was simply the horror of not being so. Besides, I never was alone, dogged by the sick, discontented, and unshakable companions of my body, my own restless mind.

The sun was wonderful, and the place was beautiful, but I quickly realized I did not know what to do with the sun and the beauty. I needed to translate them, perhaps, into words, certainly into feelings, but neither would respond as I wished. I kept a desultory journal, then gave it up. I read and soon found I could not control my eyes enough to get them to focus on the pages. On the third evening, I went to dinner with Isabella and Alec, did my best, watched Alec do his best, came back a little drunk, more ill in soul than in body. Disgraced myself in private by weeping.

Finally, the scent of the Janfia tree, coming in such tides into the room, drew me to the window.

I stood there, looking down at the veranda, the far-away hills beyond described only by starlight, the black tree much nearer, with here and there its moonburst of smoky white, an open flower.

And I thought about the poet, and the incubus that was the spirit of the tree. It was the hour to think of that. A demon which vampirized and killed by irresistible pleasures of the flesh. What an entirely enchanting thought. After all, life itself vampirized, and ultimately killed, did it not, by a constant equally irresistible, administration of the exact reverse of pleasure.

But since I had no longer any belief in God, I had lost all hopes of anything supernatural abroad in the universe. There was evil, naturally, in its abstract or human incarnations, but nothing artistic, no demons stepping from trees by night.

Just then, the leaves of the Janfia rustled. Some night breeze was passing through them, though not, it seemed, through any other thing which grew on the veranda.

A couple of handsome, shy wild cats came and went at the villa. The woman who cooked left out scraps for them, and I had seen Marta, one morning, leaving a large bowl of water in the shade of the cypress they were wont to climb. A cat then, prowling along the veranda rail, was

disturbing the tree. I tried to make out the flash of eyes. Presently, endeavoring to do this, I began to see another thing.

It was a shadow, cast from the tree, but not in the tree's shape. Nor was there light, beyond that of the stars above the hills, to fashion it. A man then, young and slender, stood below me, by the Janfia, and from a barely suggested paleness, like that of a thin half moon, it seemed he might be looking up toward my room.

A kind of instinct made me move quickly back, away from the window. It was a profound and primitive reaction, which startled me, and refreshed me. It had no place on the modern earth, and scarcely any name. A kind of panic—the pagan fear of something elemental, godlike, and terrible. Caught up in it, for a second, I was no longer myself, no longer the one I dreaded most in all the world. I was no one, only a reaction to an unknown matter, more vital than sickness or pessimism, something from the days when all ills and joys were in the charge of the gods, when men need not think, but simply *were*.

And then, I did think. I thought of some intruder, something rational, and I moved into the open window again, and looked down, and there was nothing there. Just the tree against the starlight.

"Isabella," I said to her over the telephone, "would you mind if I had that tree carried up to my bedroom?"

"Tree?"

I laughed brightly. "I don't mean one of the pines. The little Janfia. It's funny, but you know I hadn't been sleeping very well—the scent seems to help. I thought, actually in the room, it would be about foolproof. Nonstop inhalations of white double brandies."

"Well, I don't see why not. Only, mightn't it give you a headache, or something? All that carbon monoxide—or is it dioxide—plants exude at night. Didn't someone famous suffocate themselves with flowers? One of Mirabeau's mistresses, wasn't it? No, that was with a charcoal brazier—"

"The thing is," I said, "your two gardeners have arrived this morning after all. And between them, they shouldn't have any trouble getting the urn upstairs. I'll have it by the window. No problems with asphyxia that way."

"Oh well, if you want, why not?" Having consented, she babbled for a moment over how I was doing, and assured me she would "pop in" tomorrow. Alec had succumbed to some virus, and she had almost forgotten me. I doubted that I would see her for the rest of the week.

Marta scintillantly organized the gardeners. Each gave me a narrow look. But they raised the terracotta and the tree, bore them grunting up to the second floor, plonked them by the window as requested. Marta even followed this up with a can of water to sprinkle the earth. That done, she pulled two desiccated leaves off the tree with a coarse functional disregard. It was part of the indoor furnishings now, and must be cared for.

I had been possessed by a curious idea, which I called, to myself, an experiment. It was impossible that I had seen anything, any "being," on the veranda. That was an alcoholic fantasy. But then again, I had an urge to call the bluff of the Janfia tree. Because it seemed to me responsible, in its own way, for my mirage. Perhaps the blooms were mildly hallucinogenic. If so, I meant to test them. In lieu of any other social event or creative project, an investigation of the Janfia would have to serve.

By day it gave, of course, very little scent; in the morning it had seemed to have none at all. I sat and watched it a while, then stretched out for a siesta. Falling asleep, almost immediately I dreamed that I lay bleeding in a blood-soaked bed, in the middle of a busy city pavement. People stepped around me, sometimes cursing the obstacle. No one would help me. Somebody—formless, genderless—when I caught at a sleeve, detached me with a good-natured, Oh, you'll be all right.

I woke up in a sweat of horror. Not a wise measure any more, then, to sleep by day. Too hot, conducive to the nightmare... The dream's psychological impetus was all too obvious, the paranoia and self-pity. One was expected to be calm and well-mannered in adversity. People soon got tired of you otherwise. How not, who was exempt from distress?

I stared across the room at the Janfia tree, glossy with its health and beauty. Quite unassailable it looked. Was it a vampire? Did it suck away the life of other things to feed its own? It was welcome to mine. What a way to die. Not messily and uncouthly. But ecstatically, romantically, poignantly. They would say, they simply could not understand it, I had been a little under the weather, but *dying*—so very odd of me. And Isabella, remembering the story, would glance at the Janfia fearfully, and

shakily giggle the notion aside.

I got up, and walked across.

"Why don't you?" I said. "I'm here. I'm willing. I'd be—I'd be only too glad to die like that, in the arms of something that needed me, held, in pleasure—not from some bloody slip of a careless uncaring knife, some surgeon with a hangover, whoops, lost another patient today, oh dear what a shame. Or else to go on with this bloody awful misery, one slap in the teeth after another, nothing going right, nothing, nothing. Get out, to oblivion hopefully, or get out and start over, or if there's some bearded old damnable God, he couldn't blame me, could he? "Your honor," I'd say, "I was all for keeping going, suffering for another forty years, whatever your gracious will for me was. But a demon set on me. You know I didn't stand a chance." So," I said again to the Janfia tree, "why not?"

Did it hear? Did it attend? I reached out and touched its stems, its leaves, the fruited, tight-coiled blossoms. All of it seemed to sing, to vibrate with some colossal hidden force, like an instrument still faintly thrumming after the hand of the musician has left it, perhaps five centuries ago.

"Christ, I'm going crazy," I said, and turned from the tree with an insulting laugh. See, the laugh said, I know all that is a lie. So, I *dare* you.

There was a writing desk in the room. Normally, when writing, I did not employ a desk, but now I sat at it and began to jot some notes on the legend of the tree. I was not particularly interested in doing this, it was only a sort of sympathetic magic. But the time went swiftly, and soon the world had reached the drinks hour, and I was able with a clear conscience to go down with thoughts of opening a bottle of white wine. The sun burned low in the cypress tree, and Marta stood beneath it, perplexed, a dish of scraps in her hand.

"Cats not hungry today?" I asked her.

She cast me a flashing look.

"No cats. Cats runs off. I am say, Where you go give you better food? Mrs. Isabella like the cats. Perhaps they there. Thing scares them. They see a monster, go big eyes and then they runs."

Surprising me with my surprise, I shivered.

"What was it? That they saw?"

Marta shrugged.

"Who's know? I am see them runs. Fat tail and big eyes."

"Where was it?"

"This minute."

"But where? Down here?"

She shrugged a second time.

"Nothing there. They see. I am go along now. My aunt, she is waits for me."

"Oh yes. Your aunt. Do go."

I smiled. Marta ignored my smile, for she would only smile at me when I was serious or preoccupied, or ill. In the same way, her English deteriorated in my presence, improved in Isabella's. In some fashion, it seemed to me, she had begun to guard herself against me, sensing bad luck might rub off.

I had explained earlier to everyone that I wanted nothing very much for dinner, some cheese and fruit would suffice, such items easily accessible. And they had all then accordingly escaped, the cook, the cats, and Marta. Now I was alone. Was I?

At the third glass I began to make my plans. It would be a full moon tonight. It would shine in at my bedroom window about two in the morning, casting a white clear light across the room, the desk, so that anything, coming between, would cast equally a deep shadow.

Well, I would give it every chance. The Janfia could not say I had omitted anything. The lunar orb, I at the desk, my back to night and moon and tree. Waiting.

Why was I even contemplating such a foolish adolescent act? Naturally so that tomorrow, properly stood up on my date with delicious death, I

could cry out loudly: The gods are dead! There is nothing left to me but *this*, the dunghill of the world.

But I ought to be fairly drunk. Yes, I owed the situation that. Drink, the opening medicine of the mind and heart, sometimes of the psyche.

The clean cheeses and green and pink fruits did not interrupt the spell of the wine. They stabilized my stomach and made it only accommodating.

Tomorrow I would regret drinking so much, but tomorrow I was going to regret everything in any case.

And so I opened a second bottle, and carried it to the bath with me, to the ritual cleansing before the assignation or the witchcraft.

I fell asleep, sitting at the desk. There was a brief sealike afterglow, and my notes and a book and a lamp and the bottle spread before me. The perfume of the Janfia at my back seemed faint, luminous as the dying of the light. Beginning to read, quite easily, for the wine, interfering itself with vision, made it somehow less difficult to see or guess correctly the printed words, I weighed the time once or twice on my watch. Four hours, three hours, to moonrise.

When I woke, it was to an electric stillness. The oil lamp which I had been using in preference, was burning low, and I reached instantly and turned down the wick. As the flame went out, all the lit darkness came in about me. The moon was in the window, climbing up behind the jet-black outline of the Janfia tree.

The scent was extraordinary. Was it my imagination?—it seemed never to have smelled this way before, with this sort of aching, chiming note. Perhaps the full moon brought it out. I would not turn to look. Instead, I drew the paper to me and the pen. I wrote nothing, simply doodled on the pad, long spirals and convolutions; doubtless a psychiatrist would have found them most revealing.

My mind was a blank. A drunken, receptive, amiable blank. I was amused, but exhilarated. All things were supposed to be possible. If a black specter could stalk me through eight years, surely then phantoms of all kinds, curses, blessings, did exist.

The shadow of the Janfia was being thrown down now all around me, on the floor, on the desk and the paper: the lacy foliage and the wide-stretched blooms.

And then, something else, a long finger of shadow, began to spill forward, across everything. What was it? No, I must not turn to see. Probably some freak arrangement of the leaves, or even some simple element of the room's furniture, suddenly caught against the lifting moon.

My skin tingled. I sat as if turned to stone, watching the slow forward movement of the shadow which, after all, might also be that of a tall and slender man. Not a sound. The cicadas were silent. On the hills not a dog barked. And the villa was utterly dumb, empty of everything but me, and perhaps of this other thing, which itself was noiseless.

And all at once the Janfia tree gave a little whispering rustle. As if it laughed to itself. Only a breeze, of course only that, or some night insect, or a late flower unfolding...

A compound of fear and excitement held me rigid. My eyes were wide and I breathed in shallow gasps. I had ceased altogether to reason. I did not even feel. I waited. I waited in a type of delirium, for the touch of a cruel serene hand upon my neck—for truth to step at last from the shadow, with a naked blade.

And I shut my eyes, the better to experience whatever might come to me.

There was then what is known as a lacuna, a gap, something missing, and amiss. In this gap, gradually, as I sank from the heights back inside myself, I began after all to hear a sound.

It was a peculiar one. I could not make it out.

Since ordinary sense was, unwelcome, returning, I started vaguely to think, Oh, some animal, hunting. It had a kind of coughing, retching, whining quality, inimical and awesome, something which would have nothing to do with what basically it entailed—like the agonized female scream of the mating fox.

The noises went on for some time, driving me ever further and further back to proper awareness, until I opened my eyes, and stood up abruptly. I

was cold, and felt rather sick. The scent of the Janfia tree was overpowering, nauseating, and nothing at all had happened. The shadows were all quite usual, and rounding on the window, I saw the last of the moon's edge was in it, and the tree like a cutout of black-and-white papers. Nothing more.

I swore, childishly, in rage, at all things, and myself. It served me right; fool, fool, ever to expect anything. And that long shadow, what had that been? Well. It might have been anything. Why else had I shut my eyes but to aid the delusion, afraid if I continued to look I must be undeceived.

Something horrible had occurred. The night was full of the knowledge of that. Of my idiotic invitation to demons, and my failure, their refusal.

But I really had to get out of the room, the scent of the tree was making me ill at last. How could I ever have thought it pleasant?

I took the wine bottle, meaning to replace it in the refrigerator downstairs, and going out into the corridor, brought on the lights. Below, I hit the other switches rapidly, one after the other, flooding the villa with hard modern glare. So much for the moon. But the smell of the Janfia was more persistent, it seemed to cling to everything—I went out on to the western veranda, to get away from it, but even here on the other side of the house the fragrance hovered.

I was trying, very firmly, to be practical. I was trying to close the door, banish the element I had summoned, for though it had not come to me, yet somehow the night clamored with it, reeked of it. What was it? Only me, of course. My nerves were shot, and what did I do but essay stupid flirtations with the powers of the dark. Though they did not exist in their own right, they do exist inside every one of us. I had called my own demons. Let loose, they peopled the night.

All I could hope for now was to go in and make a gallon of coffee, and leaf through and through the silly magazines that lay about, and stave off sleep until the dawn came. But there was something wrong with the cypress tree. The moon, slipping over the roof now in pursuit of me, caught the cypress and showed what I thought was a broken bough.

That puzzled me. I was glad of the opportunity to go out between the bushes and take a prosaic look.

It was not any distance, and the moon came bright. All the night, all its essence, had concentrated in that spot, yet when I first looked, and first saw, my reaction was only startled astonishment. I rejected the evidence as superficial, which it was not, and looked about and found the tumbled kitchen stool, and then looked up again to be sure, quite certain, that it was Marta who hung there pendant and motionless, her engorged and terrible face twisted away from me. She had used a strong cord. And those unidentifiable sounds I had heard, I realized now, had been the noises Marta made, as she swung and kicked there, strangling to death.

The shock of what had happened was too much for Isabella, and made her unwell. She had been fond of the girl, and could not understand why Marta had not confided her troubles. Presumably her lover had thrown her over, and perhaps she was pregnant—Isabella could have helped, the girl could have had her baby under the shelter of a foreign umbrella of bank notes. But then it transpired Marta had not been pregnant, so there was no proper explanation. The woman who cooked said both she and the girl had been oppressed for days, in some way she could not or did not reveal. It was the season. And then, the girl was young and impressionable. She had gone mad. God would forgive her suicide.

I sat on the veranda of the other villa, my bags around me and a car due to arrive and take me to the town, and Alec and Isabella, both pale with convalescence, facing me over the white iron table.

"It wasn't your fault," said Alec to Isabella. "It's no use brooding over it. The way they are here, it's always been a mystery to me." Then, he went in, saying he felt the heat, but he would return to wave me off.

"And poor poor you," said Isabella, close to tears. "I tell you to come here and rest, and this has to happen."

I could not answer that I felt it was my fault. I could not confess that it seemed to me that I, invoking darkness, had conjured Marta's death. I did not understand the process, only the result. Nor had I told Isabella that the Janfia tree seemed to have contracted its own terminal disease. The leaves and flowers had begun to rot away, and the scent had grown acid. My vibrations had done that. Or it was because the tree had been my focus, my burning-glass. That would reveal me then as my own enemy. That powerful thing which slowly destroyed me, that stalker with a knife, it was myself. And knowing it, naming it, rather than free me of it, could

only give it greater power.

"Poor little Marta," said Isabella. She surrendered and began to sob, which would be no use to Marta at all, or to herself, maybe.

Then the car, cheerful in red and white, came up the dusty road, tooting merrily to us. And the driver, heaving my luggage into the boot, cried out to us in joy, "What a beautiful day, ah, what a beautiful day!"

Invited to say something about the genesis or content of this story, I'm afraid that all I *can* say is that it was based in part on a dream. Perhaps, in the light of the material itself, this is more than enough.

Tanith Lee