

Zachary's Glass Shoppe
a short story by Yvonne Navarro

Foreword

"Zachary's Glass Shoppe" was written based on the idea of giving a piece of yourself to someone else, like a lock of your hair. The "what if" question popped up immediately: What if the person you gave it to then had control over whether you lived or died? There wasn't any plan other than to have someone buy an object like this, and the rest of the story grew from there. When Mark Rainey of Deathrealm bought the story, it was the first time I'd ever sold a story to the first editor who read it.

Zachary's Glass Shoppe

He found the place in a lousy neighborhood on the south side, a place Miranda would never go on her own. That's what he wanted -- if she returned one more gift he thought he might strangle her outright and fuck the consequences.

Zachary's Glass Shoppe

The store looked seedy, but peering through the criss-cross of metal bars over the dirty windows gave Channing a glimpse of colors and crystal that hinted at unique treasures. He glanced at the Mercedes; even parking directly in front was no comfort. Dark, sullen faces watched him silently from doorways and front steps along a street gone unnaturally quiet. Like stepping late into a full class in grade school -- he was surrounded by the feeling of eyes. His stomach twisted just a bit.

The thought of another returned present made him grind his teeth and he stepped to the door, running a nervous hand through his thick hair. A tall, heavily-built teenager walked by and made a kissing sound; Channing ignored it.

"Hey, man," the guy said, "that's some hair you got. Let me touch it. We can party down."

Channing turned and glared at him with the door half open and the teenager glanced up at the sign as if in sudden realization. Before Channing could reply, the man was gone; twenty feet down the sidewalk he slipped into an alley and disappeared.

It doesn't matter, Channing told himself. Let him think he was gay; he knew better and that's what counted. The ebony mass of curls that spilled down to his

shoulderblades had been the initial bait that had landed him marriage three years ago to Miranda Cuyler, one of the richest women in the state.

A woman who had everything.

Inside, the small shop gave him used bookstore memories from his college days:

the aged smells of mildew and dust swirled lazily on the currents pushed from an old ceiling fan. Channing stood uncertainly for a moment, taking in the shelves

of colored glass and crystal, all of the would-be sparkle covered with a thin

coating of fine, white powder. Apparently the owner didn't believe in housekeeping.

There wasn't much to see and he covered it all in about thirty seconds: a few vases and some period glass to his left with a standard run of statuettes in the window, not much else -- certainly nothing special. There was a grimy display case supporting an ancient-looking cash register, but Channing had no intention of trying to clean it so he could see inside.

He'd hoped for better. Wandering around unsupervised for another two or three minutes did little to stall his disappointment and he turned to go, not understanding how the owner didn't get robbed. There was a rustling behind him as he reached for the doorknob and he looked back to see a tall, thin man with wide shoulders step from behind a curtained doorway that Channing hadn't noticed in back of the display case. Of all things that might be extraordinary, Channing's eyes fell on the man's hair -- thick, dark waves much like his own fell from a side part to well past the man's ears, partially obscuring almost colorless eyes.

"How may I help you?"

Channing started at the sound; in the short time he'd been inside, the silence had become... comfortable. Although the shopkeeper's voice was low and carefully modulated, it seemed to intrude on the atmosphere.

"Uh -- no, I suppose not." Channing thrust his hands into his pockets. The proprietor said nothing, but raised a questioning eyebrow. Oddly, Channing felt obliged to explain. "I was looking for something different for my wife. It's our third anniversary." He gave the man a small apologetic smile. "I'm afraid I don't see anything."

The man gazed at Channing solemnly, taking in the custom-sewn leather jacket and the four hundred dollar Gucci's; in the space of two pulses Channing felt thoroughly probed.

"I have something you may be interested in, Mister...?"

"Mandell, Channing Mandell."

"Mister Mandell. I am Zachary." He bent with such quick grace that for a moment Channing thought the man had vanished. Then there was a glimmer of movement behind the filthy case and Zachary reappeared with a mirrored tray. Channing saw with surprise that not a speck of dust showed on the fragile objects d'art resting on the mirror's surface.

He stared in fascination. Each was unique, a different color, a different shape, a different pose, if such a word could be used to describe abstract glass. Fragile filaments of stretched glass twined and twisted, curving over and upon itself, treating his amazed eyes to a constantly changing and glittering surface. His fingers itched to touch and he bent closer, then reached out a tentative finger--

"Be very careful, Mr Mandell."

Channing glanced up to see the man watching him intently and stopped before actually touching the small golden shape that had caught his attention. Instead, he ran a hand along his collar to free his hair and brushed a few loose

strands

from his jacket. They fell to the grubby countertop and before Channing could blink the shopkeeper had swept them away.

"What are they?" he asked.

Zachary smiled. He had full, womanly lips that seemed a trifle too red;

Channing

realized in embarrassment that he was staring at the man's mouth and forced his

gaze back to the tray.

"I call them... frames."

"Frames?" Channing asked in puzzlement. "But that's such a -- a plain description! It hardly describes them." Channing knew that any hope of price bargaining was gone; gazing at the multi-colored pieces filled him with a sense

of childlike awe that he made no attempt to disguise.

"Ah, but it does!" Zachary reached out, his overlong fingers going unerringly to

the one that had attracted Channing the most. He plucked it from the tray and held it up daintily between his thumb and middle finger, turning it this way and

that, like a jeweler testing a diamond for clarity. "Do you see?"

Zachary thrust the piece under Channing's nose and he squinted to bring it into

focus. It was even more beautiful at close range -- not a crack or ragged edge

showed anywhere among the myriad strands of glass. But wait -- there was something there, in the middle, a flaw of some type.

"What's that?" he asked, peering hard at the piece. It would be a shame if it weren't perfect, although Miranda's myopic eyesight would never notice.

"What's

in there?"

Zachary gave him a guileless smile. It reminded him of a documentary he'd once

watched on jungle cats; a lioness had stretched in the sun with that same sense

of deadly unconcern. The memory left him uneasy; perhaps it was time to tell the

shopkeeper that the things were pretty but he wasn't interested.

"A life, Mr Mandell." Zachary reached for Channing's palm and turned it up, then

dropped the golden frame onto it. The glass wobbled there and warmth seeped into

his skin. "You are holding someone's life in your hand."

Channing's fingers closed protectively around the warm glass.

"I think I'd like to hear about this," he said.

The darkness outside made him nervous. Channing sensed the sly gazes of the same

people as when he'd arrived, as though they'd done nothing besides sit and watch, waiting for him to come out. He'd been in the shop for almost an hour, listening to the tale, half-believing it, all thoughts of the seventy thousand

convertible forgotten. Yet nothing had happened, no missing wheels or stereo, though he'd left the door unlocked. His father, a race car driver in his youth,

had always told him: "Never lock the door on a convertible, Channing. Why lose

the stereo and have to replace the top?" But there were no rips in the top or

spray-painted obscenities across the hood. The odds of this automobile surviving for an hour in this section of the city were astronomical, but Channing remembered the man who had propositioned him and the way the guy had hoofed it when he'd realized where he was. He got in and started the engine, letting it warm for a few minutes while he held the small box and looked around at the interior, wondering where he could put it to be sure the contents would not be harmed. The most obvious place was on the passenger seat, where the heavy upholstery would absorb any roadshock. But what if he had a wreck? He shuddered deliciously. It was bullshit, but he couldn't help believing Zachary's story and it sure as hell would make a gift Miranda could never say was a duplicate. Zachary would tell him only that the tiny golden frame contained the life -- in the form of some minute personal object -- of a woman with the initials W S. There was a piece of parchment only an inch square in the bottom of the box with those same initials written on it in a thick script. If the frame were broken, he'd said, the woman would die. Channing had asked the obvious questions: What was the woman's name? And what kind of personal object? Zachary wouldn't say. The lives were chosen by the personal 'objects' -- he would not be specific -- themselves obtained purely by chance. The sense of unreality grew when Zachary claimed to know nothing but the person's name, and that only by his so-called second sight. What a tale! Channing smiled wistfully. It was Miranda's gift, sure, but the person he longed most to share it with was his twin sister Adrienne. He closed his eyes and remembered the way she'd looked earlier, when he'd left; the sleep-tousled hair from their short nap, her swollen lips and creamy skin... "Jesus! Get up, you filthy animal! Get out -- and you! Slut! Your own brother..." The voice was a vicious memory from the past and he pushed it from his mind. So what, he thought bitterly. The parents hadn't understood the twins, the closeness, the love. When two people shared so much -- even the womb -- no one else could ever truly substitute. He supposed it was a form of double narcissism, him loving himself in female form, her loving herself in male form. But for the eyes -- hers gray, his green, they were mirror images. Personalities were different, of course, the result of being shipped to separate boarding schools at sixteen. It must have been the teen bitches that had nurtured the streak of petty cruelty in Adrienne, and he freely admitted to being able to out-connive almost anyone to get what he wanted. But still, in every other way they fit together like the pieces of one of those silly-looking broken heart necklaces. Someday it'd be just the two of them. Channing buckled his seatbelt and started the car, glancing at the box once more before pulling away. A small gilded sticker that said Zachary's Glass Shoppe secured the top flap. There was no address and Zachary had told him he didn't believe in telephones. Maybe someday soon.

Miranda was captivated by the gift. She played with it and poked at it and at one point Channing thought she might pry the piece apart to see what was inside. His stomach knotted a little as he watched her fingernails picking at the glass filaments; it was embarrassing to realize he worried about the well-being of some unknown person, but there was a definite draining of tenseness when she finally found a place of honor for the frame in one of the oak display cabinets. Although she'd listened with interest to its history, the parchment had gone in the garbage along with the box. At least, he thought as he watched one of the maids empty the trash, that meant she wasn't going to return it.

Channing couldn't bear to be alone in the dark -- it was his phobia, a sickness that had been seeded the night in his sixteenth year when his father had caught him and Adrienne together in the poolside sauna. His naked sister had been dragged out and flung at his mother, who was already on her way to hysterics, but he had been locked in. His father had shut down the heat and the lights -- thoroughly disgusted, he still had no desire to bake his son alive -- and left him in the sauna for seventeen hours, a period of time he believed would be long enough to instill in Channing the proper amount of remorse. Ten years later, however, the only thin Channing regretted was not being able to sleep alone without a light. But darkness could also be his friend. "Channing, honey, hold me," Miranda said. She snuggled against him and ran her nails up the silk of his pajama leg. Blinking her lashes, she pushed her face close for a kiss; at her hairline he could see the faintest hint of gray. Time for a touch-up, he thought. All things considered, he'd known what he was getting and for her age -- somewhere around fifty, she'd say vaguely -- she was actually in damn fine shape. His body responded to her searching fingers and he closed his eyes and reached for her. No good. The light was an intruder, prying at his lids and forcing them open, washing out his fantasy in the rainbow-colored glow from the Tiffany lamp on the nightstand. He rolled away and fumbled for the switch. "Can't we leave it on?" Miranda pouted. "I do love to look at you." Channing found the switch and darkness swallowed the bedroom, broken only by a hint of moon through the heavy sheers at the window. "But the darkness is so much more... intimate, don't you think?" he whispered. His hands cupped her breasts and she sighed. "Yes," she breathed. In the blackness, Channing could make out only a shadow on the bed with him. His mind obligingly supplied the details as he moved closer to his wife:

shoulder-length platinum hair became long and dark, the age-softened skin became young and supple. He searched her body, remembering another form touched by no one but him. In his heart, Channing lowered his lips to Adrienne's.

Breakfast, scalding Spanish coffee and bacon croissants served on the patio, would have been perfect if the wrong woman hadn't sat across the table. Ah, well, Channing thought and smiled as the butler brought him the paper, I suppose you take the good with the bad. The weather was unseasonably warm and he enjoyed feeling the sun on his face. "What are you smiling about, dear?" Miranda asked. She had on those damnable granny glasses again, perched on the tip of her nose as she flipped through a copy of Self. Someday he hoped to see them fall into her coffee. And he hated it when she called him dear. "Nothing, Miranda," he said, losing some of his contentment. "Just enjoying the day." Channing opened the newspaper and scanned a couple of pages without interest; it was hard to concentrate with her sitting there staring at him and he felt his appetite wane. His eyes stopped at a morbid photograph that showed a dark bodybag next to the twisted wreck of a car. The paragraph accompanying it was sadly simple.

First grade teacher and mother of four, Sandra Wheatley was killed on her way to Blaine Elementary School early this morning. According to police, a truck driver returning from an overnight run fell asleep and crossed the center line, striking Mrs Wheatley's car in the left front. The truck driver was treated for minor injuries at Wellington Masonic Hospital and released with a citation for careless driving.

Channing couldn't help but notice the woman's initials -- S W. Had they been transposed, he might be worried; besides, he'd seen Miranda put the glass frame safely away. Right now, he could still feel his wife's staring eyes and he put down the paper in exasperation. "Miranda," he said irritably, "you've been watching me all morning. What's the problem?"

She dropped her gaze obediently and picked at the tablecloth. "I'm sorry, Channing. I didn't mean to stare like that. It's just that, well..." "What?" he asked. "It's just what?" "I did so like your anniversary present," she said. "I don't know how to say this." She hesitated. Channing leaned back and folded his arms. Here it comes, he thought angrily. She wants to take it back. Finally she continued. "Do you think you could get me another little glass thing -- frame or whatever you call it? I didn't want to tell you last night and

spoil
your mood, but one of the maids dropped it when she was cleaning the cabinet.
It
shattered into about a hundred pieces."

Zachary's Glass Shoppe.

It hadn't changed -- the same dusty, mildewed smell, the same old glass vases and unremarkable crystal statuettes adorning the shelves. Channing didn't know

what he'd expected to find on his second visit -- perhaps, although it'd only been a little over two weeks, that the place didn't even exist anymore. But here

he was and this time he didn't wonder whether or not there was an owner; he could feel Zachary's presence behind the curtain.

"Good afternoon, Mr Mandell."

Channing started. He must have done a fade-out, because suddenly Zachary was there and Channing didn't remember seeing him step up to the register. "Oh, hello." He didn't say anything else -- how does one ask to buy another life? Zachary smiled at him serenely and waited. Five seconds passed, then ten; still

Channing remained nervously silent, never meeting the man's eyes. Finally Zachary sighed knowingly and bent behind the case, bringing up the mirrored tray

and its glittering contents.

"A pity about Sandra Wheatley," Zachary said softly. "I'm sure she was a lovely woman."

"Who?"

"The woman who died this morning when the frame was broken," Zachary answered softly.

Channing felt his face drain -- this sixth sense of Zachary's seemed less the impossibility he'd once thought. Then he frowned. "But I thought you said her initials were W S, not S W."

The man shrugged. "A small -- shall we say, white lie? Sometimes I am compelled

inexplicably to reverse the letters." His face remained emotionless.

"Oh. Well, it w-was an accident," Channing said, stammering slightly. "One of the maids dropped it." He chided himself mentally for offering this explanation;

after all, what difference did it make? Even had he purposely crushed the golden

frame, which of them was truly the more guilty? Himself, for its destruction? Or

Zachary, for its creation?

"Of course."

Listening to the velvety tone of Zachary's words, Channing again had that leonine impression of deadliness. To mask his unease he turned his attention to

the tray. So many colors and shapes! And each represented the life -- he now fully believed -- of someone in the city, a living, breathing man or woman, someone who loved and hated, just like himself. There were at least five or six

frames he didn't remember from the last visit -- which one? His conscience was

playing hell on his ability to choose.

"This one," he said finally. He pointed to it and watched as Zachary lifted it

from the mirror's surface and held it up for inspection. It was different

from
the others, darker and classier. Amid the crystalline tendrils of glass were smoky swirls of black and gray.
Zachary's eyes found his. "A beautiful piece," he said evenly as he moved to put
it in Channing's palm. "The life it surrounds belongs to a--"
"No!" Channing interrupted and waved the glass away. "Please, I don't want to know. Just ... wrap it."
"Not even the initials?"
Channing shook his head firmly. If something happened to the frame -- if it were
dropped -- it would be easier on his psyche if its... victim remained a
mystery
to him.
"As you wish."
Channing wandered the small area absently, listening to the small rustling sounds the shopkeeper made as he packaged the gift and letting his thoughts float for awhile.
"Will there be something else, Mr Mandell?" Zachary asked softly.
Channing stopped with his back to the counter and his hands in his pockets.
He
breathed in for a long, nerve-gathering moment before turning.
"Yes... Zachary," he said. "There is." He stepped to the counter and pulled a folded handkerchief from his jacket. Willing his fingers not to tremble, Channing opened the linen and held it out; in the centre of the white square was
a single, platinum blonde hair.
"Do you," he asked carefully, "ever custom make your frames?"

This is getting to be a habit, Channing thought as he climbed in the convertible. Déjà vu crowded in and he knew he'd experience it once more when he
came to pick up Miranda's replacement anniversary present. He opened the
glove
compartment and gingerly placed his purchase inside, packing the rest of the contents -- maps, extra napkins, and the like, securely around it. That
should
do it, he thought as he locked the compartment. Besides, it hadn't really
been
that expensive. If life was cheap, the frame so safely packed in his car was almost worthless compared to the one he would pick up in three days.
As he drove away, Channing wondered how he would explain the drain on the checking account to Miranda -- perhaps she would accept the truth: that he
had
ordered a custom replacement for her shattered anniversary gift. More likely she
would think he'd spent the money on Adrienne, although he hadn't seen his
sister
since the morning of his first visit to Zachary's. Miranda's instinctive and secretly justified jealousy of his twin was amazing, and finding time to
visit
Adrienne was like trying to escape a leash of saltwater taffy: he'd pull
away,
his wife would just reel him in. Even today he had to rush back to the
estate;
Miranda had a huge dinner party planned and only promising to order her new present had allowed him a few hours' freedom. No doubt Miranda was having
Adrienne's home watched even now.

Nevertheless, the contentment Channing had felt this morning returned; soon, very soon, his life would take on a new direction.

"Channing, it's gorgeous!" Miranda squealed and hugged him quite hard, clutching the fragile glass object in one hand. For one dreadful moment, he fully expected the frame to be crushed in her careless hand. Would she then die in his arms? She pranced to a chair and sat, cupping her hands around the frame a little more cautiously. Channing thought dryly that while she couldn't know she was literally holding her life in her hands, she should at least think of the monstrous amount of money he'd paid for that tiny, peach-tinted bauble. Channing watched impassively. With her clumsiness, he figured two, three weeks at the outside before she broke it. It would be just like suicide when she did, he reasoned, though he'd failed to inform her that the personal object inside the crystalline piece was a strand of her own hair. Zachary had obligingly scripted the initials M M on the parchment, another little white lie. They stood for Miranda Mandell, the married name that she scorned in favor of her family name. Had she asked, Channing was prepared to claim the initials were W W. It proved a groundless worry; twenty minutes later the box and parchment were crushed in the wastebasket and the frame occupied the same, possibly lethal spot as had its predecessor. It was, Channing knew, only a matter of time; when it happened he could righteously attribute it to chance -- Lady Luck, bad odds. He planned not to lay a finger on it, but nothing that fragile ever survived more than a few weeks around Miranda. He smiled.

The air spilling in the open window of the Mercedes felt good, cold and crisp, like freedom in vapor form. He checked his watch. Miranda's little tea party would probably last another two hours, time enough for him to cruise over to Adrienne's. Though they talked often, he hadn't seen her for almost a month, nor had he spoken about Miranda's unique gift yet -- the frame in the glovebox was for Adrienne. He knew she would love the sense of control she would feel from it -- the almost god-like ability to end someone's existence at will. He chuckled as he turned into Adrienne's drive. When he'd left, Miranda and her cronies had been passing the peach-tinted glass among themselves; with those shaky old biddies, it was highly unlikely it would be in one piece upon his return. He shut off the engine and sprinted up the walkway. As he pounded the knocker, he hid the gift behind him. "Channing!" Adrienne cried when she opened the door. "How I've missed you!" She grabbed his hand and pulled him inside. "How long can you stay?" He grinned. How like her to be greedy right from the start! "An hour," he answered, "two at the most. But here, I've brought you something." He held out

the box, then pulled it back teasingly. "But it's very different. And very fragile."

Adrienne took it almost reverently. "Damn, Channing. You know how she watches your money -- how will you explain this?"

He followed her into a sitting room and sprawled laughing into a chair.

"Pretty

soon I won't have to. She's bound to rid the world -- and me -- of herself for

good. Perhaps even by the time I get back!"

Adrienne frowned and sank to the carpeting, sitting Indian fashion. Except for

the modestly applied make-up, it was like viewing his reflection in a mirror.

"I

don't understand." She didn't wait for his explanation as she slipped a nail through the gilded sticker and pried open the flap. Her fingers gently closed around the smoky-hued glass and lifted it up. She sucked in a small breath.

"It's beautiful! But... what is it?"

"It's a life," he said eagerly. Such a complicated, profound idea -- yet he managed to explain it in only a few minutes.

"Someone's life, huh?" she asked dreamily. There was no question that she believed him; the word of her twin had always been indisputable. Her long fingers opened and closed around the crystal filaments, opened and closed.

"How... enticing."

Channing could tell she was captivated and pointed to the box. "The initials of

your... person are in the box. Why don't you see what they are?"

She picked the carton up with her other hand and tossed it to him. "Here, you tell me."

He caught the box and fumbled reluctantly for the parchment beneath the cotton

padding. "Here," he said, holding up the tiny paper. His eyes focused on the script and he froze.

"Well?" Adrienne asked impatiently. "What are they?"

"Uh," he said shakily and reached out, "can I see it? I haven't--"

"No way!" she said and scrambled out of his reach. "It's my personal... responsibility -- God, what a feeling of power!"

Channing watched her numbly. Have to take it back, he thought, exchange it.

He

looked at the writing on the piece of parchment and stifled the urge to crush the paper in his fist.

M A.

Sometimes I am compelled inexplicably to reverse the letters -- a little white

lie.

"So what are they?" Adrienne asked and gave a wicked giggle. "Who am I going to

kill?"

"Please," he said desperately, "let's take it back -- it's defective. We'll get

another one, okay?"

"Why, Channing," she crooned, "are we having a guilty conscience? Hardly fitting

since your dear Miranda may very well destroy herself even as we speak!" She laughed then and tossed the frame in her hand lightly, as if it were a tennis ball. Channing felt a pulse jump in his temple.

Personal objects are obtained by pure chance, Mr Mandell.

He remembered the last time he'd seen Adrienne, the morning of his first visit

to Zachary's Glass Shoppe, how he'd held her close and kissed her good-bye, her

head resting sleepily against his shoulder only a half hour before stepping into the glass shop. A soft-focus memory streaked back: running his hand nervously through his hair and over his jacket, a few strands floating to the countertop. ...pure chance, Mr Mandell. Zachary, serenely sweeping them away. He looked at his twin, the other half of his heart. Adrienne tossed the frame up again; it arched past her cheekbone as she raised her face to look at him and he saw how well the smoky crystal tendrils matched her gray eyes. The fragile glass dropped-- Channing opened his mouth to tell her, to stop her. --into her palm. Her fingers folded into a fist and she smiled with cruel pleasure as her knuckles went white with the killing stroke. He wondered how Miranda was doing. God, how he hated to sleep alone.

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