

Sheena

BRIAN STABLEFORD

BRIAN STABLEFORD is a prolific writer living in Reading, England. His fiftieth novel (and seventy-fifth book), *Year Zero*, appeared in June 2000, close on the heels of *The Fountains of Youth*, which is the third volume in a future-history science-fiction series that began in 1998 with *Inherit the Earth*. Earlier novels include *The Empire of Fear*, *Young Blood*, and *The Hunger and Ecstasy of Vampires*. In 1999, he was the recipient of the Science Fiction Research Association's Pilgrim Award for his contributions to SF scholarship. His other awards include the SFRA's Pioneer Award (1996), the Distinguished Scholarship Award of the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts (1987), and the J. Lloyd Eaton Award (1987). His recent nonfiction includes *Yesteryear's Bestsellers and Glorious Perversity: The Decline and Fall of Literary Decadence*. "*Sheena*" is a story that I privately consider third-stage romanticism; when you've lost faith in love and still have to live and live and live, you might as well believe in the unbelievable...

IF I'D HAD a quid for every time I heard the old joke beginning, "What do you say to a sociology graduate?," I wouldn't have had to get a stopgap job at all, but nobody pays you a wage to listen to put-downs. Anyway, it's not true-not any more. Ever since the minimum wage came in, fast-food outlets are deeply reluctant to hire anyone who qualifies for it. The sacred right to be on the wrong end of orders for a Big Mac and fries is now reserved to seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds. Because I was twenty-one when I left university, I had no alternative but to raise my sights.

Fortunately, the introduction of the minimum wage coincided with the wildfire spread of call centres, which allowed me to cash in on the only asset I had-apart, of course, from my sociology degree. Although I was born and bred just off Easterly Road and never had an elocution lesson in my life, my accent isn't nearly as thick as it might have been. I'd learned to suppress it even further while I was doing my three years at the uni; paradoxical as it may seem, the only way for a Leeds lad to fit in at the local wastepaper factory is to ape the manners and mores of the southern majority. When I left home I got a flat in Harehills Lane, not to be just a bus ride away from Mum and the sibs-although that's what I told *them*-but because it allowed me to tell my new friends that I lived in Dorset. It was a waste of irony, of course. None of them ever thought for an instant that I might mean the posh southern county, and some of them even knew where its humbler namesake was. "Oh, yeah," they'd say smugly. "Out past St James's and the Corporation Cemetery." I might have done better simply to tell the smartarses that I'd been to school in Dorset, saving the revelation that I meant Thorn Walk Secondary for a punch line.

The people at the call centre weren't, of course, allowed to say that one of the qualifications for the job was a posher voice than most people who'd go for that kind of a job possessed. Their ads only specified a "good telephone manner"-but I could do politeness and patience, too, even though I wasn't female. Ninety percent of the front liners were lasses, perhaps because a "good telephone manner" is one of those things that most females develop naturally in their teenage years, like bulimia, PMT, and deodorant addiction. Lads don't usually develop a "good telephone manner" because boys take an essentially utilitarian view of the phone, making short and functional calls, whereas lasses find a perverse kind of intimacy in the form and touch of a plastic receiver which delivers gossip as if by magic. Not that I was a common or garden male chauvinist, of course, even before I changed-we northern scum don't always conform to stereotype.

All call centres are pretty much alike, although the one on Scott Hall Road where I went to work seemed distinctly incestuous, by virtue of the fact that we were fielding queries on behalf of a firm that made, installed, and customized all kinds of telephone equipment, up to and including call centres. Although there was only one other graduate in my intake and two already on the strength it was stopgap work for practically everyone who manned the phones, because people can take only so much of a job which involves dealing sensitively with boorish clients who are confused or angry before they're put on HOLD and twice as bad afterwards. We got calls from customers who were resentful because they were too stupid to follow the instructions telling them how to work their kit, customers who were livid because the kit couldn't do what they wanted it to, and customers who were incandescent because they thought they'd been overcharged-that was about it. Although I did two weeks' basic training in the kinds of products the company sold, the only advice I was allowed to give was script-based stuff that didn't get much more sophisticated than "have you checked that the unit's plugged in?" My job was to take down details of problems so that I could refer them to the appropriate technical staff or accounts department, with profuse assurances that somebody would phone back shortly with real help.

I didn't expect the work to be difficult, and it wasn't, but it was peculiarly taxing to have to maintain a polite front in the

face of such relentless incompetence and hostility. Apart from the fact that the money was enough to feed me, pay the rent, and nibble away at my overdraft, the job's main advantage was the flexible shift system. This allowed me to vary my hours- taking time out to attend interviews for real jobs whenever they came up-and made overtime easily available if I wanted it. There was a period when I thought there was an even greater advantage-the fact that females were in such a large majority that no shift ever had more than three blokes Working alongside twenty nubile females-but I soon learned better. In a competitive environment like that, I thought at first, even a sweeper with lead boots could score at regular intervals, but it didn't take long to encounter the downside of the situation.

It wasn't that the lasses weren't up for it. Quite the reverse, in fact. I doubt that there was one among them who hadn't lost her virginity at thirteen and taken to the sport like a duck to water, but they certainly didn't play by the rules I'd got used to at the uni. Maybe it was a side effect of the working environment and maybe it was just a sign of the times, but the great majority didn't bother with "dating" or "relationships" at all. What they did were "girls' nights out," on which they'd go out in gaggles of eight or ten, drinking like fish and laughing like lunatics with one another, until the time came to go home-at which time, if they happened to fancy a shag, they'd just pick some bloke at random and drag him off. It was easy to arrange to be one of the blokes-the slags weren't at all shy about inviting their male colleagues to join them on their riotous nights off, and if you stuck with them all night you were absolutely guaranteed to cop off with someone-but there was a price to be paid. I tagged along only once before I realised exactly why the other lads at work were so reluctant to accept any invitations from their female workmates.

The problem with being a male hanger-on on a girls' night out in Leeds is that it's rather like being a male stripper at a hen party-in fact, you have to be bloody careful that it doesn't turn out *exactly* like that. You're the butt of all the banter, and the talk gets filthier with every unit of alcohol that's sunk- and we're talking double figures by eight o'clock-so the suggestive remarks, the lewd questions, and the probing fingers become increasingly intrusive and increasingly aggressive. It's not just that they're mimicking what they see as the essential features of lad culture-which would be more than bad enough, believe me-but that while they're doing it they feel that they're *getting their own back* for thousands of years of indignity heaped upon their mothers, grandmothers, and so on, all the way back to Eve. Because of that aspect, lasses don't go over the top in the kind of relaxed, natural way that their male counterparts do; in over-the-top terms, every girls' night out is the second day of the Somme, and the troops sure as hell aren't in any mood for taking prisoners. I suppose it isn't so bad if you can just grit your teeth and wait for the payoff at the end, even though *you* don't get to choose which of the witches will eventually take you home, but for anyone with an ounce of sensibility the path to that consummation is way too thorny. Even for blokes, pull-a-pig contests are pretty tacky, but when lasses start, it gets positively disgusting. After two hours of listening to those kinds of reminiscences and hypotheticals, no man alive can get any kind of kick out of scoring, even if it happens to be the one he actually fancies who eventually drags him off. No matter what she whispers in his ear when they're finally alone, he always feels like a prize porker ripe for the Polaroid laugh track.

All of which is beside the point, really-except that it's the context that explains exactly how and why I became fascinated by Sheena Howell. She seemed to be the only lass on the various shifts who never went on girls' nights out and never indulged in any of the ritual humiliations that gave the others such insane delight.

You might think that as an obvious singleton Sheena would be the prime target of all the lads who'd ever been battered and bruised by a night out with one or other of the gaggles, but she wasn't. The others thought she was "too weird."

When I asked one of the old hands, Jez, how Sheena had come to have this reputation, when she seemed so inoffensive, he filled me in readily enough,

"She's dressed for work right now," he said, "but those are her civvies. She's a Goth-nights out she wears nothing but black, hair in spikes, eyes made up like fireworks. Wouldn't be so bad if it were only the outfit, but she's a vampire Goth- not just an Anne Rice fan, though that'd be bad enough, but a full-blown pretender. Says she learned to hypnotise herself so she could access her past lives, and maybe she did, because she surely doesn't seem to be living in the present. A mate of mine who knew her years ago told me her name's really Susan- they all make up names, although they usually pick something classier than *Sheena*. She's seriously crazy, and a bit feeble to boot-takes more time off than the others. Bad legs, apparently."

You couldn't tell any of that by watching Sheena at work.

She was small and thin, and couldn't possibly have weighed more than seven stone, but she seemed more ethereal than feeble to me. The fact that her hair was black with mousy roots was only exceptional because the regular harpies mostly had hair that was blonde with mousy roots. She was usually clad in worn black jeans and grey T-shirts implausibly declaring that she was a member of the Royal Redondan Naval Reserve or the Israeli Defense Forces, which qualified as dressing down even by the relaxed standards of Phoneland. She did seem as if she wasn't quite there, but not because she looked as if she were mad, in spite of Jez's slanders. To me, it seemed that she was slightly *faded*, like a photocopy of a photocopy. Her telephone manner was exquisite, though. She spoke softly, with perfect,

almost musical clarity. Unlike the members of the slag legion, she didn't give the impression of having momentarily switched off a natural and otherwise-everpresent coarseness. She seemed-to me, at least-to be naturally gentle of tone and manner. She never got pissed off by the callers, which spoke of incredible fortitude, and had a happy knack of calming them down, no matter how irate they were when they finally got past the Chopin prelude that we tortured them with while they were on HOLD.

"I don't think she's crazy at all," I told Jez forthrightly, after making my own preliminary observations. "All that Goth stuff is just posing, anyway. It's an affectation-a lifestyle fantasy way past its sell-by date. She must be about ready to get over it."

"Fucking sociology graduate," was Jez's immediate response, although he had two A levels himself.

"Has she got a boyfriend?" I wanted to know.

"Used to live with some guy almost as weird as she is. They were in a shitty band, but they broke up-the band as well as the living-together bit. She moved back with her mum. She'll probably go out with you if you ask, but she won't let you fuck her, and you'll have to wear black-to go out, that is. Don't know what you'd have to do in bed-never got that far. Watch your jugular."

The next time Sheena and I were on the same two-to-ten shift, I came to work in black Levis and a black T-shirt, whose Gothic qualifications were only slightly compromised by the luminous green *X-Files* logo on the back. When the shift was about to finish, I logged off five minutes early, having already taken my quota of calls, and went over to her cubbyhole.

"Hi," I said. "I'm Tony Weever, with a double *e*. Started a couple of weeks back. Wondered if you'd like to go for a drink with me before we go home. We've got an hour before closing time."

I was steeled for some kind of scornful put-off, but all she said was, "Okay."

"You're Sheena, right?" I prompted.

"That's right," she said, turning away so that she could take one more call, although I was certain that she'd already made her score. I waited patiently for her to finish, then guided her to the recently redecorated Cock and Crown in Sholebrooke Avenue, which was safely distant from any watering hole that the harpy patrol might be nipping into for a quick one. She asked for a half of Dry Blackthorn, showing commendable restraint.

"Never been in here," she observed. "The maroon plastic upholstery's seriously revolting."

"You should have seen it before," I told her. "Bad case of Oscar Wilde wallpaper-three pints and you wanted to fight it to the death."

She didn't laugh, but she contrived to give the impression that it wasn't because she didn't understand the joke.

"Jez told me you used to be in a band," I said when we sat down.

"Yes," she said. "It split. Davy and I are hoping to do something else."

"Davy?"

"We used to live together, but we don't now. It's just a music thing now."

"You sing?"

"And write lyrics. He does the music. We'll record a CD when we're ready."

"A DIY job?"

"That's right. It's normal, with our kind of thing."

"I was at the university for three years-did your band ever play there?"

"No. What did you do?"

"Sociology."

"So why aren't you a social worker?"

"That's social admin. If I wanted to do something like that, I'd have to do a vocational qualification. I considered the probation service, but only for a minute. Much safer to deal with the criminal classes over the phone, and I'm too deeply in debt to do another year's training right away. I'm hoping to get a job in the media, but so's everybody else in the world. Where do you live?"

"With my mum, in Cross Gates. You?"

"Out past St James's and the Corporation Cemetery. No dad?"

"No. Mum was married, but I was too young to notice when it broke up. He died soon afterwards. Mum took Libby-that's my older sister-to the funeral, because she remembered him, but I didn't go."

"I don't know my dad either," I admitted, "although he's still alive. Mum and he were never married. My two brothers and I all have different fathers, so it all got a bit complicated."

"Lib's my full sister," she said, "but my little brother's only a half."

The conversation was flowing more easily now that we'd established things in common, but it was way too downbeat. "So why'd you change your name to Sheena?" I asked, in a blatant attempt to lighten it up.

"Libby went to see the Cramps on their last British tour, shortly after I joined the scene. They had a song called 'Sheena's in a Goth Gang.' Lib started calling me Sheena because she thought it was funny, in a contemptuous sort of way. The best way to deal with put-downs is to accept them and take them one step further, don't you think? Now I'm Sheena to everybody."

"While the real you remains secret. Why not? Does the fact that you sometimes wear an Israeli Defense Forces T-shirt mean that you're Jewish?"

"No. Davy brought it back for me from Jerusalem. He bought it in an Arab shop on the Via Dolorosa. He thought it was funny that the Arab shops were making money out of them. Maybe the Arabs did, too. The Redondan Naval Reserve one was from him, too. He gets the Redondan Cultural Foundation Newsletter. You'd probably like him."

I had my own ideas about the likelihood of that, but I wasn't about to spoil things by saying so. Nor was I about to ask her opinion of past-life regression or vampires unless and until she introduced the topic first. A changed name is one thing; esoteric interests that she might be taking a shade too seriously were another.

"I don't know much about Goths," I confessed, thinking that it was probably safe to go that far. "I've seen them around, of course, ever since the good old days when the Sisters of Mercy were *the* local heroes."

"That's retro-Goth now," she said. "Things have moved on."

"To Marilyn Manson?"

"That's flash metal-bastard son of Alice Cooper."

"Nick Cave?" I queried, getting slightly desperate.

"He's still okay, but basically mainstream. The whole point is not to like the things that other people like, not to think the things that other people think, not to want the things that other people want, and not to do the things that other people do. Every time an idol becomes generally popular, the insiders lose interest. If you'd ever heard of any of the bands that I'd pick as favourites, I'd probably be disappointed."

"Try me," I said bravely.

"I like to dance to Inkubus Sukkubus and the Horatii. I also listen to Ataraxia, Mantra, and Sopor Aeternus, and dark ambient stuff like Endura."

The bright side was that I didn't have to disappoint her.

"Even an oppositional subculture has to have norms of its own," I pointed out, letting my sociology degree show. "You still have to think the things that *certain* other people think, etcetera, etcetera. Want another?"

"I can afford to buy a round."

"Yes, but I'm drinking pints and you're on halves, so it's only fair if I buy two before you buy one."

"Okay. But it's not true about the conformist nonconformity thing. There's a dress code of sorts, and shared tastes in music, but that doesn't mean that we all think the same things or want the same things, etcetera. We can be as weird as we like, but we don't have to be *similarly* weird. No such thing as *too weird*, of course." She was obviously familiar with Jez's opinion of her fuckability.

I fetched the drinks before I said: "And exactly how weird are you?"

"Didn't the little bird tell you?"

"Only bullshit. I didn't take him seriously."

"That's because you didn't want to. You were going to ask me out, so you didn't want to believe anything too silly."

"No, honestly," I said valiantly. "It was bullshit, but I wouldn't have minded. Be a pity if we were all the same, as Gran used to say."

" 'There's nowt so queer as folk,' " she quoted. "But Jez doesn't know the half of it. Do you believe in reincarnation?"

"No. Do you?"

"Yes. And how. How about vampires?" She was being deliberately provocative.

"Well," I said carefully, "that would depend what you meant by vampire."

"Oh, right," she said. "The 'anyone can drink blood if they want to' routine. That's not what I mean."

"If you mean the undead rising from their graves by night, perennially in danger of crumbling to dust in sunlight, invisible in mirrors, then no," I said. "It doesn't make any sense. Anyway, blood is just blood, not some magical elixir."

"We die every night," she said, in her scrupulous telephone voice. "We surrender our hold on consciousness, and we rise from the grave every time we dream, hungry as well as invulnerable. We all wake up different-even those of us who never meet an incubus or succubus. Our true selves are invisible to us, especially when we look in mirrors. Blood is just blood if you cut yourself, or while it's sloshing around your veins, but to a vampire, blood is life-and when your blood's been drunk by a vampire, you wake up *very* different. If it happens often enough, you can never go back to what you were before. All that stuff about shrivelling up in the sunlight is complete crap, though-the movies invented that."

I burst out laughing, because I thought it was a punch line-and when she kept a studiously straight face I *still* thought it was a punch line.

"You're cheating," I pointed out. "You're changing the supernatural into the merely metaphorical."

"No I'm not," she said. "That's your interpretation, not mine. Most people don't realise how supernatural even the everyday things are. Not just all dreaming but all feeling. Life itself, even reason. It's all supernatural. Vampires are ordinary *because* they're supernatural, not in spite of it."

"Ah, I get it," I said, figuring that I'd cottoned on to what she was doing and why. "It's more Sheena, isn't it? You take the put-downs and you run with them, taking them so much further that all the mockery's discharged. If people accuse you of being crazy, you take the bullshit on and double it, until it becomes surreal. Cool. I like it. I really do."

"That's your interpretation," she repeated, "not mine"- but I thought I had the measure of her, and I thought I understood the way she played the game. I wasn't lying to her. I really did like it.

"It's getting late," I said. "Maybe I should take you home."

"I knew you wouldn't let me get a round," she said. "Too macho. Not exactly convincing, is it, from a sociology graduate? You should go out with the girls a few more times. That'd toughen you up."

"I'm not in the least macho," I assured her, figuring that I might as well get in on the game. "I always wanted to be-even took masculinity A level. I was okay on the theory, but I failed the practical. I only became a sociologist so I could learn to understand my own dismal failings as a mere male. I would have done psychology, but in psychology you have to blame everything on your parents, and it didn't seem fair to Mum. In sociology, it's the entire society's fault. Share the wealth and share the blame, I say. So much more PC than blaming bad karma left over from Atlantis."

Not that I don't believe in Atlantis, of course. I believe United are going to win the league and that New Labour still intend to cut hospital waiting lists and help the pensioners, so why would I have any difficulty believing in Atlantis?"

"Which United?" she asked.

"Darling," I said, "there is, by definition, only one United, whatever fools may think in Manchester, Sheffield, or bloody Dundee. Did you know that Elland Road has the only five-stall dog track in the country?"

"No."

"Well then, it's obviously true what they say. You *do* learn something new every day. Tell you what-I'll get them in and you can slip me the money under the table when nobody's looking."

"Somebody would see us out of the corner of his eye and get the wrong idea," she said. "Anyway, it's nearly last orders."

I think I'll owe you one and get the last bus. You don't have to see me home. We creatures of the night can look after ourselves."

All in all, it was a perfectly satisfactory predate. Even after the intensity of the vampire discussion, I didn't think Jez could be taken seriously. I didn't think Sheena was crazy-and even if she was, I figured, I should still be able to worm my way into her knickers, given time and a little native wit.

"You want to take me ten-pin bowling at the Merrion Centre?" she asked when I laid out my proposition for a first real date.

"Why not?" I said. "Bright lights and polished lanes-the pastel pullovers are optional. Wouldn't want to go somewhere dark and gloomy where we'd fade into the background, would we?" I figured that the blind-side approach was best, although I'd already done what any university man would do when faced with a tactical problem-I'd visited the Central Library and Miles's secondhand bookshop in search of research materials.

"Oh, all right," she said. "Anything's better than television-and if it's good enough for Homer Simpson, it's good enough for me."

We were on eight-to-four, so we had time to go home and make ourselves beautiful before meeting up at the Merrion. I'd decided that too safe a compromise would look wimpy, so I'd borrowed a black leather jacket from half-brother Jack. I already had a black silk shirt, which I'd bought under the mistaken impression that the creases wouldn't be so obvious if it didn't get ironed in an emergency, and a decent pair of black trousers. My gingery hair did let the ensemble down somewhat, but I wasn't ready to start dyeing it yet.

I half expected Sheena to have gone the whole hog, but she hadn't. Her boots had only two-inch heels and her leggings only had a slight sheen. Her velvety jacket was cut like a Tudor doublet with a drawstring at the waist, but she hadn't done anything extravagant with her hair except for renewing the dye. Her mascara was almost conservative.

"You're not quite ready for the *real* me," she told me when I told her she looked beautiful.

"I'm working on it," I assured her.

I figured that I'd have no difficulty at all beating her on the 1st lane. Even if she'd played before, I reasoned, she couldn't have had much practice recently, and she was bound to feel bad about having to check her boots in favour of style-disaster flatties. It turned out, however, that she was every bit as neat and meticulous with a bowling ball as she was with a phone and keyboard, and I made the mistake of starting with a heavy ball. It wasn't until I put the black one aside and accepted that I was one of nature's reds that I got into a groove. Sheena won the first game by 120-113, and I had to sweat to get the best out of three; I needed 160 to outscore her on the third and I only just managed it.

"I knew you could do it," she said when I collected the necessary eight on a final-frame spare. "You're the sort who raises his game under pressure. Not many of those about in this town. Wasted in Phoneland."

"It's just a stopgap." I said, revelling in the compliment as we reclaimed our footwear and gravitated towards the bar.

"Course it is," she said. "According to the techies, it'll only be a couple of years before the whole place disappears up its own arse. The next-generation software will let them farm the work out to people's homes. I'll have to jack it in then, mind- no way I'm spending all day with Mum and Marty the brat. Lib says she can get me a job at Gap, but I wouldn't want to work in a mall, and I certainly wouldn't want a job where I was somebody's crazy little sister."

"Maybe your singing career will take off," I suggested as I ordered a pint and a half of Dry Blackthorn.

"I'll get these," she said. I let her; in a bowling alley, anything goes. "Davy's not ready yet," she added, as we made our way to a cubicle. "He gave me a tape last week, but he says it's only half cooked. I'll find the words, but I'll probably have to change them later. He says he's a perfectionist, but he's really just a ditherer."

I wondered whether it had been a mistake to turn the conversation in that direction, but it seemed better to follow it through and kill it off rather than backtrack. "That's how you work, is it?" I said. "He does the tunes, then you fit words to them?"

"I find the words," she repeated. "Davy finds the music; I find the words."

"Why put it like that?" I asked. "Why pretend that it's not Your own effort?" It had always seemed to me to be a peculiar form of false modesty when writers talked about their work having a life and logic of its own which they had no alternative but to follow-as if they were merely passive agents of fate, puppets in the hands of their own creations.

"Because it's what happens," she said. "Don't you believe in muses?"

I was more than ready for any sentence beginning "Don't you believe in... ?"

"Of course I do," I said. "I'm intimately acquainted with the muse of sociology. She wasn't one of the original nine, of course, but they had to make concessions after the publication of the Communist Manifesto or there'd have been a revolution on Olympus. Which one's yours?" I hadn't been expecting muses, so I didn't have any names to drop; I was sufficiently grateful to have remembered that there were nine.

"In seventeenth-century France," she said with a half smile that seemed to be a polite acknowledgement of my ready grasp of the game, "poets thought that their muses were vampiric- that they had to pay in blood for artistic inspiration. Geniuses paid so high a price that they wasted away."

I figured that it was a test-maybe the crucial test that would decide whether she was willing to let me get closer. "In nineteenth-century France," I countered, "they thought the same about the clap-that because genius was close to madness, tertiary syphilis was the MI to enlightenment." I said it lightly, so that she would know that it was the kind of put-down that was laid on to be picked up and run to healthy absurdity.

"By that time," she said, "the art of dreaming had gone to pot, ruined by laudanum. If you know how to let yourself go when you fall asleep, you don't need dope. You only have to attract the right kinds of night visitors to make the connections you need."

"Must be why I got only a two-two," I said. "The muse of sociology didn't come through when I needed her most. My mistake-I should have fed her better."

"It's not just blood, of course," she said. "There are other bodily fluids that will do as well-and some which definitely won't."

I got the joke immediately. "Muses never take the piss," I said.

"Neither should you," she riposted immediately, in her very best telephone manner.

I could take a hint. Sheena was telling me that if we were to devote ourselves to the game in earnest, I had to be careful to stay within the field of play-even if, like Elland Road dog track, it was too narrow to accommodate the sixth stall that the normal rules demanded.

"So how do you find the words," I asked earnestly, "if you can't just make them up the way other lyricists do?"

"You lose yourself in the music," she said, with equal seriousness. "You shut your eyes and you let it take over. It's like self-hypnosis-it's not really a trance, but it *is* an altered state of consciousness. Music's a natural language, with its own meanings built in. It speaks to the emotions. It's the purest magic of all, and the greatest mystery. And if you listen-really *listen*-you know what it's about. A piece of music doesn't mean the same thing to everybody, of course, because our emotional profiles are so different. Music resonates in different ways in different souls. If you want to understand your own meanings-the nature of your true self-you have to find your own music, and then you have to find the words that fit it. Otherwise, you might as well be taking calls at work, reciting crap from somebody else's script."

It *was* a test, and I knew that it was a crucial one. If I couldn't take what she was saying seriously, it would all be

off-but she didn't want it to be off. She liked me, at least enough not to prefer loneliness, so she'd warned me as gently as she could about the dangers of taking the piss. All I had to do was play ball.

I nodded sagely and resisted the pseudo-intellectual temptation to quote Walter Pater about all art aspiring to the condition of music. "I see what you mean," I said. "Our moods have musical reflections, and it goes much deeper than the ratio of backbeat to heartbeat. To produce the right lyrics, you have to find words that have the same emotional quality as the music. It makes sense."

"No, it doesn't," she said quietly. "It goes way beyond *sense*, in either meaning of the term. It's supernatural."

"And it costs," I added, trying not to sound too tentative. "In blood, sweat, and tears. It takes something out of you."

"It takes everything out of you," she said. "Everything that isn't just waste."

Jez's comments about the band she and her boyfriend had been in-and their living-together thing having broken up at the same time-took on new significance then. The one topic you should normally steer clear of when you're trying to charm a lass into bed is her ex-boyfriend, but I already knew that Sheena wasn't subject to the normal rules of engagement.

"It must be difficult," I observed delicately, "to find the right words to fit the music of a guy you used to live with."

"The sex was always a mistake," she said. "That wasn't the way we gelled."

Under normal circumstances I'd have deduced from that remark that wee Davy must be queer, but in this particular instance I was prepared to believe that he might really be wedded to his vampire muse. In any case, that wasn't the important issue. "We all make mistakes," I said. "I never thought it was possible for sex to be among them, but that was before I met the Phoneland harpies. One night with them was enough to teach me that it really does matter whether or not you gel."

"You could probably get used to it," Sheena informed me coolly. "After the third or fourth time they'd go easier on you. One or other of them would probably develop a soft spot for you and let you separate her from the pack. They don't really go in for pull-a-pig contests-what's the point of playing a game it's impossible to lose? They just resent the fact that lads do, and they know it puts the fear of God into lads to think that they might be victims of that kind of contempt."

"Actually," I said, "I think the whole pull-a-pig thing's an urban legend."

"No it's not," she said quietly.

She was right; I'd never done it myself, but I'd seen the Po-laroids. I'd even laughed at them, because that was what was expected, even though they weren't at all funny.

"I wouldn't want to get used to it," I said. "And it's definitely my round. The next one, too."

"In that case," she said, "let's go somewhere a little less naff. We've both made our points, haven't we?"

We had. The only places within easy walking distance where the oak beams weren't plastic and there wasn't a trace of maroon were the downmarket Upin Arms and the upmarket Countess of Cromartie. I took her to the Countess, even though the harpies sometimes used it for girls' nights out. I figured that the risk was worth it.

Afterwards, I saw her home. Sheena lived on what passes for the wrong side of the tracks in Cross Gates, north of the railway and east of the ring road, but the terraced street she lived in was neatly kept-what gran would have called respectable poor. It was obvious that Sheena wasn't about to introduce me to her mum or her big sister right away, so I left her on the doorstep-but that was okay, because we'd already fixed up another date. She had agreed to bring some of her tapes over to my place and let me cook her a meal. Nobody said anything about bringing an overnight bag, but it was tacitly understood that we liked one another well enough to find out whether or not we gelled.

I don't claim to be much of a cook, but I'd felt the pinch of student poverty sharply enough in the previous three years to appreciate how much money you can save by peeling your own potatoes and sticking your own toppings on a pizza base. For Sheena I splashed out on steaks-from the butcher's, not Tesco-and a bottle of French red. I draw the line at attempted baking, though, so I bought a couple of slices of cheesecake from the Harehills Delicatessen to serve as dessert. I'd managed to acquire three more black shirts by scouring the local charity shops, and I took the best one up to Roundhay so Mum could pass the iron over it.

"Not going into the church, I hope," Mum said wearily.

"Fraid so," I told her. "I get my dog collar next week, but I'm not allowed to hear confessions until I've done the moral obstacle course."

Mum only humphed, but I was proud enough of the quip to save it up to tell Sheena later.

Sheena turned up fashionably late, but only by fifteen minutes. She was wearing the same mock-doublet-and-hose she'd worn at the Merrion Centre, but her boots were longer and shinier and she'd gone all out with the makeup and silver-plate jewellery. Her earrings were bats, and her necklace looked like something out of an ancient Saxon tomb. Her eyes looked fabulous, like pale blue suns with black holes at the core, pouring all manner of strange radiance over her lids and lashes.

She'd brought four tapes, but she told me to put them on one side until later. While I made busy in the kitchenette she inspected my bookshelves with minute care.

"Research?" she said, when I popped my head around the door to check that she was okay. She was pointing a long black fingernail at the Freda Warrington paperbacks I'd picked up at Miles's-but I'd taken care to hide the books on Atlantis and past-life regression I'd borrowed from the Central Library. A conscientious bullshitter has a duty not to reveal his sources.

"Sure," I said. "Have you read them?"

"Oh yes. I could have lent them to you if you'd asked."

"That's okay," I told her. "How rare do you want your steak?"

"Somewhere between well done and ruined."

That was a relief. If she'd felt forced to conform to stereotype and eat it bloody, I'd have felt obliged to do likewise, but she was obviously a Yorkshire lass first and a vampire second.

"So what's your favourite past Me?" I asked her, once we were tucking in. "Priestess, princess, or courtesan?"

"Those sorts of existences aren't what they're cracked up to be," she retorted. "History being what it was, the most comfortable incarnations have usually been male-except for the really remote ones, back in the days when the Mother Goddess was all-powerful. Being a dryad in Arcadia was okay-satyrs put merely human males in the shade, equipment-wise-but being an Amazon was even better. The two lives I led in Atlantis were good, too."

"I meant to ask you about that," I said. "Where exactly was Atlantis-Thera or north of the Azores?"

"Malta," she said unhesitatingly.

"Malta isn't underwater," I pointed out.

"No," she admitted, "but it did get comprehensively drowned and scrubbed clean of all habitation during the disaster. It was an asteroid, I think, like the Tunguska object. The tidal wave wiped out the whole of civilization in the Middle East and Africa, thousands of years before the eruption that destroyed Thera."

"It must have been painful amputating your left breast so that you could use a bow when you were an Amazon," I observed. "I hope it didn't get infected."

"Oh, we had anaesthetics and antibiotics in Arcadia," she said. "It wasn't until the Dark Ages that the last remnants of traditional female learning were wiped out by male doctors. Don't knock it-*you'd* love getting in touch with an Amazon self. Think of all that lesbian sex!"

"You'll have to teach me to do the self-hypnosis thing," I said. "Not that I expect too much, of course. I realise that finding out I'd been Napoleon-or even Max Weber-would be the equivalent of winning the lottery on a rollover week. With my luck, I'd probably turn out to have been a eunuch in a Caliph's harem."

"I was one of those once," she told me serenely. "Great singing voice. Every incarnation leaves its mark, but some are more welcome than others."

"On the other hand," I said speculatively, "maybe it would spoil my enjoyment of the present to be always comparing it with the edited highlights of a thousand lifetimes. Don't you find that?"

"Other way about," she came back, presumably having met the argument before. "The only way to get a true appreciation of what it means to be alive-or undead-is to have died a thousand times. Until you've lived and lost a million joyful moments, you don't realise how precious they are. Anyway, once you've had a glimpse of other worlds, this one can never be enough. If you don't learn to dream, you're letting most of life's potential go to waste."

"Does the soul have any choice about its incarnations?" I asked, aware as I did so that my pretended curiosity was becoming real. "Does it simply get assigned to the baby whose birth coincides most closely with the extinction of the previous incumbent, or can it hang about and wait for a better opportunity?"

"The more closely you're in touch with the sequence of your past lives, the more control you obtain," she assured me. "Some ghosts are just souls that get stuck, but others are exercising a precious skill. Vampires tend to be experts at hanging around-it makes it much easier to visit sleepers and take their blood. If necessary, you can get right inside the beating heart, bathing in the oxygen-rich flood from the pulmonary Vein. In some ways, though, shed blood is better, especially if it's *offered*, as a kind of libation."

I thought she might mean the pulmonary *artery*, but I'd dropped biology at thirteen so I wasn't sure, and it wasn't the kind of conversation into which one could insert an abrupt dose of pedantry.

"Forgive me if I'm being stupid," I said instead, "but how is it possible to remember having been a vampire in a past existence? Do the memories of the undead impress themselves on the eternal unconscious of the wandering soul in the same fashion as memories of life?"

"Yes, they do," she said. "And how. Once you've been a vampire, you never forget it. Of all the things that make their mark, that's the most powerful. It's not quite 'once a vampire, always a vampire,' but there's a definite predilection."

"Like a curse, handed down from generation to generation?"

"Some might think so."

"Not you?"

"Not me. All vampires aren't alike, Tony. Didn't the muse of sociology explain that to you?"

"I forgot about the muse thing," I admitted. "It's all very well for poets to pay in blood for inspiration, but if it were just the blood, I wonder whether the vampire muse would bother with the trade-off. Why give anything in return, unless she gets more than she could have for free? On the other hand, maybe if I'd given more freely of my blood, sweat, and tears, the muse of sociology would have let me in on a few more secrets-like how to get a better degree and immediate employment. But I've got you now, haven't I?"

"Have you?" she countered. She was making a tokenistic show of being hard to get. I reminded myself that it was *all* just a show, just an exotic lifestyle fantasy, but it no longer mattered. All lifestyle is fantasy, and there's no virtue in buying a mass-produced one off the peg in Gap if you have the wherewithal to design and make your own.

We saved a little of the wine until we'd finished the cheesecake, so that we could carry our half-full glasses to the couch. It was difficult to tell how mellow Sheena was, because her veiled eyes and meticulous pronunciation didn't give much away, but I saw the tension in her limbs as she went to put one of the tapes on. This, I knew, was the final test-and I had a shrewd suspicion that I wasn't going to be able to fake it. If I couldn't relate to the music, no amount of bluster and empty flattery would cover up. She'd know. Although she still didn't know a damn thing about the real me, she would know enough, somehow, to see right through me in that one vital respect.

I didn't really know what to expect, but if I'd had to guess I'd probably have opined that heartbreaker Davy's music would tend to the gloomy, the ethereal, and the tuneless. Sheena's remark about seventeenth-century French poets had given me an impression, although I'd never read a word of seventeenth-century French poetry in my life. I just assumed that it was dark, nebulous, and leaden.

I was dead wrong, about twentieth-century Leeds if not about seventeenth-century Paris. These days, with fancy keyboards, synthesizers and samplers, drum machines and computer software, one guy can pretend to be a whole ensemble, or even an orchestra. Davy didn't seem to want to be an orchestra, but he didn't want to be some morose bastard sitting in the dark with an acoustic guitar, either. The backing track on the tape was multilayered, replete with insistent percussion, but by no means unmelodious. It was dark and strange, but there was nothing in the least effete about it. If anything, it was a trifle too full-blooded for my pop-educated taste.

Sheena was so softly spoken, and so seemingly fragile, that I'd expected her voice to be thin, maybe tending towards falsetto or whispery, but it wasn't. The register was lower than I'd anticipated, but the notes were well rounded, not in

the least hoarse. If her lyrics had been written out as if they were prose or blank verse, they would probably have looked clumsy, maybe even meaningless, but I could see right away what she meant about finding meaning implicit in the music and choosing words to echo and amplify it.

I knew that I wouldn't be able to follow or remember the convolutions of the lyrics until I'd heard them at least a half dozen times, but certain phrases and repetitive refrains immediately stuck in my head. The dark romanticism of the music was reflected in images of night and death, but there was a lot more that obviously derived from Sheena's fascination with remote and probably imaginary pasts. There were no explicit references to Atlantis or Amazons, although vampires featured in such tracks as "Graveyard Love," but the half-whimsical conversation in which we'd touched on those subjects allowed me to catch references I might otherwise have missed-to the extent that I began to wonder whether I'd really been as much in charge of its subject matter as I'd thought.

When Sheena sang about falling stars or the wings of time or the loneliness of castaways, she wasn't simply redistributing the standard pick-and-mix materials of teenage angst. I knew that I'd have to go a lot deeper into her fantasies if I were to get to the bottom of her lyrics, and that I'd have to put some work into solving the mysteries with which they'd been liberally salted. Because I had other things on my mind-well, *one* other thing on my mind-I didn't really make much effort to listen with more than half an ear, but that half ear was sincerely appreciative, and some of the couplets penetrated deeply enough to recur long after the tapes had run through.

"I like that," I said, of one refrain which ran: "To kiss and sting through some emergent world / Reeking and dank from out of the slime."

For the first time, she blushed.

"It's Byron," she admitted. "I borrow, sometimes."

If there were more misappropriations, I didn't recognise them-but I probably wouldn't have. One that seemed to me to be more than likely to be hers, though, was: "I need to be free, of myself, of myself / I need to be free, of myself."

I hadn't a clue what it was supposed to mean, but it seemed to me to be heartfelt.

First impressions don't always cut deepest, but if they stick, they stick hard, and Sheena must have known that before she selected the order in which she played the tapes. The couplets that wormed their way into my consciousness most avidly, and stuck most securely, were on the earliest tracks she played. There were other neat refrains, but the one I seized upon as if it were a key was "I want to be free, of myself." It didn't sound, in Sheena's voice, like a mere artifact or affectation. It sounded intensely personal, and somehow found a resonance in me that the more fanciful imagery didn't.

Davy's compositions weren't the kind of music you'd ever hear on *Top of the Pops*, and I wasn't sure that they were the kind of alternative that John Peel would ever have championed

••••• before he turned into a comedy teddy bear, but they certainly weren't amateurish or inept. When the first tape clicked off I relaxed, no longer afraid that I was going to blow my chances with Sheena by being unable to take this aspect of her seriously-and when she saw me relax, she relaxed, too. She'd remained standing after putting the tape on, but after three or four minutes of the second side she sat down.

"I brought some earlier stuff as well," she said. "But that's more or less where we're up to. Davy says it's not right yet. It's partly the mix, he says, but bits of it need rethinking. When he's got the fundamentals right, he says, I'll be able to find the right words." Her telephone manner had cracked at last, and she was rambling slightly.

"It's good," I said. "It works. It's weird, but it works."

"Would you like to meet him? Davy, I mean."

I hadn't been in any doubt as to her meaning, but I wasn't sure what the right answer was.

"Not tonight, of course," she added swiftly. "Sunday, maybe, if you're not doing a shift."

"Would he want to meet me?" I asked. I didn't want to be paraded before an ex-boyfriend as some kind of trophy, displayed in order to make him think again about the wisdom of casting her aside like a worn-out sock.

"He wouldn't be jealous," she assured me, having recovered enough of her composure to read my hesitation. "He really wouldn't mind-and it would help you to understand." She didn't specify whether she meant the music, or her, or both.

"Sure," I said. "Sunday. Why not? Not as if I'm due in church. Still have to pass the moral obstacle course."

After I'd explained the reference, she said: "You've been hearing my confessions."

"Yes," I said, "but you don't need absolution-and if you did, eating my cooking is penance enough for anyone."

"It was good," she said. "I'm impressed."

"Can't go wrong with meat," I said. "Stick it under the grill till it turns brown."

"It only seems easy," she assured me. "The accumulated unconscious wisdom of a thousand unremembered lifetimes. Who knows? Back in the Stone Age, you might have been the caveman who first came up with the idea of cooking."

"I think it was earlier than that," I said. "I seem to remember being an *Australopithecus* at the time. Weren't you the woman who came up with the idea of cutting up gazelle skins to make clothes? I thought we'd met before."

I wondered briefly what the United strikers could have been doing since the days of Mitochondrial Eve to have so completely mastered the art of kicking a ball the size of a dead man's head into a rectangular goal. I drank the last of my wine and reminded myself that there was no hurry at all, and that the more tapes we played through, the later it would get. Within her lifestyle fantasy, Sheena and I had already had all the time in the world, and we could take that legacy to bed with us when the time came, even though I couldn't remember a single damn thing that had happened before 1984-by which time I'd already been five years undead for what still seemed to me to be the one and only time.

"It *is* good," I said again, cocking an ear towards the music centre. "It's too weird to sell, but it's okay."

"Weird *is* okay," she informed me, although there was no longer any need. "And there's no such thing as *too weird*, in this world."

The sex wasn't terrible, which was good, for a first time. It wasn't weird either, which was also good, for a first time. Not that it was ordinary, of course, and not just because looking down at those fantasised eyes was almost as strange as looking up at them. No first time is ever ordinary, because it's all exploration. Maybe there'll come a day when I've experienced all the different shapes, sizes, and textures that lasses come in, but I can't believe that any more than I can believe that in the course of a thousand lifetimes I've already done it.

There's no point trying to describe how Sheena felt, because even if I had anything to liken it to, I'd have no way of knowing whether anyone else could understand the likenesses-and in a way, I'd prefer to believe that nobody could. She was slim and silky, firm and flowing, but none of those words really signifies anything, because they're all mere measuring devices, which only operate in a world of common sense and common sensibility. Even the kind of perfunctory and dismissive sex that the harpies went in for can't entirely be reduced to that. Sheena would have said that even that was supernatural, and that sex with her was much further out, but She would have been speaking metaphorically, at least about the harpies.

We were both nervous, of course. We both knew that it could be a lot better, and maybe would be, but we both took comfort from the awareness that it was okay. In fact, if I were honest enough to put the discretion of hindsight aside and try to recall how I felt at the time, it was much better than okay. We'd had only the one bottle of wine between us, so there was plenty of margin left for further intoxication. We went at it hard enough to exhaust ourselves, and if we hadn't been on such tenterhooks we'd probably have fallen straight into Dreamland. In fact, we were too uneasy to release each other from our mutual embrace in order to relax into sleep, and just uneasy enough to play one more round of the collusion game.

"You didn't bite," I said, neither wonderingly nor accusatively.

"Didn't have to," she said. She didn't mean that she'd had her fill of other bodily fluids; the vital ones were safely contained in a twentieth-century French letter. She meant something subtler.

"If I don't feed you properly, how can you become my muse?"

"I can't," she murmured, very softly. "But that's not what you want me for. Even if it was more than just one more notch on the bedhead, that's not what you need from me. Don't think you got off lightly, though. You can't escape unscathed-and if this goes on, you'll be changed forever. I don't need to bite to draw blood, and if you give me enough chances, I'll get right into the chambers of your heart and change you forever. You might be the kind of vampire who sinks blood like a pint of bitter, but I'm not. I belong to a rarer and more discerning kind."

As the monologue went on the musical quality of her voice was enhanced, as if she were fitting her words to secret

music-or finding her sentiments in some melody that only she could hear. The way we were entangled allowed me to feel the heartbeat behind her ribs-and I knew, even though I couldn't hear the secret music, that it had a greater surge and power than anyone would have realised who was only conscious of her slenderness and physical frailty.

"A lamia," I suggested.

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"A lamia's a snake," she whispered. "I'm not a snake. Human through and through. A thousand times over, but always a human vampire. No curse at all, just lust for blood and every clever way to take it in. It won't kill you, but it will change you forever. Better make up your mind whether you want in or out."

I wanted in. I wanted in again and again and again. I was in love, and not just with her fragile flesh. She was too weird for Jez and everyone like him, but she wasn't too weird for me. The best way to defuse a put-down is to pick it up and run with it, until you've transformed it into a way to fly, and I decided that I was with her a hundred percent when she said that there was no such thing as too weird in our world.

I wanted in. Again and again and again. It only takes one psychotherapist to change a lightbulb, but the lightbulb has to want to be changed. I wanted to be changed. I wanted to shine, as brightly and as darkly as her paradoxical eyes. I had glimpsed new possibilities, and I wanted them actualised.

If you fall asleep in that kind of mood, you can hardly be surprised if you dream. So I did, and I wasn't.

In my dream, I looked at myself in a mirror and couldn't see myself. I asked Mum if she could see me in the mirror, and she couldn't, but she merely told me, in that no-nonsense Yorkshire way of hers, that it didn't matter, because she could see me in the flesh, and why would she ever feel the need to look at me in a mirror? I knew she was right, in the dream, but I wasn't sure that it was as simple as that, even though I used an electric razor and didn't need to see myself in order to shave. Perhaps Mum would need to see me in a mirror, I thought, if I became a gorgon when I changed, with snakes for hair and a gaze that could petrify people.

Afterwards, in the dream, I did become a gorgon, and it was wicked. I went around petrifying people deliberately, and it gave me a real thrill to do it Mercifully, Sheena-who was, of course, undead-wasn't affected by my baleful gaze, so we could still get together and wander through the frozen world like two playful demons, mocking the comical Polaroids that everyone else had become, lads and lasses alike. It was as if all the people in the world had become victims of our lust. Their clothes weren't petrified, though, and the mobile phones in their pockets kept going off, like the phones that escaped the

Paddington train wreck unscathed, as the distant loved ones of the dead tried to find out what had happened to them. All the stupid customized ringing tones formed a crazy symphony that had far too much percussion in it to be plausible, and the beat went on and on and on until the only way to stop it was to wake up, and ease myself slowly away from Sheena's sleeping body.

I woke up, but she didn't. She was sleeping very deeply indeed, as if her spirit really had fled her undead body to go wandering, as a blood-sucking succubus. She couldn't bite anyone if she were insubstantial, but I knew now that she didn't have to. She didn't even have to suck semen into her cunt, or lick the tears from grief-stricken eyes. For her, vampirism wasn't a matter of sinking pints the way lads sup ale. It was authentically supernatural. She could leech the blood out of a man's veins, the marrow out of his bones, the elixir of life out of his very soul, with the most delicate touch of her purple-stained lips, or maybe even the hypnotic gaze of her neutron-star eyes.

"I can do this," I said to myself, not quite aloud. It was the most joyful discovery I had made in twenty-one years ten months and twenty-two days, or maybe in a thousand lifetimes. I felt like the missing link who'd invented cooking, or a newborn sceptic unexpectedly risen as a vampire from the coffin where he'd fully expected to rot. I didn't just think I could do it-I *knew*. It's like that, being in love; your powers of apprehension become supernatural.

I believed in the supernatural, at that moment. At least, I half believed-which is fair enough, given that when I'd told myself "I can do this" without the slightest shadow of doubt, I was really only half right.

It wasn't until we got out of bed the next morning that I saw the bruises on her thighs.

"Christ!" I said. "Did I do that?"

"Not all of it," she said. "Maybe some. Don't worry about it. It comes, and it goes. Sometimes I bruise really easily,

other times hardly at all. No sense to it. It's the same with my periods-one month it's red Niagara, the next it's almost a no-show. The pregnancy scares I had with Davy ... well, I soon learned not to worry too much. My legs get bad sometimes, and I have to live on aspirin for days. Had to go to casualty a Couple of times-but it's okay. I'm not as fragile as I look. Honestly."

I knew that she hadn't put in the comment about the pregnancy scares to remind me that she had a real history as well as a thousand imaginary ones. She was preparing the ground for a lasting relationship. If I'd been a United player, I'd have been over the moon or extremely chuffed, but as a conscientious avoider of cheap footballing clichés, I was content to be very, very pleased indeed.

The rumour that I'd "slipped the ferret to the Queen of the Jungle" (as Jez so ineloquently put it) went round the call centre like a dose of the flu. I hadn't said anything to anyone and neither had Sheena-and neither of us wasted a moment suspecting the other of so doing-but they knew anyway. It wasn't quite supernatural, but it was a divmatory talent the harpies had by virtue of being harpies, so it was the next best thing. If I'd been able to collect a quid every time some red-lipped monster invited me to "show us yer love bites, then" I could have quit the job, but I couldn't. We simply had to weather the jokes and shrug off the cackling laughter.

"Of course I'm as weird as she is," I told Jez, playing the game with the zest of a recent convert. "In fact, I'm weirder. Supporting United and voting Labour is just camouflage. I have the heart of a psychopathic serial killer. I keep it in the second drawer of my desk."

"Fucking sociology graduate," he observed glumly. "I never thought you'd pull it off. Anyway, I'm going out with the girls tonight."

"Well, bully for you," I said. "If I ran across you in the Headrow stark naked and handcuffed to a lamppost, I'll call you a locksmith but I won't lend you my coat."

Even Mum figured out that I'd got a girlfriend, although the fact that I took round all my shirts and underpants to be ironed probably gave her enough of a clue to save her from needing any uncanny powers of divination.

"Make sure you clean the lavvy," she advised. "Strong bleach, mind-*and buy a brush*. Peeling your own potatoes won't impress her for long-lasses expect more than that nowadays. And whatever else you do, don't get her pregnant."

"That's okay," I said. "She's a vampire. Vampires don't get pregnant."

"They do if you don't use protection, love," she said. "Believe me-I know."

Facing up to the petrifying leers of the Phoneland gorgons and the anxious solicitations of my own dear mother wasn't the worst aspect of the rite of passage, though. The worst of it, I knew, wouldn't be encountered until bloody Sunday, when I had agreed to meet Davy, Sheena's partner in musical endeavour.

I'd expected another terraced house in lesser suburbia, but it turned out that Davy lived south of the railway and west of the ring road, off Whitkirk High Street. He lived in what had once been a single-storey detached cottage in the long-gone days when Whitkirk was a village. It must have been worth nearly a hundred thou. When I raised my eyebrows, Sheena explained, slightly shamefacedly, that Davy rented it from his uncle.

"He's kind of the black sheep of the family," she said, "but they haven't completely cut him off."

The incompleteness of that severance was equally obvious in the interior, not so much in the cheesy 1940s furniture that wasn't quite old enough to qualify as antique as in the equipment that Davy had installed to assist him in pursuit of the vocation that his parents probably thought of as "Bohemian." He had a computer with twice the clout of mine, three heavy-duty keyboards, amps the size of sideboards, and various accessories I couldn't even put a name to.

The shock of Davy's surroundings was almost matched by the man himself. I had somehow begun thinking of Davy as "wee Davy," perhaps as a subconscious strategy to minimise the vague threat he posed to my future happiness, but he turned out to be anything but wee. I don't think of myself as short, by Yorkshire standards, but he towered over me by a good four inches, and his exceedingly long black hair seemed to exaggerate the advantage. He wasn't exactly handsome, especially with the bags under his eyes that made him look as if he hadn't slept for a week, but he was *imposing*. He looked more like a young Howard Stern than your average primped-up Goth-boy, and he moved with a stately unhurriedness that suggested that he was seriously laid-back. I tried telling myself that he'd probably smoked far too much dope since deciding to cultivate his black-sheep status in earnest, but I knew that it was a hopeful invention. Somehow, he reminded me of one of those spindly nocturnal proto-primates that you sometimes see in zoos: a slow loris, writ large. He was probably a year or two younger than me, although he certainly didn't look it.

"Tony," he echoed, when Sheena introduced us. His voice was a profound baritone, which added a little more dignity to the name than it had ever possessed in anyone else's mouth, but also a little more absurdity. Sheena immediately retreated to the kitchen—a *real* kitchen, not a glorified cupboard like the one bundled into a spare corner of my flat-to make coffee.

"Sheena's told me a lot about you," I said foolishly. "I liked the tapes."

"It's half cooked," he said apologetically, "but it's coming along. I think I'm almost there. I hope you won't be too bored while Sheen and I get on with things."

Sheen! I thought *She told me that she was Sheena to everybody.*

"No, that's okay," I said. "She warned me that you'd be working. I won't get in the way."

He leaned closer, exaggerating the looming effect. He seemed to be looking down at me from a mountainous height. Knowing that it was just an optical illusion didn't make it any more comfortable.

"There's no polite way to say this," he whispered, "so I'll just come right out with it. If you're pissing Sheen about, and you don't stop right away, I'll come after you and rip your fucking head off."

I'd heard of people's jaws dropping in amazement, but I'd never experienced it until then. The only reply I could contrive was a strangled: "I'm not."

"Because," he added, without any evident change of mental gear, "you could be really good for her, you know, if you're serious."

"Right," I said. It never even occurred to me to try to play the game. Extrapolating to the surreal was definitely not called for in this instance. I knew it was a man-to-man thing, although it wasn't like any man-to-man thing I had ever encountered before. "I'm serious."

He nodded his huge-seeming head and politely retreated to the margins of what we in Yorkshire consider to be a man's personal space. Then he retreated an extra step, as if to emphasize that he needed more personal space than most.

"Everything okay?" said Sheena, as she brought in three coffee mugs, two in her right hand and one in her left.

"Peachy," I said. "He says he'll rip my head off if I do you wrong, but apart from that we're practically blood brothers already."

"He'll have to join the queue," Sheena said with perfect equanimity. "If it came to that, I think I could persuade him to back off until I'd had my own pound of flesh. Blood included, of course. After that, you probably wouldn't feel your head coming off. A mere coup de grace."

It was no good complaining that this was a side of her I hadn't seen before. She had as many sides as I had new ideas to feed her extrapolative compulsion, and I wouldn't have wanted it any other way. "Well," I said, "at least we all know where we stand, future-mutilation-wise."

"You mustn't think it's jealousy," Sheena observed punctiliously. "Davy doesn't do jealousy. He doesn't care who I fuck. He just needs my input into the music."

"I care," said Davy. "I could do jealousy, too, if need be. Not the point. You're happy, I'm happy, too."

The conversation was becoming tedious, and I was glad when it lapsed. I remembered Sheena saying that I would probably like Davy, and that I'd decided to reserve my judgement. It had been a wise decision; I didn't like Davy *at all*. But when he started his back-up tapes running and began fingering his keyboards, I had to admit that he had a certain style. He had the amps turned up so that the music sounded far louder than it did on tape, and there was something about the acoustics of the cottage's main room that made the produce of his drum machine seem even more insistent than it ever had before. I felt it vibrating in my rib cage, not unpleasantly by any means, but more intrusively than I could have wished.

I sat in a corner, already feeling like a spectre at a feast. I knew that the feeling was going to get worse and worse. I was certain that Sheena had only the best of motives for letting me into this part of her life, and I certainly wouldn't have felt good about being left out of it, but it wasn't comforting to be made to see that Sheena already had an intimate relationship that ours—however close it might become—couldn't weaken or reduce. I was prepared to be convinced that Davy genuinely didn't envy me any part of Sheena that was actually accessible to me, but that didn't mean that I had

to refrain from envying him the part of Sheena that was accessible only to him. I could do jealousy, and then some. I couldn't help myself.

I'd never seen musicians at work before, so I didn't know what to expect, but I certainly hadn't imagined that it would be so fragmentary or so repetitive. Davy would play a bit, then Sheena would supply a few words, and then they'd break off-for no particular reason that I could discern-and start again. It wouldn't have been so bad if they'd seemed to be building something that got longer and longer each **time** they tried it, converging on completion, but every time they seemed satisfied with the way one fragment was going they'd switch to something else. They seemed to make such switches without any significant discussion, as if by instantaneous common consent. The intensity of their communion increased by slow degrees, until they both seemed utterly lost. I wondered whether they would even notice if I got up and left, or if I started yelling at them, but I didn't want to try it in case I was right.

It would have been horribly tedious and mildly annoying if the fragments hadn't been so loud, but I found that the assault on my ears had a peculiar progressive effect on my imagination. Even though I wasn't involved in the making of the shattered soundscape, I was sucked into it regardless. The insistent beat didn't lose its authority in being so frequently interrupted; in a curious fashion, the incompleteness of the many repetitions began to create a kind of physical need in the parts of my body that were reverberating, which gradually confused and disoriented me-but as if in answer to that penetrating loss of focus, I thought that I began to see the relationship between Sheena and Davy much more clearly.

They worked on the Byronic kiss-and-sting motif for a while, but not as long as they worked on the ramifications of "I want to be free, of myself." Davy seemed to know what it meant, or was at least prepared to pretend.

As I watched the two of them together, exploring esoteric fractions of some vaster and inchoate scheme, I began to fancy that they were both serving as muses for the other, each drawing the other out and each changing the other's perceptions of their collaborative endeavour. I might once have thought of it as a kind of symbiosis, but I'd heard and read too much of vampires in the last couple of weeks. I couldn't help seeing it as a mutual parasitism that was taking a toll of both of them rather than working to their mutual advantage.

I tried to put such ominous thoughts aside by letting my mind wander. As the train of thought ran off, seemingly under its own steam, it got a little lighter-but it never left the realm of the macabre.

How long could a vampire survive on a desert island, I wondered, if she had only her own blood to drink?

At first, it seemed to me that her predicament wouldn't be much different from that of other hypothetical castaways, who had nothing to eat but slices carved from their own flesh and nothing to drink but their own piss, but then I remembered the difference that Sheena had taught me. To a vampire, blood isn't mere food. To a vampire, blood is life itself, and anyone who feeds a vampire is profoundly changed in the process. So the vampire castaway drinking from her own veins wouldn't simply be wasting away; she'd be embarked upon some mysterious process of self-induced metamorphosis. But suppose that on this desert island there was not one vampire but two, who thus had the alternative of sustaining themselves on each other's blood rather than their own. They, too, would be in a situation very different from two castaways who attempted to dine on each other's meat, or two snakes who tried to swallow each other's tails. They, too, would be remaking the other as they fed, inducing mysterious metamorphoses of flesh and spirit alike.

If a vampire muse needed nothing but blood, I remembered saying to Sheena, she surely wouldn't bother trading inspiration for what she could have for free-but if she, too, obtained her share of inspiration, of creativity, the trade-off would be more understandable. Not necessarily fair and equal, of course, but *understandable*. Even if it were a crooked game, you might have to play, if it were the only game in town.

It was all a flight of fancy, of course. Davy and Sheena were just making music, after their own conscientiously esoteric fashion. They weren't drinking each other's blood. And yet, those bags under Davy's eyes made it look as if he hadn't slept for a week, and Sheena was so slim that anyone who hadn't seen her eat a well-done steak could easily have wondered whether she was anorexic. Now I'd seen the bruises, I knew what a delicate flower she could be-but only *could be*, because I had her assurance that there were also times when she hardly bruised at all.

I could do jealousy, and then some. If anyone were feeding on the substance of Sheena's soul, metaphorically or supernat-urally, I wanted it to be me. Obviously, I thought, Davy felt exactly the same way. He didn't mind my fucking her, but if I upset the equilibrium on which her singing depended, he'd rip my head off-always provided that he could get to the head of the queue in time.

Eventually, they finished. They seemed happy with what they'd done, although it didn't seem to me as if they'd completed anything. Unfortunately, I wasn't like Big Bad Davy. It wasn't enough for me to be happy that she should be happy. For me to be happy, I had to be the cause of her happiness- and if that made me a kind of vampire that

neither of us could admire, I had to live with it.

I knew that I couldn't woo her away from the music, and I knew that I shouldn't even try, but that didn't mean that I couldn't try to compete, to make my own demands on the blood that coursed through her body. I didn't have to settle for being the only one who was changed. I could change her, too, if only I put my mind and heart into the attempt. As she'd said herself, anyone can be a vampire, and everything that we take too readily for granted is really supernatural.

Sheena went to the loo before we left, and I took the opportunity to have another wee word with Big Davy.

"So who were you in a previous life?" I asked. "Beethoven or Jack the Ripper-or both?"

He grinned. "What you see is what you get," he said. "I don't do past lives. Do you?"

That was what I wanted to hear. I'd suspected as much. Sheena had told me that Goths had a licence to be weird in any way they wanted-nothing ruled out, and nothing compulsory.

"Yes I do," I said. "And how."

In the next few weeks Sheena and I went dog racing at Elland Road and horse racing at Wetherby. We went dancing wherever there were dark-clad bands playing to legions of dark-clad acolytes-even if we had to go as far as Nottingham or Derby-and we went drinking in the Cock and Crown, the Upin Arms, and the Countess of Cromartie. Mostly, however, we went to Atlantis and Arcadia.

While I was still figuring out the best way to work it I let Sheena do most of the talking. The kind of self-hypnosis she practised wasn't much more complicated than relaxing into a mental gear somewhere west of neutral, and once I'd learned how not to be an inhibitory presence, she didn't have any obvious difficulty in getting there, or in free-associating fantasies of quite extraordinary elaboration. I had a lot of catching up to do, so I was content at first to offer prompts and nonleading questions. As time went by, however, I began to feed more and more information into the fantasies.

I discovered that Sheena was right about the nature of the creative process-that it really did seem that I *was finding* the material I fed in, not in the books that I read but within the fantasy itself, as if they had always been there waiting to be noticed or uncovered. It was perhaps as well, because the Atlantis we wove out of words wasn't much like any of the Atlantises in the books I dug up-which ranged from Plato to Madame Blavatsky-and the Arcadia would have been hardly recognisable to the scrupulous author of *Dr Smith's Classical Dictionary*. If I'd had to plagiarise the material I used in the continuing reconstruction of Sheena's favourite past lives, the wheels would probably have come off the entire enterprise. I'd never have become an authentic collaborator. Fortunately, my own imagination proved equal to the continual challenge. Necessity is the mother of improvisation, and I needed to cement that link with Sheena because it was the only way I could see to go one better than Davy, to be the perfect partner he had failed to be in spite of the hold his music exercised upon her.

It was inevitable, of course, that the fantasies would come to occupy much of my thought even when I was not with Sheena. At work, once I was able to cruise through calls on autopilot, I often found myself slipping away into daydreams of discovery, in which I would conjure up new titbits of information and imagery that fit one or other of the jigsaws we were patiently bringing towards completion. Whenever I was walking from home to work, or filling in time at home while Sheena was working with Davy, Atlantis and Arcadia were always there to provide temporary avenues of escape. Bit by bit, slyly and shyly, they even managed to work their way into my dreams.

Sheena introduced me to her mother within a week of introducing me to Davy, but I didn't see her big sister then or on any of the next few times when I had occasion to cross her home threshold, because she was always at work or out. Mrs. Howell was no taller than her daughter, but she was much stouter. She had probably been pretty thirty years before, but she hadn't aged well, perhaps because she was so nervous, indecisive, and fluttery that she must have been hyped up with adrenaline practically all her life. I never mentioned Atlantis, Arcadia, vampires, or Goths in front of Mrs. Howell, who seemed to take some comfort from the fact that I did not have dyed-black hair. Sheena was careful not to leave me alone with her mother, but on the one occasion when Mrs. Howell did manage to snatch a private word, she said: "I hope you'll be patient with Suzy. She's often unwell, you know, and her imagination sometimes runs away with her."

"She's been fine lately," I assured her, tacitly taking credit for the fact that Sheena's bad legs had almost ceased to bother her. "I love her imagination." It was the truth, if not the whole truth. I adored her pliant, fleshy reality *and* her runaway imagination, and saw no need to separate the two in my own mind, even if diplomacy circumscribed what I could say to her mother.

The sex was even better once we began to take it for granted, although I did try to be as gentle as possible, even when

she told me that she was in one of her unbruising phases. For me-but not, I suspect, for her-the sex functioned in the beginning as a kind of anchor in reality, tethering the flights of fancy that became, in essence, a leisurely kind of foreplay. I thought of the sex, to begin with, as "coming down to Earth" after an excursion into Neverland, and it wasn't difficult to draw that distinction while our mutual hypnosis sessions weren't really mutual at all. While we were exploring past lives sitting at a table, or in two chairs placed so that we could stare into each other's eyes, the act of *going to bed* was always an obvious transition from one state of mind to another. As time went by, however, we began to indulge our flights of fancy while lying together on the couch. Sometimes we went to bed *before* we began to explore the still-hidden treasures of Sheena's supposed memories, and added the physical into the imaginary as if one could be subtly dissolved into the other without crossing of any obvious boundary. I had no alternative, then, but to enter more fully into the fantasies myself.

It was natural enough, during my early attempts to help Sheena recall her supposed past lives in Atlantis and Arcadia, for me to ask her whether there was anyone among her past selves' acquaintances who might be one of my own former incarnations. She denied it with such apparent assurance that I never thought the point worth pressing-and it seemed, at first, to make my own part as a prompter easier to play. As time went by, however, I began to wonder if her confident denials were a way of keeping me safely distant from the deep core of her dream. The only thing which stopped me making more strenuous efforts to intrude myself into the scenarios we spun out was the fact that she was just as emphatic that none of Davy's previous incarnations was present, even though Atlantis and Arcadia were both places where music flourished. In Sheena's Atlantis, in fact, choral singing was the highest art, much more vital to the coherence and solidarity of society than religion.

"I wish I could sing the songs of Atlantis for you," she said, "but I can't. I've tried before-" I presumed she meant that she had tried to sing them for Davy "-and it can't be done. The language of Atlantis is dead, and I can't pronounce the words, but even if I could, they're not the kind of songs that can be sung solo."

That was, of course, one of the many aspects of her fantasies that were intrinsically mysterious. For instance, all her memories of Atlantis were nighttime memories, although her memories of being a dryad or an Amazon in Arcadia were usually sunlit, pleasantly if not gloriously. This was not because Sharayah or Morgina-the two Atlanteans she remembered most frequently and more clearly-had not been active by day, although they had both been vampires after their fashion, but because they were deliberately shielding their memories of day from her miraculous hindsight.

"Our past selves can do that," she explained. "Access to such memories is a privilege, not a right. In fact, access to our own memories is a privilege, too. Sometimes, when we repress aspects of our present histories, it's not because they're traumatic in themselves but because they're linked to recurrent patterns extending across the centuries, like wormholes."

"There must be something terrible in Atlantis that can be seen only by day," I suggested. "Some monster that retires to its lair at sunset and returns at dawn, like a movie vampire in reverse."

"It's not as simple as that," she assured me. "I think it might be something to do with colour. At night, no matter how bright the stars are, it's very difficult to perceive colour. Candlelight helps, but it's not like real daylight. I think the Atlanteans may have had more colours than we have, and that Sharayah and Morgina don't want me to realise what we've lost."

"Perhaps that's why the magical creatures of Arcadia were destined to die out," I said. "We may flatter ourselves that satyrs and centaurs, dryads and the gods themselves became intangible when humans ceased to believe in them, but it's hard to see why they'd be impressed by our scepticism. Perhaps their hearts were broken, although they didn't know why, by the loss of the secret colours of Atlantis. Perhaps that's why they lost the ability to sing in proper harmony, or even to speak in the language of the authentic Golden Age. Did the Arcadians invent art and drama in the hope of being able to rebuild what they dimly remembered? And is that why the arts have been going downhill ever since, as the memory is slowly obscured from all but a frustrated few? Except, of course, that you're not frustrated, are you?"

"No," she said, ignoring the double entendre. "What I do remember only makes me more complete."

There's nothing in the least surprising in the fact that I began to hypnotise myself with these same fancies, occasionally slipping into a mental gear where disbelief was totally suspended. The only real cause for surprise is that I couldn't make any progress inventing or summoning up the memories of any past lives of my own. I *wanted* to find my Atlantean and Arcadian selves, even if it turned out that they didn't overlap in time with any of Sheena's selves and couldn't actually meet, but it seemed that I was to be limited to the role of disembodied voice, accompanying Sheena when she flew upon the wings of time, a mere parasite of her remembrance.

"I wish I could be more," I said once.

"Don't fret about it," she advised. "What was, was-the past is unchangeable. It's not the worst of fates, to be a passenger in my memories. It's a far easier way to my heart. I just wish you could hear, if only for a moment, the song of Atlantis, the song of the world as it was. I can describe the people to you, the buildings, the flowers, and the animals. I can even describe the chimeras and the spirits, at least as they seem by moonlight, but I can't describe the music, because that can't be put into any words *we* know."

"I have more than enough," I assured her, repenting of the suggestion that I could be in any way dissatisfied with our relationship. "I have everything I need."

I had, too. I had everything. It took me a little longer to show Sheena off to my mother and my half-brothers than it might have done, because I was paranoid that one or other of them was going to say something horribly wrong, but when the time came to bite the bullet, the occasion passed harmlessly.

"She's that thin," was Mum's verdict afterwards. "But it seems to be the fashion nowadays. Look at that Ally McBeal." The last remark was not a veiled reference to Sheena's talent for invention, but merely evidence of the censorious frame of mind in which Mum invariably watched TV.

The last remaining piece of our personal jigsaw fell into place a couple of days later, when we were in overlapping shifts. I got home about five, while Sheena was on two-to-ten, and I'd been in for an hour or so when the doorbell rang. It was a woman, who looked to be about four years older than me. She had bleached blonde hair, but she was too well dressed and neatly polished to be placed in the same category as the slags at work.

"I'm Elizabeth Howell," she said.

It took a full ten seconds for the penny to drop; I had never taken the trouble to work out what "Libby" must be short for. When it did, reflex made me say: "Sheena's not here. She's at work."

"I know," she said. "Can I come in for a minute?"

I opened the door wide and stood aside to let her go past. By the time I'd closed it and turned around again, she was already well into her tour of inspection. She made not the slightest attempt to cover up the fact that that was what she was doing. She carefully examined my furniture, my bookshelves, my CD collection, and my PC before turning her critical eyes on me. I tried to meet them squarely, taking note of the fact that although they were blue, they were much darker than Sheena's. Physically, Libby favoured her mother. She was handsome, even voluptuous, but anyone who had seen Mrs. Howell would have been able to imagine her slowly morphing into something wide and soft.

"Crockett says you're all right," she observed.

"Crockett?" I queried. Again the penny was ridiculously slow to drop. She meant Davy, obviously.

"Wasn't as obliging as our Suzy," she admitted. "Wouldn't take the nickname on-but I keep trying. Don't like to fail."

"Davy told you I was all right?" I said, slightly surprised.

"Said you'd probably be good for her. Don't know about that, myself. She's head over heels. Never good to be that dependent. If you muck her about, you know-"

"You'll do terrible things to me," I finished for her. "Fine. By the time Sheena's had her pound of flesh, blood included, and Davy's ripped my head off, I'll be past caring."

"Fucking sociology graduate," she said. "Think you know it all. Well, you don't."

"So tell me the rest," I said, trying to suppress my annoyance and keep my tone light. She was Sheena's sister, after all.

"I will," she said, "when the time's right. Until then-"

"Don't muck her about. Believe me, Elizabeth-can I call you Libby?-I'm not about to do that."

"Call me what you like," she said. "Just tell me that you're as mad on her as she is on you, and that you're man enough to handle it." She was staring at me, trying to give the impression that she had a built-in lie detector.

"I'm as mad on her as she is on me," I told her. "I hope I can handle it, because it's going to fuck me up worse than anything it can do to her if I can't. Satisfied?"

She didn't go so far as to nod. "Mum says come to dinner on Saturday," she said instead, finally condescending to

complete the errand on which she'd presumably been sent, probably because her mother didn't trust Sheena to deliver it or bring back an accurate answer. "It's her wedding anniversary."

"*Wedding anniversary?*" I echoed.

"Is there any law that says a widow can't celebrate her wedding anniversary with her daughters?" Elizabeth Howell demanded. It would have been anything but safe to enquire, even in jest, whether Mrs. Howell also celebrated the anniversary of her divorce, or the anniversary of her son's conception. I guessed that the anniversary was just an excuse, although I couldn't quite figure out what it was that Libby and her mother were excusing.

"We'll be there," I assured her.

"Seven-thirty," Libby said in a much friendlier tone. "Maybe you *are* all right. Our Suzy certainly thinks so."

"Our Suzy?" I challenged, having realised that I had failed in my duty when I'd let it go before.

"Oh, all right," she said. "Sheena. Don't see why I should keep it up, now that she's as good as out of the Goth gang, but if it's what she wants ... do me a favour, will you, and tell her no if she asks you to dye your hair."

"She seems to like it the way it is," I said, "but if she were to ask, it'd be black before you could count to five. Sorry."

Libby shrugged. "Probably the right answer," she conceded grudgingly. "See you Saturday."

I relayed the entire conversation to Sheena, virtually word for word, when I met her from work.

"They're just trying to be friendly," she assured me. "It's just an excuse to make a big show. It'll be hell, but it's best to go through it."

"Well," I said, "if ever Mum approaches you about springing a surprise birthday party for me, you have my permission to tell her to go jump off Wigan Pier."

It wasn't hell, although it was a bit of an ordeal-more like purgatory, really. No mention was made of the supposed anniversary, which had served its purpose in getting us to turn up. The food was average and the canned lager Mrs. Howell had thoughtfully but mistakenly laid in for me was drinkable in spite of the gas. I probably put one too many away while Libby and Sheena shared a six-pack of Strongbow. Little brother Martin had obviously been instructed to talk to me about football, but he felt that his duty had been done once we had exchanged a few ritualistic utterances about the leakiness of the United defense away from home and the falsity of the assumption that a four-all draw at Everton counted as "value-for-money entertainment," when all that really mattered was bagging the three points. Libby was friendly enough, although her relentless campaign to win Sheena away from Phoneland by extolling the virtues of Gap became rather tedious once the cider had loosened her up.

We managed to escape at half-past ten. Sheena made a show of having to see me home and muttered vaguely about getting a taxi back, although no one was really under the illusion that she had any intention of coming back. We could have stayed on the bus all the way into town and then got another outward-bounder practically to the door, but it was easier and a little quicker to get off opposite Rookwood Recreation Ground and walk up Harehills Lane, so that's what we did.

By the time we got to my place it was ten past eleven, and I thought there wasn't enough time for adventures in imaginary history, but Sheena had other ideas. She was happy enough to go directly to bed, but once there she didn't want to pass Go without going all around the board, so we took refuge under the duvet and turned out the light. Knowing that she'd have to do a little work to get me into the mood, Sheena started talking while I lay back and listened. It was standard stuff, at first.

Morgina was in the principal harbour of Atlantis-what would now, I guess, be Valletta-about to board a ship. The sailing ships of Atlantis were akin to dhows, but tended to be much larger than the Arab vessels that inherited their design. They often carried passengers to Atlantean colonies in Clar-ica-the modern Sicily-and the north African coast, and they often set sail by night if the tides and winds were favourable. Morgina was bound for the Clarican city of Avra.

Morgina was excited, because she had never left the Atlantean mainland before, and slightly frightened by the awful silence of the sea. The night was bright enough when the boat set sail, but the sky soon darkened as clouds gathered, overtaking the craft because the wind blew faster at altitude. It began to rain, but it wasn't a storm, and Morgina didn't take shelter down below. The raindrops weren't cold, and they fell with an eerie gentleness, like sentimental tears-not tears of grief but the kind you shed at the end of a film when lovers are reunited after an interval of heart-rending

separation and danger.

Belowdecks, some of Morgina's fellow passengers began to sing, as if to shut out the rain and the loneliness, but Morgina resisted the inevitable temptation to join in, because she wanted to savour the rain. When she opened her mouth to take in the falling drops, she found it sweet, almost as if there were a trace of blood in every slowly descending drop ...

We were touching all the while, caressing each other, slowly and unhurriedly. We were perfectly relaxed, all the more so for having escaped the tension and embarrassment of the family dinner. If I'd had to set my mind to the serious business of invention I would have had to concentrate, but even that obligation had released its hold. I wasn't entranced, and I wasn't drifting off to sleep ...

But for the first time, I *remembered*. I really and truly remembered, with a certainty that would have instantly dismissed all doubts and confusions arising from the knowledge that there had, after all, never been any such place as Atlantis, had some such dismissal been necessary. As it happened, though, I didn't remember being in Atlantis or any of its satellite states.

What I remembered was being on a tiny island, not much larger than a sandbar. The interior was covered with thorn-laden scrub, interrupted by a few scrawny date palms, but I'd already stripped the trees of their unripe fruit-at considerable cost to the integrity of my skin, which was scored all over with streaky scabs. I'd managed to squeeze a little moisture from leaves and a few inedible fruits, but there was no gentle rain to supply me with fresh water, and I was fearfully thirsty. I was lying on the thin strip of sand that separated the scrub from the breaking waves, and would certainly have been unconscious had it not been for the torment of my thirst, because I was very weak. My eyes were open, and I was staring up at the sky, desperately wishing that the clouds obscuring the stars would break, although I rolled my head from side to side occasionally, hoping that I might glimpse the lanterns of a passing ship.

I never said a word to Sheena. I was too startled, too amazed. I felt that if I spoke, I would break the spell, and I didn't want the experience to evaporate like a dream. I wanted to examine every detail of the apparent memory, and the fact that it was painful only made it more fascinating, more intriguing. If I gave any indication at all to Sheena that I had been transported, it could only have been my body language that conveyed the hint. I said *nothing*-but she knew. Or maybe it was Morgina who knew. One way or another, the tale that Sheena was spinning changed, seamlessly, into an account of an errand of mercy.

"The ship is too slow," Sheena/Morgina reported. "It'll never get there in time, and I know it. I can't go below to join in with the singing. I have to use magic. It's dangerous, but it's the only way. I have to fly, no matter what the risk or the cost. It's very difficult, to sing my own song when I can still hear the other, but it has to be done, and the sound of the rain on the sea helps me. I sing my spell, and I know it's going to work, even though I've never sung such a spell before, because the need is so great. I sing the spell, and I take wing from the deck of the ship. I fly so fast that I'm out of the shadow of the rain-clouds within minutes, although I can see darkness on the horizon again almost as soon as the moonlight touches me. The clouds on the horizon are different, high and cold, remote and uncaring, but they don't matter."

I couldn't remember my name, but I didn't think of that as strange, I was in dire straits, and names didn't matter. Only thirst mattered, and the possibility of relief. I had known, once, exactly who I was and where I was bound and how I'd come to be marooned on that tiny strip of land somewhere between Europe and Africa, but all of that had been driven deep into my mind, to leave the surface of my thoughts free for desperation and hope. In another world, the hope would have died, and in due course the desperation would have died, too, as I shrivelled into a desiccated corpse, silver-grey upon the amber sand, fading by slow degrees to whiteness. But this was an age of miracles, and there was no need to die.

A winged shadow fell out of the soulless night, and metamorphosed into a human female. I had no idea who she was, and could not have recognised her had I known her name. There were no mirrors in Atlantis; for all Morgina's skill in description, she could not describe her own face.

She was small and slender, and the pale features of her black-framed face were so perfect that I wished I could see their true colours. But I was also seized by a premonition that something was wrong, that my need had demanded something from her that was more than she had to give, no matter how clever or willing she might be.

She had no water, but she cut her forearm above the wrist and gave me blood to drink. The blood was sweeter and more intoxicating than wine, and it quenched my dreadful thirst, if only for a little while.

Having done that, my saviour sank down beside me on the sand utterly exhausted, and began to caress me with her fingers, and what had been memory faded by slow degrees into a dream, which extended in the way dreams sometimes do, rendering time elastic, so that the night went on forever... or would have done, had forever been a possibility.

But forever was not a possibility, and the dream was already faded, like a photocopy of a photocopy. It evaporated, as did the darkness of the night.

Morgina tried to pull away then, but I caught and held her.

Stay, I said, insistently but not aloud-and she consented to be held while the sun rose and the dark world filled with colour.

Newton only pretended that there are seven colours in our rainbow because he thought that seven was the appropriate number. In fact, there are five: red, yellow, green, blue, and violet-but Newton must have remembered fragments of past lives spent in imaginary histories, and must have known that there really were seven colours in the rainbows that shone in Atlantean skies. Two of them have been lost, and no longer have names, but I know now that they lay beyond red and violet, not within .like Newton's invented colours.

The colour of the sun was yellow, and the sea was blue. The date palms and the thorn bushes were green-but Morgina's face and costume were tinted with colours I had never seen before. I know now that we only think that blood is red because we have lost the ability to see the other colour with which the red is mingled, just as we have lost the ability to taste blood as vampires taste it, and draw that special nourishment from it for which vampires ceaselessly thirst.

Had I drunk more frequently or more abundantly of Morgina's blood, I would have been more vampire than I was when the sun rose on that tiny island, forgotten even though it lay within the boundaries of the empire of Lost Atlantis. Alas, I remained far too human.

As soon as the light hit her, she began to dissolve. I felt a terrible sense of betrayal, because I had always believed-always *known*-that vampires did not dissolve in sunlight, because that was the one aspect of the myth that really was a myth-but I stifled a scream when she tried to speak. I needed to hear what she was saying, even though her voice had already decayed to the merest whisper.

"The spell was too costly," she told me. "But nothing really dies, and nothing changes its inmost nature. Don't be afraid. I shall return with the night, and you will not go thirsty, no matter how long you remain here."

I was already awake, as far as far could be from any mere dream, but it wasn't until I opened my eyes that I found Sheena dead.

I was hysterical, of course, but I think I managed to do all the right things in the right order. I phoned an ambulance, and then I set about trying to resuscitate her. I breathed air into her lungs and I pummelled her chest until the paramedics from St James's arrived and took over. It was only after their arrival that I actually lost control. I remember shouting "She's only nineteen fucking years old, for fuck's sake-how the fuck can she have a fucking heart attack?," but I don't think the paramedics held it against me. That wasn't why they wouldn't let me accompany the corpse to the hospital. I was sufficiently coherent, in any case, to give them the address and phone number of her official next of kin, so that they could send someone else to deliver the terrible news.

I couldn't stay in the flat, and I certainly couldn't face Mrs. Howell and Libby, so I started walking eastwards, towards the rising sun, and I continued until I reached the urban wilderness ofWhitkirk.

Davy was already up and about, busy with noise. I leaned on the doorbell until it penetrated the wall of sound. When he opened the door, he seemed angry, but as soon as he saw me the anger metamorphosed into something else-something essentially unfathomable.

"Is she ... ?" he asked, but couldn't force the final word past his lips.

"This might be a good time to rip my head off," I told him angrily. "You seem to have got to the head of the queue-but then, you always knew that you would, didn't you?"

"It wasn't your fault," he said, standing aside to let me in, then closing the door to exclude the world from our private business. "However it happened, it wasn't your fault."

"If you weren't so much bigger than me," I told him, "I'd be seriously considering the possibility of ripping *your* head off. I must have been blind and stupid not to see it. First you, then her sister. I thought it was just run-of-the-mill protective-ness. Even when she spelled it out in letters of fire, telling me in so many words that there was something I didn't know, it didn't click. But *you* knew, didn't you? Whatever the big secret was, *you* were in on it and I wasn't."

"We would have told you," he said. "When the time ... we didn't expect... I'm sorry. We didn't know ... so soon."

The message was clear even though the sentences weren't complete. They hadn't expected it to happen so soon-but they *had* expected it. They would have told me eventually, but they wanted to be sure that it was serious first. They wanted to convince themselves, as far as it was possible, that I was, in Libby's phrase, "man enough to handle it." I understood all that. The one thing I didn't understand, and desperately needed to know, was why Sheena had been part of the conspiracy of silence. She had known me through and through, even if her sister and her ex-boyfriend hadn't.

"So tell me," I said to Big Bad Davy, "exactly how it comes about that a nineteen-year-old girl can have a heart attack."

Davy sighed. "Do you know what protein C is?" he asked.

"No," I answered sourly. "I'm only a fucking sociology graduate."

"It's one of the clotting factors in the blood. Do you know what homeostasis is?"

"Feedback," I said. "Like a thermostat. If you're talking about people, it's the control mechanism that regulates body temperature. You get too cold, you shiver to generate heat. You get too hot, you sweat to lose it."

"It's not just temperature," he told me. "All kinds of bodily processes have to be regulated by chemical feedback systems.

Blood clotting is one of them. If blood doesn't clot readily enough, you can bleed to death from a trivial cut. If it clots too readily, clots form even when there isn't any damage, and they get stuck-usually in the capillaries in the legs, but sometimes in more dangerous places. A clot in the brain can cause a stroke, a clot in a heart valve can cause heart failure. Nowadays, doctors can treat conditions like haemophilia with clotting factors like thrombin and protein C, and conditions of the opposite kind with warfarin and hirudin, but Sheena's condition wasn't amenable to any kind of continuous therapy. They didn't even know it existed until ten years ago. Her father was one of the first people to be properly diagnosed-posthumously, unfortunately."

"How can you have *both* problems?" I demanded. "It doesn't make sense."

"The level of protein C in the blood is controlled by a feedback mechanism," he said. "Unfortunately, Sheena's father had a bad gene which made a faulty version of the enzyme which is supposed to switch off protein C production when it reaches the right level. It wasn't that the mechanism didn't work at all-just that it was dodgy. Sometimes, his levels went way up, and sometimes they went way down. His children had a fifty-fifty chance of inheriting the dodgy gene, and that's the way it worked out. Libby was clear, Sheena wasn't. They didn't actually have a test for the gene until a couple of years ago, when they finally managed to locate it, but the symptoms were pretty obvious. Given two or three more years of the Human Genome Project, they'll probably be able to sequence the protein and identify the fault in the dodgy version, and that might open up the possibility of finding an effective treatment, but at the time Mrs. Howell and Libby got the diagnosis there was nothing that could be done except treat Sheena's symptoms as and when they appeared, according to type, so ..."

"So they decided not to tell her," I finished for him, as enlightenment dawned. "Because they didn't want her to know that she was living under a death sentence." And then, as further enlightenment dawned, I said: "Is that why you broke up with her, you bastard? Is that why Libby hesitated over telling *me*?"

"*Nol*!" he said. "At least, not in the way you think. Okay, I admit, it made a difference when Libby told me. I got scared. Look at me! I'm twice her size. I'd always felt like I was handling precious porcelain-how do you think it made me feel when I was told that a bad bruise could kill her? Maybe I did overdo the carefulness, and maybe she did begin to wonder whether I might be going off her, but that wasn't it. It *wasn't*. We just weren't *right*, except for the music ... and I knew that if she didn't have time to spare, she shouldn't have to spend it making do. / *didn't dump her*. We just . . . fell apart."

Maybe it was self-justificatory bullshit and maybe it wasn't, but that didn't matter. It had been the right result, after all. Sheena and I had been *right*. If anything was ever meant to be, we'd have been one of the things that was meant to be-but whether we live a million .lifetimes or one, nothing is ever really *meant to be*. What isn't pure chance is what you make of the cards you're dealt, and Sheena and I had made the most of each other once chance had thrown us together. No one could have made any more of either of us than we'd made of each other, and there was no use complaining about the unfairness of the ill-luck that had torn us apart. It hadn't been cruel fate, or any god that any human had ever believed in. Life never had been fair, even in Atlantis or Arcadia.

I couldn't blame Davy. I certainly couldn't hold it against him that he hadn't told me what Libby and Mrs. Howell wouldn't, and I couldn't even rail at him for not having told Sheena-because I knew that even if she hadn't heard the ugly clinical details, Sheena *had* known everything she actually needed to know. She'd always known, even if she'd

never raised it to consciousness or connected it to her absent father's premature demise, that she was living in mortal danger. Why else would she have been so implacably determined to get in touch with her past selves, to cram a thousand lifetimes into one horribly narrow span?

I had helped. I had to cling to that. I had helped.

The funeral was absolute hell. The crematorium was sterile, the reality of the process carefully hidden by velvet curtains and passionless smiles, but it was even worse at the house, afterwards. Libby and her mother kept giving me books, pictures, CDs, and tapes, saying: "I think she'd have wanted *you* to have these." She probably would have, but that didn't make it any easier standing beside a chair piled high with the obscene loot of her brief life. Davy had already given me a dozen spare tapes and had promised me faithfully that when the CD came off the presses I'd get the very first copy.

On the other hand, I certainly wasn't going to turn anything down that had anything of Sheena in it, even if it were just a secondhand paperback whose pages had been turned by her black-painted fingernails.

I couldn't eat anything, and the tea was vile as well as weak. It wouldn't have tasted any better even if I hadn't still been nursing the remains of the previous night's hangover.

After hell, it was back to purgatory again when I turned up for work. A dreadful hush seemed to have descended on the call centre, and the muted ringing tones of the multitudinous phones were transmuted by the lack of competition into a sinister symphony.

I got seven invitations to go out with the girls, and seven assurances that they'd behave themselves if I did. I believed them. They'd have sat quietly in a corner, with me in the middle, sipping their drinks. Although they'd all have made themselves available, just in case I needed further comfort, they would have done so with unprecedented discretion and sensitivity.

I said no seven times, very politely. Only five of them went on to say: "Well, if you need to talk ..."

I didn't. I needed to listen.

I played the tapes over and over, and when Davy arrived to make me a present of the newly cut CD—from which "Graveyard Love" had been sensitively omitted, although Byron's kiss-and-sting was still there—I played it over and over and over. I wanted to be free, of myself, but hearing Sheena sing those words, far less plaintively than seemed warranted, didn't do the trick. I wasn't free, especially of myself, even though my true self was invisible. Every time I looked into a mirror, I saw nothing but emptiness.

Davy told me that the songs on the CD were the best of her work as well as the best of his, but they weren't. They weren't even the *rest* of her work, left over when body and soul had fled, because I knew full well—although I could hardly confide the truth to anyone else—that her soul hadn't fled at all.

Sheena was a vampire, and she knew how to remain disembodied. She was in no hurry to be reborn, because she understood well enough how much future remained for serial embodiment. The Earth had existed for four billion years, while humankind had been around for a mere million; it would exist for four billion more, and humankind stood a better than even chance of seeing far more than a million of that, provided that the next falling asteroid was no bigger than the one that had drowned Atlantis and scoured its relics from the soil of Malta. She didn't need to rush for her own sake, and she knew that I needed her to linger. If she had wanted to be free of herself when she wrote that song, she didn't want it now. She had met me in the interim. Now she wanted to kiss and sting in an emergent world, reeking and damp from out of the slime. Now she had a reason to remain, suspended between death and life.

I played the songs over and over regardless of the fact that their message was out of date, because I knew that music as the purest magic of all as well as the greatest mystery, and I needed magic. I needed to go way beyond *sense*, into the supernatural. I needed the music to take everything out of me that wasn't just waste, because there was so much in me that *was* just waste, and I couldn't bear it.

Sheena had been right when she told me that the only way to get a true appreciation of what it means to be alive is to have died a thousand times, and I knew that I didn't have that true appreciation. She had been right to tell me that until I'd lived and lost a million joyful moments, I wouldn't realise how precious they were. And above all, she was right to tell me that once I'd had the even briefest glimpse of other worlds, this one would never be enough.

I knew that I had only to attract the right kind of night visitor, and feed her, to make the connection I needed, to find the muse who would teach me the art of living in a shattered and shambolic world.

Every night, I opened a vein in my forearm in order that Sheena could feed. It wasn't strictly necessary, given that she could install herself readily enough within the chambers of my heart, but I wanted her beside me as well as inside me. I wanted to make an offering, an honest libation. I always had to lick the remaining blood away, as if I were a vampire castaway on some desert island, driven to desperate measures in the hope of sustaining myself till rescue came, but the nourishment it provided me was meagre by comparison with the need it filled in her. For her, vampirism wasn't a matter of sinking pints the way lads sup ale. She could leech the blood out of my veins, the marrow out of my bones, the elixir of life out of my very soul, without requiring the delicate touch of her purple-stained lips or the hypnotic gaze of her neutron-star eyes-but she needed the gift, the demonstration of my love.

I tried my utmost to remember Atlantis and Arcadia, or even to dream of them, but I couldn't. I could have made things up, of course, but I didn't. Fiction is all about contriving happy endings in a world where the only real endings are fire and the grave, but real comfort has to be found and not contrived, and if the supernatural is the only place where real comfort can be found, that's where you have to look for it. If you also find nightmares there, that's the price you have to pay.

I paid.

You can't just *make things up*. You have to *find* what you need, even if that makes you a puppet in the hands of your own creation. I knew where to look. I knew how. I paid the price. But I couldn't remember. I couldn't even dream. I had to be content with cutting myself, and watching the blood flow down my arm, clotting with minutely judged alacrity, neither too quickly nor too slowly.

There was always time for Sheena to drink her fill, and she never took too much. She knew the value of extravagance, but she knew the value of economy, too. Her spirit had none of the inbuilt irresponsibility of her body and her blood. She was a vampire-and how!

I talked to her, of course. Oh, how I talked! But I didn't talk about Atlantis or Arcadia, because she no longer needed my help to recall her past lives. The wandering soul remembers everything. Even Plato, who really didn't know the first thing about Atlantis, knew that. I talked to her about the future, because the future was unmade, and the future was where we'd meet again, if we ever did.

"In the future," I told her, "all things are possible. In the future, our descendants will learn to see those two lost colours all over again, and they'll find out how to sing again, in all the languages that ever were or ever will be, in true harmony. It won't always be like that, of course, because the course of progress never runs smoothly, and there'll be dark days when civilization all but vanishes and even vampires starve, but as long as the sun shines there'll be new dawns, and because light sustains life, it also, in the ultimate analysis, sustains all the forms of undeath, even the photophobic ones. In time, of course, the sun will begin to fade, reddening as it ages, always reaching for that *other* colour which is the better part of the colour of blood. In the end, that colour will be all that's left, and even that will fade as the sun shrinks and dies, until there's nothing left of it but the black hole at its core and a surrounding chaos of strange energies. With luck, my love, you'll survive even that; in four billion years even humans ought to be able to reach the stars, and the undead will surely lead the way."

She didn't answer, but I didn't really expect her to. After all, her voice was the one part of her that I still had in superabundance, and it was always there, filling the space between me and the walls.

/ want to be free, of myself, of myself,

I want to be free, of myself.

I didn't really need her voice, although I was very glad to have it, and in such abundance. In the final analysis, I needed only her thirst. It would have been better if I'd been able to remember, or even to dream, but life isn't fair, and you have to play the cards you're dealt to the best of your ability. All I could give her was blood, and for that, she wasn't obliged to be a generous muse.

But still, */ had her thirst.*

I knew she was there every time I cut myself. She was there the rest of the time, too, day and night. She was with me when I slept, no matter how dark and bleak my dreaming was, and she was with me when I went to work, to play the puppet in my best telephone manner, always speaking softly and always following the script with minute precision. She was with me in the Headrow and Harehills Lane, at the Merrion Centre and El-land Road ... but when I cut myself, I *knew* she was there, because I knew exactly how thirsty she was, and exactly what she needed to satisfy her thirst.

She'd have done as much for me.

In another life, she already had, even though it set her free upon the tides of time, incapable for a little while of anything but drifting. I'd lost her then, but I didn't have to lose her this time around, and I didn't. I clung on, and I clung hard.

The more blood I shed, and the more I consumed, the greater the change in me became, but I didn't become the kind of vampire she had been. She'd never promised me that. All she'd promised me was that I would be changed, and changed forever, and I was.

In a way, it might have been easier to become a shadow of my former self, to pine away and die of a broken heart, but I didn't have a broken heart. My heart was healthy-a fit abode for the sickliest of disembodied vampire spirits-and I didn't want to be a shadow while I still had blood to feed a shadow's thirst.

Sheena had needed me while she was alive, because nobody else could give her what she needed then, and she needed me just as much now that she was dead, because mine was the blood that she wanted more than any other. When her body had been more than ash and dust, it had been my body that she had needed to give her comfort, and now that there was nothing left of her flesh but ash and dust, it was my blood that she needed *for comfort*. Any body might have done for warmth, and any blood might have slaked her thirst, but *for comfort*, it had to be my blood, exactly as it had to be my body. I offered it, as a testament of love.

It was for comfort, too, that I needed her. For me, nobody else would have sufficed, even for warmth-but what I needed her for most urgently and most ardently was comfort. That was why I cut myself, night after night after night, to feed her and to try-crudely and hopelessly-to feed myself. She was always satisfied, but I never was. I continued to thirst, because no matter how much I had changed, I wasn't the kind of vampire who could sustain myself on a desert island, with none but a ghostly spirit for company.

"Life goes on, love," Mum said-and she was absolutely right. She had no idea how right she was. Life does go on, but that doesn't mean that it doesn't hurt.

"It could have been either of us," Libby told me, once when she came to the flat to see how I was doing. "It could have been both, or neither. It could have been me and not her.

Maybe it should have been. I was the older one, after all. If I said I wished I could trade places with her, I'd be a liar, but maybe that's the way it should have been."

"No," I said, in my best telephone manner. "It shouldn't. You couldn't have handled it the way Sheena handled it."

"We never even talked about it," she went on. "That was absolutely the worst thing about not telling her. We never talked about it. It's almost as if we weren't sisters at all."

"It doesn't matter," I assured her. "She knew what she needed to know. She said what she needed to say. She heard what she needed to hear."

"From you," she said. "What did I ever give her, apart from that stupid name?"

"It was what she needed," I pointed out. "If it hadn't been, she wouldn't have taken it."

Libby went away happy that we'd shared a few confidences, genuinely pleased that I was bearing up and doing well. She didn't offer me any more than her good wishes because she was being loyal to her little sister. She knew, even though she'd never be able to say so, that Sheena wasn't entirely gone. She might even have known what Sheena was, even though she couldn't actually *believe* in ghosts, let alone in vampires. Working in Gap and living at home had fixated her mind on superficial things. Her mother was like my mother, full of common sense and well-tried saws. I never heard Mrs. Howell say, "Life goes on, love," but I expect she did, even when there was no one in the room to hear her.

The first person to see my scars-inevitably, I suppose- was Mum, but she didn't see them for what they were. "What *have* you been doing, love?" she asked. I could have told her that I'd been out collecting blackberries and she'd have believed it, but what I actually said was a far more blatant lie, even though it was nearer to the truth.

"I've had them for ages," I said. "They'll be fine, as long as I never get scurvy. Collagen dissolves when you get scurvy, apparently, and the wounds open up."

"You and your books," she said-which was a tamer version of *fucking sociology graduate*. I kept drinking the orange juice, though. I didn't want to start coming apart at the seams.

They say that time heals, but it doesn't. At best, time scars, and there's no orange juice for the soul that will keep you safe from those occasional moments of spiritual scurvy when the scars break down and everything pours out. Even though I couldn't remember, or even dream, I still had those nightmare moments when everything seemed to fall apart and it felt as if all the blood was flooding out of me at once, inviting every supernatural carrion drinker for miles to fall upon me like a flock of crows. The flock was sometimes so dense that my own guardian vampire had no chance to defend her territory-but such moments did pass as my spiritual clotting factors cut in, never more than a little too late.

I always got through the night, ready to return to puppet life in Phoneland, where even the harpies still touched me tenderly and the gorgons looked at me with naked pity.

"Actually," I confided to Jez one night in the Countess of Cromartie, when I finally allowed him to bully me into letting him buy me a pint of bitter, "life doesn't go on. We begin to die as soon as we begin to live. It's death that whittles the embryo into human shape, death that clears out all the cellular compost day by day, as life takes its toll. Life doesn't go on at all-it just flows away, bit by bit, emptying us out even though we were never really full."

"Yeah," he said wisely. "Too bloody right. That's why you have to make the most of what you've got. Fight it, mate. You might lose, but you've got to fight." He couldn't quite see that that was exactly what I was doing, far more cleverly than he could know. At least he had the grace to refrain from making observations about the number of pebbles on the beach or fish in the sea. He'd been out with the girls too many times to be under any delusions about any fuck being a good fuck. He didn't know enough to envy me what I now had, but he knew enough to envy me what I'd had before.

"She was a grand lass," he said. "A bit strange, but who can blame her? We take our health too much for granted."

"Yes, she was," I said. "And yes we do. Do you mind if I don't get another round in-no offence, but I think I'd rather be at home."

"No, mate," he said. "Another time, eh?"

"Another time," I echoed. That was where I was headed. I didn't necessarily expect to get there that night, but I intended to travel hopefully. Contrary to proverbial wisdom, it's far better actually to arrive, but the momentum of hopeful travelling does have its own compensations.

When I got back to the flat, I made myself eat. I had to "keep my strength up," as Mum would have put it. I peeled and chipped my own potatoes, although the processed peas came out of a tin. It had been a while since I'd been to the supermarket and the skinless sausages were a couple of days past their sell-by date, but I knew it didn't matter. English sausages have so much preservative in them that they keep for at least a week after they've supposedly given up the ghost-it's one of the nation's finest traditions.

While I ate I put on the CD Davy had given me, and filled the flat with Sheena's voice. Afterwards, I put it on again, and then again. I wasn't always that obsessive; some nights I didn't play it at all, preferring other items from what had been Sheena's Gothic rock collection and was now-thanks to the generosity of Libby and Mrs. Ho well-mine. Listening to the Fields of the Nephilim's *Elizium* or Dreadful Shadows performing "Sea of Tears" or anything at all by Sopor Aeternus brought back tender memories of listening with Sheena as well as creating an appropriately heartaching mood. Most nights, though, I arrived home without having been sidetracked, and there was something about drinking in a pub with Jez that smacked ever so slightly of betrayal, so I felt that I needed to mainline the real thing, to go directly to the source. I had mixed feelings now about Davy's decision to omit "Graveyard Love" from the album, because I had begun to think of that as the most prophetic and deeply felt of all Sheena's non-Byronic lyrics.

Eventually, I put the kettle on to boil. Then I got the kitchen devil from the drawer and used the jet of vapour gushing from the kettle's spout to sterilise the blade. It wasn't for my own sake that I was frightened of infection, but I needed to preserve the purity of my blood.

The inner surface of my left forearm already had too many scars crisscrossing it, and the outer part was far too hairy, and I wasn't sure I could make a neat enough cut with the blade in my left hand, so I took off my shirt before sitting down on the bed. There were hairs on my chest too, but they were mostly above nipple-level and I was pretty sure that I could draw a good line across my heart if only I could figure out exactly where it was hiding behind my rib cage.

By this time I'd read enough about the circulation of the blood to know that Sheena had been right and I had been wrong about the pulmonary vein, but I didn't intend to cut that deep. Freshly oxygenated blood is undoubtedly the best kind-the vampire's champagne-but as soon as you open up the meanest, bluest vein the outflow sucks life from the air and becomes pure scarlet, pure intoxication.

When I'd made the cut I lay back, closed my eyes, and listened. One day, I knew, I'd be able to lie back like that and

keep on going: falling through the space-time continuum, across the fragile borderlands that separate our own universe from all the parallel alternatives, not merely to Arcadia and Atlantis but to venues even more exotic.

But not yet.

For the time being, I was still an amateur, still a hopeful fellow traveller, not yet an initiate into the brotherhood and sisterhood of blood. For the time being, I stood in need of guidance, of education, of moulding-but that, at least, I already had. I had the best teacher in the world, perhaps the best in all the worlds.

Although I could always hear and feel her, I didn't often see her-but that night I did. That night, she came to me *vividly*, in all her posthumous glory. Her face was pale but her lips were purple and her black hair shone as it tumbled vibrantly about her shoulders. She was dressed for the grave, in a shroud that had once been white, but the night had infected the filmy fabric, filling it with darkness and the stars.

The lust in her eyes was limitless, but when she settled upon me and lowered her head to feed she was as light as a cloud and as dainty as a moth.

When I first threw my arms around her, I hardly dared to hug her, for fear that she would break or dissolve into mist, but I felt the thrill in her flesh as she lapped the blood from the horizontal well, and I felt the force of her caresses, as she ran her delicate fingers over my face and my neck, my hips and my thighs.

When we kissed, she nipped my Up between her teeth to prove that I wasn't dreaming. I needed the reassurance, because I needed to know that the ecstasy was real and not just a product of my wishful mind. Sheena had assured me that even the everyday was supernatural, and we'd had our moments of ecstasy while she was still imperfectly incarnate, but the supernatural is at its best when it's bold and blatant, and ecstasy achieves its greatest heights when it's properly unfettered. To get the best from a vampire lover, you have to do more than dream. You have to overcome your fear of true commitment.

When I came, Sheena absorbed the milky fluid as easily as she'd absorbed the rich claret that flowed from the gash beneath my nipple.

It's traditional for supernatural visitors to prove their reality by leaving behind some physical token of their presence, and Sheena did that, too, but it was the substance that she took to nourish her own fugitive solidity that provided the firmer proof to me. It didn't make sense, but I knew that she was way beyond sense now, as truly supernatural as any creature that had ever defied the crippling demands of mortality.

She had always been a vampire, but I never had before. The final proof of the preciousness of our love would be the future we would share, once we were united in nature and in purpose.

When she had had her fill of me, she lingered, as only the most loving vampire can or will. She let me run my hands over her body and look into her fabulous eyes. As I looked, it seemed to me that I could see *through* her eyes, into the dark essence of her emotion and intelligence, where her lust for blood, life, and eternity was manifest in the tortured energies swirling around the event horizon of her appetites. The display was alight not merely with all the colours of the Adantean rainbow but with others not yet manifest in any of the lives that she and I had lived.

One day, I know, we'll find the identities that would allow us to perceive those colours, and more besides.

That night, with all my heart, I wanted to be free, especially of myself-but I knew that the kind of freedom I wanted was the kind that had to be won, and that the winning of it wouldn't be easy.

Silence fell while we held each other, but it didn't break the spell. Sheena still lay upon me, her head cradled on my shoulder, the weight of her slender torso pressed against my heart, and her legs parted to either side of my lumpen thighs. She was so very peaceful, now that she had fed, that I could have rolled us over and pinned her down, and threatened to detain her until morning, but she would have laughed at me, because vampires can't be caught like that.

"There's no hurry," she whispered when she caught the stray thought. "We have all the time in the world."

I know that-but sometimes it's hard to be patient. Sometimes, when you hold a vampire lover in your arms, you want it to go on-if not forever, at least until the sun comes up. But vampires are definitely creatures of the night, even though the notion that they crumble to dust in sunlight is something the movies made up to provide their tall tales with some sort of closure.

"When will I see you again?" I asked, although I knew she wouldn't give me a specific answer.

"Another time," she said.

That's where I'm headed, for now and always.

I truly believe that I'll get there. I'm changed and I'm changing, and it's only a matter of feeding the muse until she forgives me for the time it took to see her for what she really is, and to understand what I really am, even if I'll never be able to see it hi a mirror.

The inhabitants of other times saw more in light than we can see, and they heard more in music than we can hear. There's not much we can do to compensate for that, but we should all do what we can. We can all try our utmost not to think the way other people think, not to do the things other people do, not to like the things that other people like, and not to want the things that other people want. We can all feed the creatures of the night, and hope that whichever of them deigns to accept our loving offerings will eventually set us free, in one or another of the nine secret ways that only muses know.

Sheena told me her secret even before she died: that the only way to get a true appreciation of what it means to be alive is to die a thousand times. Until I've lived and lost a million joyful moments, I can't begin to know what such moments are really worth-and that's not the kind of task you can rush.

I'm working on it, but I know that even with her to help me, it'll take a lot longer than a single lifetime.

Another time?

If only.

End