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The Fallen Country

Somtow Sucharitkul

He had blank, sky-blue eyes and confused blond hair. He had a wry, dry voice with just a lemon twist of longing in it. He was small for his age, almost as though he had willed himself not to grow. As I dosed the door behind us, my hand brushed against his and he flinched away violently in the split second before willing himself to smile; from this I pegged him as a victim of child abuse.

"Hi," I said, answering him. "My name is Dora Marx." I eased him into the brown, wombish chair that faced my desk. "You may call me—" I sat down myself, with the stuck-record-in-a-groove smoothness that comes from seeing a thousand children a year for twenty years, "—either Dora, or Mrs. Marx. Whichever makes you feel more comfortable."

"I think I'd prefer Mrs. Marx," he said. "But." he added, "You can call me Billy." Touche.

He didn't look at me. I went to the window to slam out the eleven o'clock yelling from the schoolyard. God damn it, they should never make you work under these conditions . . .

I said, "You're the one who—"

"They found at five in the morning, dinging to the steeple of Santa Maria's. You read the papers?"

"Sometimes," I said, flicking the dipping out of his file.

BILLY BINDER. AGE 12—

"Where'd you get that scar?" *—like an albino earthworm, wriggling into the sleeve of his teeshirt.*

"Fell off my bike." Sure.

—FOUND HALF-DEAD ON THE LEDGE, HIS ARMS AROUND THE STEEPLE ON THE SIDE OVERLOOKING ANGEL PLAZA. FATHER EPSTEIN, SUMMERTIME PASTOR STANDING IN FOR FATHER SANTINI, WHILE TRYING TO RING THE BELL—

"It says here," I said, "that you were suffering from severe frostbite."

"Yes. From the snow."

"It doesn't snow in Florida in the middle of August—" No point trying to argue with him yet. My job was to listen, only to listen. I wasn't trained to root out traumas. It wasn't up to me to pronounce the kid an attempted suicide either, or to solve the mystery of how he got to the topmost turret of a locked historical monument, or to elucidate the medical wonder of frostbite in a hundred-degree heatwave— I was only a counsellor in a parochial school too poor and stupid to afford an expert.

I wouldn't get anywhere by questioning his story. Perhaps I should start with something else. "How often do they beat you up?" I said.

"What?" Terror flecked his eyes for a second. Then they went dead. He said, "Almost every day." It was in the same tone of voice.

"Who?"

"Pete, my Mom's boyfriend."

"What?"

He told me about it, never raising his voice. I had been doing this for twenty years. After a while you grow iron railings round your brains. Nothing hurts anymore. I listened, staring at my hands and wishing a ton of Porcelana on them. I knew I would sit there and endure until the catalogue of beltings and poundings had dissolved into incoherence, into tears, into hysteria, and then I would flow into the cracks in the kid's soul like epoxy glue and make him seem whole for a while . . . but he didn't give me a chance. He went on in that same monotone, detail after detail, until it was I who was ready to crack. I held up my hand. He stopped.

"Don't you ever cry?" I said.

"Not any more," he said. "I've promised."

"What do you mean, you promised?"

"The Snow Dragon."

"Tell me about him."

"I knew it!" he cried. Now he was exultant, taunting. I wasn't prepared for the change in mood; I started most unprofessionally. "You're supposed to be trying to help me or something, but all you want to do is listen to me lie!"

Shirting gears to accommodate his outburst "Is that why he hits you?"

"Yes! Yes! But I won't stop!"

"It's all right," I said. "You can He if you want You can tell all the lies you want in this room. Nothing will ever escape from here . . ."

"Like a confessional? Like a black hole?"

"Yes." Imaginative imagery, at least This kid was no dummy. "Like a black hole." He looked me in the eye for the first time. His eyes were clear as glass; I could read no deceit in them.

"Good," he said firmly. I waited. I think he had begun to trust me.

"So what were you really doing, then, up there. Straddling the steeple, I mean."

"Rescuing a princess."

That's how he started telling me the stories. The stories' They would have been the envy of any clinical psychiatrist with a pet theory and a deadline and a paper to be churned out in a fury. To me they were only stories. Of course I did not believe them; but my job was to listen, ^not to judge.

Billy had been adopted by one set of parents after another. He couldn't remember the first few. After the divorcees had played musical chairs for a while he had settled with the third or fourth mother, Joan, and they'd moved to our town, a spiderweb of brash fast food places that circled the Eighteenth Century Spanish church that was the town's one attraction. Billy shed pasts like a snake sloughing its skin or a duck shaking off canal water. The only thing he kept was the name, Billy Binder. He'd always been adamant about his name. He'd always gotten his way about it somehow: throwing tantrums, whining, running away. It was the only part of him he'd ever kept successfully. Days his mother typed accounts in a doctor's office; nights she went to school, dreaming vaguely of a softer future. As I grew to know Billy I would go over and meet her sometimes at the doctor's. She was a dark-haired, tired, cowering, rake-thin woman; I never got much of a feel for her. And somehow I never met Pete. I never went to their house, except once, at the end of my association with Billy; and I shall never return there.

Pete came on a motorcycle and took over their lives. He and Billy exchanged a single glance and understood each other to the core: enemy. But Pete was the stronger, physically anyway. He wielded his leather belt like a lion tamer in a circus. Nights, after it was over—and it almost always happened, every night—Billy went to his closet of a room and lay down choked with anger. He never tried to disguise his weals. He flaunted them in school, never offering any explanation for them. And no one dared ask him for one. They saw him shrouded in anger as in a burning forc6shield, and they were afraid to touch his loneliness.

A night came when the anger burst at last. It was long past midnight and the pain had died down a little. Billy got out of bed, wriggled into some old cutoffs, pulled on a teeshirt, wincing as it raked against new welts. He tiptoed out of the house. He found his old bike leaning against the front door, and then he hiked like a maniac into the burning night. He did not know what drove him. A quick twisty path rounded some shadowy palms and crossed an empty highway and skirted the beach for some miles. It was a night without stars, the heat wringing moisture from the blackness. At first he heard the sea, but the surf-shatter faded quickly. In the distance rose a wall of luxury hotels, distant giants tombstones. In a while he made a left turn into the town. He was not hiking with any particular purpose. It began to snow.

He didn't take it in at first. His anger was everything. But it didn't stop. Fragments of cold were pelting his face, and then great sheets of white, but Billy had never seen snow before, and he was too busy being angry to realize that this was a blizzard. ...

(I'll kill him! he was thinking, forcing the pedals against the ever-piling snow . . .)

And then it thinned. He came to a stop, stuck against a rock or a drift. A dead, sourceless light played over vistas of whiteness. It didn't feel like the world at all. The snow didn't stop. Sometimes it tickled his face. Sometimes it swirled in the sky, its flakes like stars in a nebula. There was no sun or moon. Misty in the horizon, an impossibly far horizon, Billy saw white crenellated castle walls that ran behind a white hill and emerged from the other side of it;

they went on as far as he could see, twisting like marble serpents. Billy began walking towards the hill. He did not wonder at where he was. The cold didn't touch him, not like sticking your hand in the freezer. He walked. By a strange foreshortening or trick of perspective he found himself facing the hill-

The hill's wings flapped, eyes flared briefly, fire-brilliant blue. It was a dragon. Again the eyes flared, dulled, flared, dulled . . . Billy gazed at the dragon for a long time. In a rush that sent the wind sighing, the dragon spread its wings, sweeping the snow into fierce sudden flurries. Billy saw that the dragon had no scales but little mozaic-things of interlocking snowflakes; when the dragon's eyes flashed, the flakes caught rainbow fire and sparkled for a few seconds.

The dragon said, "Billy Binder, welcome to the fallen country."

Billy was afraid at last. "Send me home!" he cried. And then he remembered Pete and said nothing.

When the dragon spoke, its voice was piping dear, emotionless, like the voice of a child's ghost. It wasn't a

booming, threatening voice at all.

"What are you thinking?" he said. "That I don't sound fierce and threatening the way a dragon should? That I don't roar?" He did roar then, a tinny, buzzing roar like an electric alarm clock.

Billy said, "Who has stolen your roar?" He felt a twinge of pity for the dragon; but then his anger slapped it down.

"This is the fallen country. Billy. Here there is no emotion at all. We cannot love or hate. We cannot utter great thunderous cries of joy or terror. . .the world is muted by perpetual snow. That is why you are here,"

"What do you mean?" Billy was scared and wanted to go back to his bike. He looked behind him and saw it, impossibly far away; it seemed strange that he could have walked this far, through the trudge-thick snowdrifts, in only a few minutes. Perhaps time was different here. He knew that time was different in different countries.

The dragon said, "You are here because you are full of anger. Billy Binder. In the fallen country we need such anger as yours. Anger is strength here . . . if I could feel such anger, such love, such hatred as you can feel, I would die. Billy. . . ."

Wrenching his feet out of the knee-deep coldless snow. Billy forced himself to walk toward the dragon. Even the dread he had been feeling had passed away now. "But who has done this to you? Who has stolen your feelings?"

"You know. You have touched his shadow. His shadow has come pursuing you. The Ringmaster. With his whip of burning cold."

Pete.' "You should kill him!" Whiteness burned all around him, making the tears run.

"He cannot be killed. He slips from world to world as easily as you have done." Again the pitiful whinebuzz that passed for a roar. "But we can work against him. Slowly, slowly we can sap him of his strength. Your anger is powerful here. Your anger can build bridges, can bum pathways through the snow. Try it, Billy."

Billy clenched himself, feeling the rage course through him, and when he opened his eyes he saw greenery poking through the snow for a few seconds, but then it was misted over by white again.

"Do you see?" the dragon said. "You are Binder,"

"That's my name," said Billy, "but—"

"Your roots are in the fallen country. That is why you have never felt truly at home in your world, why you have been tossed from household to household, taking only the name Binder with you."

Thunder shuddered through the cloud-haze. For a moment the sky parted. A whip cracking, halving the sky, retracting into the greyness, a burst of sound that could have been applause or a circus band starting up or a crowd deriding a fallen clown-

"Pete!" he blurted out

"No," said the dragon, "only the shadow; the Ringmaster has a thousand shadows, and it is only a shadow of his shadow that has followed you all the way to your distant world."

Billy nodded, understanding suddenly.

Then he saw a red weal open on the dragon's neck, blood trickling in slow motion onto the snow, blood that stained the whiteness like a poppy-duster-"He's hurt you!" he said. They were akin then, he and this alien creature. Both were at the mercy of-"Can't you cry out?" he cried into the howling wind, "Can't you feel anything?"

"No." The dragon's voice did not change. "Here one need feel no pain at all. It's better to feel nothing; isn't it? Come now. Ride me."

He extended a wing; it fanned out into a diamond-speckled staircase. When Billy stepped onto it he realized that he felt no cold at all. He should be freezing to death through his worn sneakers, but he felt only numbness. It was less real than a dream.

"Lets go now. We'll have adventures, rescuing princesses, fighting monsters and such. Isn't that what every child wants to do? A lot of children find their way into the fallen country. And they find a use for themselves here . . . one day we'll have a whole army of them."

"But I want to find the Ringmaster himself! I don't want him to hurt you and me anymore. I want to kill him."

The dragon only laughed, a wretched ghost of a laugh. Billy clambered up the wing.

"Every child who comes here dreams of reaching the Ringmaster. Of shaping his anger into a bridge that will touch the very heart of the Ringmaster and topple the circus where he wields his whip. They learn better, Billy."

"I want to kill him!"

Again a spectre of a laugh. Billy settled on the dragon's back; it was ridged with soft dunes of snow. The dragon flapped his wings, not resoundingly, but with a thud like a cellar door slamming shut in a next-door house.

The dragon said, "You'll never need to cry again. Billy. From now on you will have to save your grief, your anger, save it for here where it will be of some use. Listen! I am the

Snow Dragon, the last surviving dragon of the fallen country. I survived by purging myself of all that made me dragon: my fire, my rage, my iridescing, sparkle-flashing scales that gleamed silver in the moon and gold in the sun. Now sun and moon are gone. And I have waited for a thousand years, so long that I have lost the capacity to feel any joy at your coming. . . I, me Snow Dragon, tell you to dry your tears for the last time. Promise me."

"I promise." Billy found himself acceding, on impulse, without thinking it out. Already his eyes felt drained. Only the melting snowflakes moistened his cheeks. He felt no motion, but saw the ground fall from the dragon's claws. They were rising.

They flew through snowstorms into landscapes overcast and lightly puffed with snow. Here and there the outlines of castles, here and there a spire poking through the whiteness. There were oceans frosted with vanilla icing. There were cities full of silent people, trudging listlessly, never pausing to watch the dragon swooping in the sky, never lifting their glazed-dead eyes from the snow. At times the sky opened, the whip cracked once, twice, thunderclap-swift, raising fresh welts in the dragon's hide. They flew on;

and the Snow Dragon never seemed to notice the Ringmaster's capricious punishments,

"Do you still want to kill him?" said the dragon. The air streamed past Billy's face, and yet he felt nothing, as though he carried around him a bubble of utter stillness. "After what you've seen he can do—"

"Yes! Yes!" Billy cried fiercely. Anger pounded inside him. "I see what I have to do now; I see why I was brought here!" And he dosed his eyes, thinking of the bridge of anger. And again and again the lightning-whip cracked. Although he didn't feel its wetness he saw he was sitting in a pool of congealing blood. Dragon's blood. Purple, smoking in the chill air.

I pushed myself into a nice, controlled, professional posture.' 'I liked your story,' I said, noting from the silence through the window that the forty-five minutes were over.

HOW can he sit there and spin such a haunting web of dreams—I was shivering in my chair. So was Billy, as thought from terrible cold. I thought. He has plucked, out of the septic tank of the human unconscious, an image of such precision, such startling profundity, an image of the dark country we all carry inside us ... I checked myself, knowing I was beginning to sound like a pretentious academic paper. Get a grip on yourself.

"Billy," I said, trying to gauge my tone, to show just the right blend of concern and unconcern. His story cried out for involvement, for belief, the way poetry does even when it lies. But my job was not to sit back and revel in the mystery and the beauty of his delusions. It was to help him find reality ... to shatter the crystal goblet with my

sledgehammer of platitudes. "I liked it," I repeated-

"It wasn't a story."

"Of course not."

Pause. "See you next week," I tried a noncommittal half-smile.

"Sure," And suddenly he was gone, leaving me alone to hunt for shadows in the shadowless sunshine.

The following week, Billy said, "I wait until it builds up, until I can't stand it any more. And then it bursts out of me and I'm free to enter the fallen country. And afterwards, I find myself in bed or maybe in some strange place, and sometimes I'll be blue with cold and my joints will feel like icicles and I'll be shaking all over ..."

I found the mother, Joan, at a desk in an office in a huge building, confined in by expanses of naked glass, always reaching for the phone.

I said, "You know there's at least one way of ending the problem, don't you?"

She said, "Yes." When she looked at me she reminded me of myself, and I was unnerved by this. She was a dark-haired, slight woman, who didn't look like Billy at all—well, that was only to be expected. Unlike her stepson, she did not hide her feelings well. I saw her guilt very clearly.

I said, "Then why don't you get rid of the man?"

She paused to take an appointment. A crisp, medicinal odour wisped by for a moment. Outside, palm-fringed concrete paths criss-crossed a carpet of harsh, brash green. But I was thinking of snow, of cold, numbing snow. Finally she answered me, speaking with difficulty.

"I can't,»i can't!" She was crying a little, and I found myself turning away, embarrassed- "What can I do, Mrs. Marx? He's a force, not a person—he's not human. And what about Billy's lies? Will they suddenly end?"

"By imagining that Pete is not human." I said cruelly, "you make it a lot easier on yourself, don't you?" Mustn't lose control . . .

Feeling very foolish, I turned around and walked out. I don't know what I was trying to accomplish. All I knew was .that I was well past my good years, and that I longed for the snow, for the fallen country that we all keep locked in our hearts. I wanted to be like Billy. I was looking forward to his next appointment, even as I felt guilty, because I had been spying on another's pain.

Then there were the princesses: some were in dun-

geons, buried neck-deep in the snow; others were chained in the topmost turrets of candycane castles of intertwisting tourmaline and olivine, half-veiled by the clinging whiteness. Billy saved a princess the second or third time he came to the fallen country.

They were swooping down from where the sun should have shone, and Billy saw the castle, a forest of ice-caked spires, mist-shrouded, dull grey in the unchanging cold light of the fallen country.

'Time to rescue a princess!' said the dragon.

They circled the tower, for a minute Billy revelled in the rushing of the wing-made wind. The dragon's flight was a dance that almost seemed like joy. But when Billy asked the dragon, "Are you happy. Snow Dragon? Has my coming done this to you, then?" the dragon's swooping seemed to lose its passion.

The dragon said, "Now, Billy, isn't rescuing princesses one of the oldest compulsions of your world? Isn't it what every earth creature longs to do?"

"I wouldn't know," said Billy, who didn't always do too well in school, and did not know of such things as myths. "Where's the princess?"

"In the castle, of course. And now—" they were skimming the turret's edge, almost, and the windrush had become still—"you must do what you know best how to do."

"I don't know what you mean!"

"Your anger, Billy . . ."

And Billy understood, then, what he was capable of doing. He took the anger inside him, he thought of Pete and of terrible nights lying awake and burning for vengeance, he concentrated all this anger until it took shape, took form... a bridge sprang up where the dragon had hovered, clawing the emptiness—a bridge of thin ice, as though someone had sliced up a skating rink and slung it into the sky. The bridge ran all the way to a round window, gaping with serrations like a monster's mouth, at the top of the tower. Billy sprang lightly from the dragon's back. He looked down for a moment, thinking I should be scared but I'm not, I'm too angry.

Beneath him the whiteness stretched limitlessly. He could not be scared; you could not gauge the distance of things at all, the ground seemed cushiony-soft, not a death-trap at all. He took a couple of steps on the bridge. It was slippery. He looked at the dark yawning jaws of the window, feeling no fear, fuelled instead by his terrible anger, and he began walking.

He leapt gingerly from the bridge into the room; he expected it to be dark but it was lit by the same depressing

sourceless light mat illuminated the world outside. The princess was-chained to the wall. He closed his eyes and shattered the chains with a swift spurt of anger, and the princess came towards him. She was a typical blonde, boyish, unvoluptuous princess like the ones in Disney cartoons, with kohl-darkened eyelashes fluttering over expressionless glittering eyes that seemed almost faceted like an insect's. She did not smile, but walked towards him stiffly and thanked him.

"That's all I get?" he said.

"What did you expect?" said the princess. Her voice was like the dragon's voice: thin, toneless, uninterested.

"Buy expected—"

The princess laughed. "Expected what? Something strange and beautiful and romantic? How can that be, with him up there, watching, watching? He'll catch me again, don't you fret."

"I want to kill him."

"I know you want to kill him," the princess said, seeming to read his mind. "But you won't, you know. He is more real than you will ever be."

And then she stepped out of the window and left him stranded; for the bridge was gone, melted into the air. And it was because he had lain aside his anger for a moment.

"That's how I ended up on top of the church," Billy told me. But how could I believe such a thing? And yet it was so neat, so cleverly paradigmaticized. That the real world and the fantasy should have such interfaces of confluence: the church, the castle. Piety and passion, authority and rebellion, father-shadow and princess-anima, superego and id. An amateur analysts dream.

I said to Billy, "Let's work together now, you and I. Let's come out of the fallen country into the real world, let's fight this inner grief of yours." The words sounded so false, They were false.

"You know what he told me?" said Billy. "The Snow Dragon, I mean."
"What?"

"He told me that I would never have to leave if I didn't want to."

That bastard Pete! But ifs people like him who pay my rent. I too am a vampire, feeding myself on children's emotions. Would Billy understand, if I told him, how we all have apiece of Pete inside us?

Billy said, "Our time's up, Mrs. Marx."
"Wait a moment—" I had no business going on longer than the allotted time. "Billy, won't you stop and just let

me help?"

He paused at the door. We confronted each other for a moment, an innocent child who daily harrowed hell and a middle-aged, middle-class, middle-grade counsellor Jaded with trivialities who must supposedly know all the answers. His face was trusting. He was a pathological liar, a Bar of frightening vividness, but all I saw was a frightened kid who yearned for something I did not have to give. He said, "How can I let you help me if you won't even believe me?"

I said—I couldn't lie, even to reassure him—"No, I don't believe you."

"But until you believe me, Mrs. Marx, well never get anywhere."

To my surprise I found myself longing to agree with him.

When I looked up he was gone. I saw that carefully, methodically, I had been shredding his file with my fingernails. Hating the sunlight, I found myself walking through the schoolyard. wishing it would snow..

I live in a luxury condominium—there are dozens such in our town—where children cannot come. There the old people hide. There I am protected from the nightmares that I must face every day.

Usually I do not remember any dreams; but that night—the fourth week of Billy's visits with me—I do remember things: dragons' wings, leathery, hung with icicles - - . Did my father ever beat me? I couldn't even remember, damn it!

Waking up. Outside—a hurricane building up? Beating of giant wings?

I sat up on the bed. Through the mosquito netting of the open window I heard night-sounds, insects, the ocean hidden by a dozen Hiltons and Ramada Inns. I thought of calling Pop, whom I hadn't thought about in years, but I knew it was too late to patch up my life now—

There was a knock on the door.

Not the buzzer, not the little loudspeaker I use to force strangers to admit that they came in peace. I did not move. It came again, and then that voice, that heart-wringing voice: "I'm cold, Mrs. Marx."

Children may not enter this domain.

How had he gotten past the security? Unless he had just materialized, like in his stories... I pulled on a bathrobe and went, through the dusty little living room, to the door,

opened it—

He collapsed into my arms. It was like. . .when I was a kid, hugging a snowman. "For God's sake, Billy."

"I killed a monster today!" His voice frail, defiant. "But now I'm ready for him."

"Don't try to attack Pete, he's too strong for you—"

"Pete? Screw Pete. I mean him."

He's going into fugue. Got to keep him here, got to keep him warm, or God knows what he'll try—

"Look at me, you bitch!" He ripped his teeshirt open. I saw blood. I saw scars. I saw blue bruises. Red, white and blue, like the goddamn American flag. But his eyes were dry. And blazing. "Now try to believe. You're all I have, Mrs. Marx. I'm going back like me Snow Dragon says, maybe forever. Or until I kill the Ringmaster."

"No!" I tried to hold on to him, but he twisted away from me. Somehow he had warmed up, as though the very fever of his anger could melt away the cold. I knew how unbearable the real world was, I knew the cold hard beauty of his imaginary one, but I couldn't let him run away from reality, I couldn't let him hide inside himself, I was conditioned to helping the children face the truth—

"Believe me!" he shouted. "Come with me!"

Grasping at straws, "All right All right" Quickly I was pulling on an old dress, not caring that he could see my sagging breasts—we had come too close for modesty now—I was shepherding him out of the door, down the steps, into the car, thinking Hospital, doctor, shrink, anything, just anything . . .

I am ashamed to admit that I was also afraid that seeing me walking through the condo grounds at midnight would Jeopardize my rental agreement, would force me out of my own fallen country.

As we pulled out onto the highway, it began to snow—

I panicked, fumbling for the wipers. Billy watched me solemnly, with a kind of I-told-you-so superiority. The snow grew from powder-fluffy to blizzard sheets; I stomped on the accelerator and slithered, I couldn't see the road at all.

"I knew it," Billy was saying softly. "I knew you had it in you to come with me."

He understands, I thought suddenly. *About my secret fears, about the pain I think I hide so successfully. And all the while I thought I was taking the lead.* We ploughed through the thick whiteness, until—

I stalled out. I pushed hard on the door handle, cursing old clunkers. When I got the door open the snow flew in, whipping my face and flooding the car floor with chalky ice.

"Out of the car now," Billy said.

"We'll freeze!" I didn't want to lose control of the fantasy. I didn't want to relinquish myself into the hands of a demented kid.

"No we won't," he said firmly. He scooted over me, a bony bread crust of a boy, and then he was walking out into the billowing whiteness, was striding, oblivious to the cold, had become a grey shadowghost streaked with white.

I tried to remember the things he'd told me. Be angry! I told myself- Anger will warm you.

Why didn't I ranch myself? Why didn't I think I was going mad? I must have known all along, the realness of Billy's fantasy must have touched me all along. . . .

I followed the kid cautiously. Soon I too felt nothing. The wind lashed my face and I could have been in a shopping mall buying shoes. I called out the kid's name but he was too intent to answer. I fell into the fallen country's strange detachment; it lured me, it drugged my pain, I knew that I could live there forever.

The snow whirled around me and I saw nothing but eye-smarting toothpaste commercial dazzlewhite, and then, through the burning white, two pinpoints of blue fire.

The Snow Dragon!

The storm subsided a little. There he hovered. I watched him, believing in him completely. The wings were not leathery-^my nightmares had lied to me-but like a thousand layers of crystal-stitched gauze. He landed, shook a snowdrift from his back-whiteness peppering whiteness-and I saw the sky open and the whip crack and I saw the blood trickle down him, and he did not even tense in pain. I called his name, "Snow Dragon."

"You have brought another one?" The dragon spoke only to Billy. I was here only as an observer, then,

"She's been hurt, too, Snow Dragon! Only she doesn't see it; sometimes she hides it too well."

"You are back too soon. Something is wrong with things. The fallen country is all disordered."

"This time I've come to kill him!"

"You cannot kill him." He sounded resigned. "You haven't energy enough."

"I am energy enough! She's seen! She can tell you!"

The dragon seemed not to hear. The wing came down, lashing the snow and making it dance for a moment.

Without hesitating Billy leapt up. I followed, searching in vain for my fear.

And then we broke through the thick mist, and still there was no sunlight, only a kind of grey clarity in the air. I sat hunched into a ridge on the dragon's spine, my shapeless blotchy dress fluttering a little. I saw the castles blanketed with white; I saw the distant ice-sea, the snow-forts ringing the snow-hills.

"My bridge of anger," Billy said. His voice did not waver. The dragon circled slowly, I felt the kind of unease you feel on a plane in a holding pattern, but only for a second; then I felt nothing again. It was good to feel nothing.

Billy stood. The dragon braked in mid-air, an eerie, weightless feeling. And then Billy began to dream his bridge into being,

At first nothing. Then the whip, cracking in the sky, over and over, the dragon shivering himself into stillness as though concentrating the pain deep inside himself, and I was sitting in fast-hardening purple blood, and the dragon's breath came harder, clouding the chill wind- And as the cloud cleared I saw that a bridge was growing in the air, a suspension bridge with great columns of ice sprouting up from the mistiness below, pathway of living ice, thrusting in a rainbow-curve across the sky, reaching for the crack in the sky where the whip still cracked, from which great thunder-howls of laughter burst forth now, shrieks of a blood-lusty crowd.

The bridge hung there. Girders, rainbow-fringed from the sourceless light, a boy-wide road that thinned in the distance into a point.

"Your anger," the dragon said, "you are exhausting your anger, see, it will soon be gone, Billy Binder."

"Never!" the boy cried resolutely. "Only when he dies, that'll kill my anger, only that." He stepped out onto the ice. Again I felt a second's anxiety, and then the fallen country's spell drug-dragged it from me.

"Let me come too!" I yelled after him. Already he was tiny in the distance. Space and time seemed to work differently in this country. An adventuress now, this old woman who had made nothing of her life, I ran after him, my low-heels clicking like castanets on the thin ice. I had to be with him. I was angry too, angry because of all the times I'd listened to the kids and done nothing while they bawled their guts out onto the floor of my little office-I was going to kill one child abuser in my lifetime! I was going to crush this dream-Pete that Billy had created, to throttle him to death with my twenty years of rage! Already I felt my fury fuelling the bridge, making it firmer, easier to run on.

I was getting tired fast. But Billy still ran ahead, relentless as a wind. With a burst of anger I caught up with him, we

ran neck and neck for a moment, and I saw that he wasn't even fired yet, and I knew I was wrong to think I could help or that I had anger enough in me—I who had never been hurt like that, who experienced the hurt only vicariously. The bridge soared up, steep in the strange foreshortening, and now even Billy was gasping. Then I was lurching forward, seeing the bridge telescope contact between my eyes, seeing the splitting sky.

A circus tent now, walls of flapping canvas painted sun moon stars shivering sheep-cloudlets, floors of mist-steaming packed snow, countless rings where bone-bare children leapt through fire-hoops, their faces tense with terror, frightened seals with planets whirling on their noses, scared to drop them, elephants trampling with earthquake feet, toppling skyscraper building-blocks, trumpeting thunderstorms. ...

I stood there, panting, exhausted, couldn't take anything in. But Billy ... he strode through the chaos, single-minded, seeking the centre of things. And then I saw him, a little man with a whip, and he was dancing as he waved the whip, his eyes were as cold and expressionless as tundra-snow that has never thawed. And I knew his face. My face, Pete's face, even Billy's face, a template of human faces, always changing. I even saw Pop. I swear it, even Pop . . . Pop whom I couldn't remember beating me, until tonight.

The Ringmaster bowed to the audience. The cacklebuzz that had been a constant background, soft-brush percussion to the raucous band music, died down. He spoke very quietly. I recognized a little of Snow Dragon in his voice. and I was chilled by it.

The Ringmaster stepped out of his ring. He advanced towards Billy; again I saw that I was being ignored, that I was a watcher in another's confrontation, that I might as well have been sitting at the desk in the office listening to the screaming children in the yard.

The Ringmaster cracked his whip. Once. Worlds whirled! Children leapt! Blood spattered the sand! And then, like clockwork winding down, they sank into slow motion.

"You came, Billy Binder," said the Ringmaster. "I've been expecting you."

"You bastard!" Billy cried. "But I'm strong enough to get you!" Laughter echoed from the stands; I spun round to watch, and I saw that they all had his face, his face that was also mine and Billy's and Pop's and everyone else's and they all laughed in unison, as though animated by a single hand.

"So come and get me!"

Billy reached out with his rage, a fireball burning tracks in the snow. I saw grass for a split second.

"You've got it all wrong!" the Ringmaster said. "You haven't come here to kill me at all! I sent for you. I bred you to be another shadow, another Ringmaster even—that's how you were able to find me. I granted you this gift of anger so you could build a way to me "

"No!" he shrieked.

"A shadow of my shadow," said the Ringmaster, raising his whip but never his voice, "You too are to become a shadow of my shadow, like Pete, like all the others.

"Billy, Billy . . ." the Ringmaster said. "You could be just like me, I have no pain, I only give pain now; I've been freed . . . Hate me, Billy. Hate me! Your anger only makes me greater, only binds you more to me! For you are my son, Billy Binder, be free, Billy, be free, like me .

Billy stood, catapulting firedarts of anger, and the Ringmaster absorbed them all and grew tall, and snow-tempests swept around him, blurring him. Once I tried to step in, to add to Billy's store of rage, but I was frozen to the floor of snow.

The Ringmaster went on, "Oh, Billy, how can you turn your back on this? We are alike, you and I. You too can wield the whip and make a thousand universes dance with pain, and never feel the pain yourself."

'Til never be like you! Never, never, never—" Billy screamed, and then I saw a final blast of rage explode from him and the canvas wall split open for a moment and I saw for an instant another whip, and another face of another Ringmaster up in the sky above us, and behind him another and another'

Then I looked at Billy, saw him shrunken, spent, the anger burned from him. I looked at the Ringmaster, panicking, thinking: *We're stranded here now, we'll never get back to the real world; we'll stay and rescue princesses and fight monsters and see the princesses get recaptured and the monsters get reborn, for ever and ever.*

I began to yell hysterically at the Ringmaster. He stood for everything I'd ever been angry about. I shouted: 'I hate you! There's no reason for you to be; you're senseless, you screw up the whole universe!'

But Billy said, very quietly, "I don't have any anger left." And the Ringmaster's face grew pale, and he said, "But you must hate me! I bred you to hate me! I followed you and beat me hatred into you ..."

Billy turned and spoke to me at last "Don't you see?" he said, "I could have been like that He's not the real Ringmaster at all. You glimpsed it, didn't you? I was so angry that I opened up ... another country, the fallen country behind the fallen country, and I saw that the

Ringmaster was only a shadow himself, that he danced to the whip of a higher ringmaster. . . How can I hate him?' '•

"Don't. . ." the Ringmaster said. I saw anguish cross his face for the first time. Or maybe I was just imagining it It was only for a second.

Deliberately, quietly, Billy turned his back on him,

I followed the boy like an idiot. The dragon waited by the bridge, the bridge was already dissipating into mist, the dismal, cold light was brightening into sunlight, and—
By the car, patches of green.

Billy said to the dragon, "It's true. isn't it? What he said. That he's my father."

The dragon said nothing. I knew, though, that he did not disagree. And then Billy said, "It's strange, isn't it, how he plants in all his kids a little shred of something . . . that could destroy him, like he was dancing for his Ringmaster and secretly working to sabotage him at the same time'

The dragon said, "I too am part of the shadow. Billy, the part that seeks the shadow's own death, the left hand that does what the right hand dares not know about You have killed us both: him by your compassion, me by compelling me to feel love for you . . .

"The snow is melting. The fallen country will be dosed to you now." He did not speak again, but uttered a roar that rent the sky as sunlight broke the cloud-veils, a cry both of heartache and of joy. and he spread his wings and soared upwards with a heart-stopping whistlerush of wind. And then he was gone, disintegrated like a windgust, like a dream, like a half-stirred memory.

There was the car. I drove like a madwoman, churning up snow, bursting suddenly into the known world of concrete roads and forests of hotels and condominiums bleached lifeless by loneliness—

Police sirens! Lights! "The house!" Billy cried. We rounded a turn, he sprang out and sprinted towards the house, red blur of revolving sirens everywhere, swirling . . . We watched, silently. They brought Joan out. shaking, and then a stretcher, a covered one, I heard the onlookers muttering, looking curiously at Billy, avoiding his eyes, heard them say how Pete had gone crazy and just gone and crashed his motorbike into the house.

"I killed him," Billy said softly, for me alone. And I believed him. For he had found the way into Pete's soul, and in understanding it, in giving it peace, had destroyed it. The inner and outer worlds are congruent in a thousand places. Wherever we stand, we are within a hair's breadth of the fallen country.

Billy had understood things which I had never understood, I, whose job was understanding. I'd been so

sure of myself, coaxing traumas out of children, beating on their tittle minds until they danced out their pain for me in my office- But where was my peace? My suffering was trivial, and so was my reward-to be beset by little things only, to be a watcher, not one who can compress the shadow-substance of her dreams until they become diamond-hard, like truth.

I moved closer to him, trying irrationally to shield him from the screaming sirens. Quietly, but openly, without shame, he had begun to cry.

If only we could wear our griefs as lightly as the snow wears the sneakerprints of children's dreams.

I went closer to him, almost touching him now, and began to do what I am trained to do. At first no words would come. Damn it, Dora Marx, I thought- Who has stolen your roar? I groped-

"Sure," I murmured. "Sure." I wondered if he would flinch if I tried to hug him.