

And the Angels Sing

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Eddie never left the office until one or even two in the morning on Sundays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays. The -North Coast News- came out three times a week, and it seemed to him that no one could publish a paper unless someone in charge was on hand until the press run. He knew that the publisher, Stuart Winkle, didn't care particularly, as long as the advertising was in place, but it wasn't right, Eddie thought. What if something came up, something went wrong? Even out here at the end of the world there could be a late-breaking story that required someone to write it, to see that it got placed. Actually, Eddie's hopes for that event, high six years ago, had diminished to the point of needing conscious effort to recall them even. In fact, he liked to see his editorials before he packed it in.

This night, Thursday, he read his own words and then bellowed, "Where is she?"

-She- was Ruthie Jenson, and -she- had spelled frequency with one -e- and an -a-. Eddie stormed through the deserted outer office looking for her, and caught her at the door just as she was wrapping her vampire cloak about her thin shoulders. She was thin, her hair was cut too short, too close to her head, and she was too frightened of him. And, he thought with bitterness, she was crazy, or she would not wait around three nights a week for him to catch her at the door and give her hell.

"Why don't you use the goddamn dictionary? Why do you correct my copy? I told you I'd wring your neck if you touched my copy again!"

She made a whimpering noise and looked past him in terror, down the hallway, into the office. "I... I'm sorry. I didn't mean..." Fast as quicksilver then, she fled out into the storm that was still howling. He hoped the goddamn wind would carry her to Australia or beyond.

The wind screamed as it poured through the outer office, scattering a few papers, setting a light adance on a chain. Eddie slammed the door against it and surveyed the space around him, detesting every inch of it at the moment. Three desks, the fluttering papers that Mrs. Rondale would heave out because anything on the floor got heaved out. Except dirt; she seemed never to see quite all of it. Next door, the presses were running; people were doing things, but the staff that put the paper together had left now. Ruthie was always next to last to go, and then Eddie. He kicked a chair on his way back to his own cubicle, clutching the ink-wet paper in his hand, well aware that the ink was smearing onto his skin.

He knew that the door to the press room had opened and softly closed again. In there they would be saying Fat Eddie was in a rage. He knew they called him Fat Eddie, or even worse, behind his back, and he knew that no one on earth cared if the -North Coast News- was a mess except him. He sat at his desk scowling at the editorial, one of his better ones, he thought, and the word -frequency- leaped off the page at him; nothing else registered. What he had written was "At this time of year the storms bear down on shore with such regularity, such frequency, that it's as if the sea and air are engaged in the final battle." It got better, but he put it aside and listened to the wind. All evening he had listened to reports from up and down the coast, expecting storm damage, light outages, wrecks, something. At midnight, he had decided it was just another Pacific storm and had wrapped up the paper. Just the usual: Highway 101 under water here and there, a tree down here and there, a head-on, no deaths...

The wind screamed and let up, caught its breath and screamed again. Like a kid having a tantrum. And up and down the coast the people were like parents who had seen too many kids having too many tantrums. Ignore it until it goes away and then get on about your business, that was their attitude. Eddie was from Indianapolis where a storm with eighty-mile-an-hour winds made news. Six years on the coast had not changed that. A storm like this, by God, should make news!

Still scowling, he pulled on his own raincoat, a great, black waterproof garment that covered him to the floor. He added his black, wide-brimmed hat, and was ready for the weather. He knew that behind his back they called him Mountain Man, when they weren't calling him Fat Eddie. He secretly

thought he looked more like The Shadow than not.

He drove to Connally's Tavern and had a couple of drinks, sitting alone in glum silence, and then offered to drive Truman Cox home when the bar closed at two.

The town of Lewisburg was south of Astoria, north of Cannon Beach, population nine hundred eighty-four. And at two in the morning they were all sleeping, the town blackened out by rain. There were the flickering night lights at the drug store, and the lights from the newspaper building, and two traffic lights, although no other traffic moved. Rain pelted the windshield and made a river through Main Street, cascaded down the side streets on the left, came pouring off the mountain on the right. Eddie made the turn onto Third and hit the brakes hard when a figure darted across the street.

"Jesus!" he grunted as the car skidded, then caught and righted itself. "Who was that?"

Truman was peering out into the darkness, nodding. The figure had vanished down the alley behind Sal's Restaurant. "Bet it was the Boland girl, the young one. Not Norma. Following her sister's footsteps."

His tone was not condemnatory, even though everyone knew exactly where those footsteps would lead the kid.

"She sure earned whatever she got tonight," Eddie said with a grunt, and pulled up into the driveway of Truman's house. "See you around."

"Yep. Probably will. Thanks for the lift." He gathered himself together and made a dash for his porch.

But he would be soaked anyway, Eddie knew. All it took was a second out in that driving rain. That poor, stupid kid, he thought again, as he backed out of the drive, retraced his trail for a block or two, and headed toward his own little house. On impulse he turned back and went down Second Street to see if the kid was still scurrying around; at least he could offer her a lift home. He knew where the Bolands lived, the two sisters, their mother, all in the trade now, apparently. But, God, he thought, the little one couldn't be more than twelve.

The numbered streets were parallel to the coast line; the cross streets had become wind tunnels that rocked his car every time he came to one. Second Street was empty, black. He breathed a sigh of relief. He had not wanted to get involved anyway, in any manner, and now he could go on home, listen to music for an hour or two, have a drink or two, a sandwich, and get some sleep. If the wind ever let up. He slept very poorly when the wind blew this hard. What he most likely would do was finish the book he was reading, possibly start another one. The wind was good for another four or five hours.

Thinking this way, he made another turn or two, and then saw the kid again, this time sprawled on the side of the road.

If he had not already seen her once, if he had not been thinking about her, about her sister and mother, if he had been driving faster than five miles an hour, probably he would have missed her. She lay just off the road, face down. As soon as he stopped and got out of the car, the rain hit his face, streamed from his glasses, blinding him almost. He got his hands on the child and hauled her to the car, yanked open the back door and deposited her inside. Only then he got a glimpse of her face. Not the Boland girl. No one he had ever seen before. And as light as a shadow. He hurried around to the driver's side and got in, but he could no longer see her now from the front seat. Just the lumpish black raincoat that gleamed with water and covered her entirely. He wiped his face, cleaned his glasses, and twisted in the seat; he couldn't reach her, and she did not respond to his voice.

He cursed bitterly and considered his next move. She could be dead, or dying. Through the rain-streaked windshield the town appeared uninhabited. They didn't have a police station, a clinic or hospital, nothing. The nearest doctor was ten or twelve miles away, and in this weather... Finally he started the engine and headed for home. He would call the state police from there, he decided. Let them come and collect her.

He drove up Hammer Hill to his own house and parked in the driveway at the walk that led to the front door. He would open the door first, he had decided, then come back and get the kid; either way he would get soaked, but there was little he could do about that. He moved fairly fast for a large man, but his fastest was not good enough to keep the rain off his face again. If it would come straight down, the way God meant rain to fall, he thought, fumbling with the key in the lock, he would be able to see something. He got the door open, flicked on the light switch, and went back to the car to collect the girl. She was as limp as before, and seemed to weigh nothing at all. The slicker she wore was hard to grasp, and he did not want her head to loll about, for her to brain herself on the porch rail or the door frame, but she was not easy to carry, and he grunted although her weight was insignificant. Finally he got her inside and kicked the door shut and made his way to the bedroom where he dumped her on the bed. Then he took off his hat that had been useless, and his glasses that had blinded him with running water, and the streaming raincoat that was leaving a trail of water with every step. He backed off the Navajo rug and out to the kitchen to put the wet coat on a chair, let it drip on the linoleum. He grabbed a handful of paper toweling and wiped his glasses, then returned to the bedroom.

He reached down to remove the kid's raincoat and jerked his hand away again.

"Jesus Christ!" he whispered, and backed away from her. He heard himself saying it again, and then again, and stopped. He had backed up to the wall, was pressed hard against it. Even from there he could see her clearly. Her face was smooth, without eyebrows, without eyelashes, her nose too small, her lips too narrow, hardly lips at all. What he had thought was a coat was part of her. It started on her head, where hair should have been, down the sides of her head where ears should have been, down her narrow shoulders, the backs of her arms that seemed too long and thin, almost boneless.

She was on her side, one long leg stretched out, the other doubled up under her. Where there should have been genitalia, there was too much skin, folds of skin.

Eddie felt his stomach spasm, a shudder passed over him. Before, he had wanted to shake her, wake her up, ask questions; now he thought that if she opened her eyes, he might pass out. And he was shivering with cold. Moving very cautiously, making no noise, he edged his way around the room to the door, then out, back to the kitchen where he pulled a bottle of bourbon from a cabinet and poured half a glass that he drank as fast as he could. He stared at his hand. It was shaking.

Very quietly he took off his shoes, sodden, and placed them at the back door next to his waterproof boots that he invariably forgot to wear. As soundlessly as possible he crept to the bedroom door and looked at her again. She had moved under, was now drawn up in a huddle, as if she was as cold as he was. He took a deep breath and began to inch around the wall of the room toward the closet where he pulled out his slippers with one foot, and eased them on, and then tugged on a blanket on a shelf. He had to let his breath out then; it sounded explosive to his ears. The girl shuddered and made herself into a tighter ball. He moved toward her slowly, ready to turn and run, and finally was close enough to lay the blanket over her. She was shivering hard.

He backed away from her again and this time went to the living room, leaving the door open so that he could see her, just in case. He turned up the thermostat, retrieved his drink from the kitchen, and again and again went to the door to peer inside.

He should call the state police, he knew, and made no motion toward the phone. A doctor? He nearly laughed. He wished he had a camera. If they took her away, and they would, there would be nothing to show, nothing to prove she had existed. He thought of her picture on the front page of the - North Coast News-, and snorted. -The National Enquirer-? This time he muttered a curse. But she was news. She certainly was news.

Mary Beth, he decided. He had to call someone with a camera, someone who could write a decent story. He dialed Mary Beth's number, got her answering machine and hung up, dialed it again. At the fifth call her voice came on.

"Who the hell is this, and do you know that it's three in the fucking morning?"

"Eddie Delacort. Mary Beth, get up, get over here, my place, and bring your camera."

"Fat Eddie? What the hell -- "

"Right now, and bring plenty of film." He hung up.

A few seconds later his phone rang; he took it off the receiver and laid it down on the table. While he waited for Mary Beth he surveyed the room. The house was small, with two bedrooms, one that he used for an office, on the far side of the living room. In the living room there were two easy chairs covered with fine, dark green leather, no couch, a couple of tables, and many bookshelves, all filled. A long cabinet held his sound equipment, a stereo, hundreds of albums. Everything was neat, arranged for a large man to move about easily, nothing extraneous anywhere. Underfoot was another Navajo rug. He knew the back door was securely locked; the bedroom windows were closed, screens in place. Through the living room was the only way the kid on his bed could get out, and he knew she would not get past him if she woke up and tried to make a run. He nodded, then moved his two easy chairs so that they faced the bedroom; he pulled an end table between them, got another glass, and brought the bottle of bourbon. He sat down to wait for Mary Beth, brooding over the girl in his bed. From time to time the blanket shook hard; a slight movement that was nearly constant suggested that she had not yet warmed up. His other blanket was under her and he had no intention of touching her again in order to get to it.

Mary Beth arrived as furious as he had expected. She was his age, about forty, graying, with suspicious blue eyes, and no makeup. He had never seen her with lipstick on, or jewelry of any kind except for a watch, or in a skirt or dress. That night she was in jeans and a sweatshirt, and a bright red hooded raincoat that brought the rainstorm inside as she entered, cursing him. He noted with satisfaction that she had her camera gear.

She cursed him expertly as she yanked off her raincoat, and was still calling him names when he finally put his hand over her mouth and took her by the shoulder, propelled her toward the bedroom door.

"Shut up and look," he muttered. She was stronger than he had realized, and now twisted out of his grasp and swung a fist at him. Then she faced the bedroom.

She looked, then turned back to him red faced and sputtering. "You... you got me out... a floozy in your bed... So you really do know what that thing you've got is used for! And you want pictures! Jesus God!"

"Shut up!"

This time she did. She peered at his face for a second, turned and looked again, took a step forward, then another. He knew her reaction was to his expression, not the lump on the bed. Nothing of that girl was visible, just the unquiet blanket, and a bit of darkness that was not hair but should have been. He stayed at Mary Beth's side, and his caution was communicated to her; she was as quiet now as he was.

At the bed he reached out and gently pulled back the blanket. One of -her- hands clutched it spasmodically. The hand had four apparently boneless fingers, long and tapered, very pale. Mary Beth exhaled too long and neither of them moved for what seemed minutes. Finally she reached out and touched the darkness at the girl's shoulder, touched her arm, then her face. Abruptly she pulled back her hand. The girl on the bed was shivering harder than ever, in a tighter ball that hid the many folds of skin at her groin.

"It's cold," Mary Beth whispered.

"Yeah." He put the blanket back over the girl.

Mary Beth went to the other side of the bed, squeezed between it and the wall and carefully pulled the bedspread and blanket free, and put them over the girl also. Eddie took Mary Beth's arm and they backed out of the bedroom. She sank into one of the chairs he had arranged and automatically held out her hand for the drink he was pouring.

"My God," Mary Beth said softly after taking a large swallow, "what is it? Where did it come from?"

He told her as much as he knew and they regarded the sleeping figure. He thought the shivering had subsided, but maybe she was just too weak to move so many covers.

"You keep saying it's a she," Mary Beth said. "You know that thing isn't human, don't you?"

Reluctantly he described the rest of the girl, and this time Mary Beth finished her drink. She glanced at her camera bag, but made no motion toward it yet. "It's our story," she said. "We can't let them have it until we're ready. Okay?"

"Yeah. There's a lot to consider before we do anything." Silently they considered. He refilled their glasses, and they sat watching the sleeping creature on his bed. When the lump flattened out a bit, Mary Beth went in and lifted the covers and examined her, but she did not touch her again. She returned to her chair, very pale, and sipped bourbon. Outside, the wind moaned, but the howling had subsided, and the rain was no longer a driving presence against the front of the house, the side that faced the sea.

From time to time one or the other made a brief suggestion.

"Not radio," Eddie said.

"Right." said Mary Beth. She was a stringer for NPR. "Not newsprint," she said later.

Eddie was a stringer for AP. He nodded.

"It could be dangerous when it wakes up," she said.

"I know. Six rows of alligator teeth, or poison fangs, or mind rays."

She giggled. "Maybe right now there's a hidden camera taking in all this. Remember that old TV show?"

"Maybe -they- sent her to test us, our reaction to -them-.

Mary Beth sat up straight. "My God, more of them?"

"No species can have only one member," he said very seriously. "A counterproductive trait." He realized that he was quite drunk. "Coffee," he said, and pulled himself out of the chair, made his way unsteadily to the kitchen.

When he had the coffee ready, and tuna sandwiches, and sliced onions and tomatoes, he found Mary Beth leaning against the bedroom door contemplating the girl.

"Maybe it's dying," she said in a low voice. "We can't just let it die, Eddie."

"We won't," he said. "Let's eat something. It's almost daylight."

She followed him to the kitchen and looked around it. "I've never been in your house before. You realize that? All the years I've known you, I've never been invited here before."

"Five years," he said.

"That's what I mean. All those years. It's a nice house. It looks like your house should look, you know?"

He glanced around the kitchen. Just a kitchen, stove, refrigerator, table, counters. There were books on the counter, and piled on the table. He pushed the pile to one side and put down plates. Mary Beth lifted one and turned it over. Russet colored, gracefully shaped, pottery from North Carolina, signed by Sara. She nodded, as if in confirmation.

"You picked out every single item individually, didn't you?"

"Sure. I have to live with the stuff."

"What are you doing here, Eddie? Why here?"

"The end of the world, you mean? I like it."

"Well, I want the hell out. You've been out and chose to be here. I choose to be out. That thing on your bed will get me out." She bit into a sandwich.

From the University of Indiana to a small paper in Evanston, on to Philadelphia, New York. He felt he had been out plenty, and now he simply wanted a place where people lived in individual houses and chose the pottery they drank their coffee from. Six years ago he had left New York, on vacation, he had said; he had come to the end of the world and stayed.

"Why haven't you gone already?" he asked Mary Beth. She smiled her crooked smile and shook her head. "I was married, you know that? To a fisherman. That's what girls on the coast do, marry fishermen, or lumbermen, or policemen. Me, Miss Original No-talent, herself. Married, playing house forever. He's out there somewhere. Went out one day and never came home again. So I got a job with the paper, this and that. Only one thing could be worse than staying here at the end of the world, and that's being in the world broke. Not my style."

She finished her sandwich and coffee, and now seemed too restless to sit still. She went to the window over the sink and gazed out. The light was gray. "You don't belong here any more than I do. What happened? Some woman tell you to get lost? Couldn't get the job you wanted? Some young slim punk worm in front of you? You're dodging just like me."

All the above, he thought silently, and said, "Look, I've been thinking. I can't go to the office without raising suspicion, in case anyone's looking for her, I mean. I haven't been in the office before one or two in the afternoon for more than five years. But you can. See if anything's come over the wires, if there's a search on, if there was a wreck of any sort. You know. If the FBI's nosing around, or the military. Anything at all."

Mary Beth rejoined him at the table and poured more coffee, her restlessness gone, an intent look on her face. Her business face, he thought.

"Okay. First some pictures, though. And we'll have to have a story about my car. It's been out front all night," she added crisply. "So, if anyone brings it up, I'll have to say I keep you company now and then. Okay?"

He nodded, and thought without bitterness that that would give them a laugh at Connally's Tavern. That reminded him of Truman Cox. "They'll get around to him eventually, and he might remember seeing her. Of course, he assumed it was the Boland girl. But they'll know we saw someone. Even if no one asks him directly, he knows if a flea farts in this town."

Mary Beth shrugged. "So you saw the Boland girl and got to thinking about her and her trade, and gave me a call. No problem. "

He looked at her curiously. "You really don't care if they start that scuttlebutt around town, about you and me?"

"Eddie," she said almost too sweetly, "I'd admit to fucking a pig if it would get me the hell out of here. I'll go on home for a shower, and by then maybe it'll be time enough to get on my horse and go to the office. But first some pictures."

At the bedroom door he asked in a hushed voice, "Can you get them without using the flash? That might send her into shock or something."

She gave him a dark look. "Will you for Christ sake stop calling it a her!" She scowled at the figure on the bed. "Let's bring in a lamp, at least. You know I have to uncover it."

He knew. He brought in a floor lamp and turned on the bedside light and watched Mary Beth go to work. She was a good photographer, and in this instance she had an immobile subject; she could use timed exposures. She took a roll of film, and started a second one, then drew back. The girl on the bed was shivering hard again, drawing up her legs, curling into a tight ball.

"Okay. I'll finish in daylight, maybe when it's awake."

Mary Beth was right, Eddie had to admit; the creature was not a girl, not a female probably. She was elongated, without any angles anywhere, no elbows or sharp knees or jutting hipbones. Just a smooth long body without breasts, without a navel, without genitalia. And with that dark growth that started high on her head and went down the backs of her arms, covered her back entirely. Like a mantle, he thought, and was repelled by the idea. Her skin was not human, either. It was pale, with yellow rather than pink undertones. She obviously was very cold; the yellow was fading to a grayish hue. Tentatively he touched her arm. It felt wrong, not yielding the way human flesh covered with skin should yield. It felt like cool silk over something firmer than human flesh.

Mary Beth replaced the covers, and they backed from the room as the creature shivered. "Jesus," Mary Beth whispered. "You'd think it would have warmed up by now. This place is like an oven, and all those covers." A shudder passed through her.

In the living room again, Mary Beth began to fiddle with her camera. She took out the second roll of film, and held both rolls in indecision. "If anyone's nosing around, and if they learn that you might have seen it, and that we've been together, they might accidentally snitch my film. Where's a good place to stash it for a while?"

He took the film rolls and she shook her head. "Don't tell me. Just keep it safe." She looked at her watch. "I won't be back until ten or later. I'll find out what I can, make a couple of calls. Keep an eye on it. See you later."

He watched her pull on her red raincoat and went to the porch with her, where he stood until she was in her car and out of sight. Daylight had come; the rain had ended although the sky was still overcast and low. The fir trees in his front yard glistened and shook off water with the slightest breeze. The wind had turned into no more than that, a slight breeze. The air was not very cold, and it felt good after the heat inside. It smelled good, of leaf mold and sea and earth and fish and fir trees... He took several deep breaths and then went back in.

The house really was like an oven, he thought, momentarily refreshed by the cool morning and now once again feeling logy. Why didn't she warm up? He stood in the doorway to the bedroom and looked at the huddled figure. Why didn't she warm up?

He thought of victims of hypothermia; the first step, he had read, was to get their temperature back up to normal, any way possible. Hot water bottle? He didn't own one. Hot bath? He went to the girl and shook his head slightly. Water might even be toxic to her. And that was the problem, he knew; she was an alien with unknown needs, unknown dangers. And she was freezing.

With reluctance he touched her arm, still cool in spite of all the covering over her. Like a hothouse plant, he thought then, brought into a frigid climate, destined to die of cold. Moving slowly, with even greater reluctance than before, he began to pull off his trousers, his shirt, and when he was down to undershirt and shorts, he gently shifted the sleeping girl and lay down beside her, drew her to the warmth of his body.

The house temperature by then was close to eighty-five, much too warm for a man with all the fat that Eddie had on his body; she felt good next to him, cooling, even soothing. For a time she made no response to his presence, but gradually her shivering lessened, and she seemed to change subtly, lose her rigidity; her legs curved to make contact with his legs; her torso shifted, relaxed, flowed into the shape of his body; one of her arms moved over his chest, her hand at his shoulder, her other arm bent and fitted itself against him. Her cool cheek pressed against the pillows of flesh over his ribs. Carefully he wrapped his arms about her and drew her closer.

He dozed, came awake with a start, dozed again. At nine he woke up completely and began to disengage himself. She made a soft sound, like a child in protest, and he stroked her arm and whispered nonsense. At last he was untangled from her arms and legs and stood up, and pulled on his clothes again. The next time he looked at the girl, her eyes were open, and he felt entranced momentarily. Large, round, golden eyes, like pools of molten gold, unblinking, inhuman. He took a step away from her.

"Can you talk?" There was no response. Her eyes closed again and she drew the covers high up onto her face, buried her head in them.

Wearily Eddie went to the kitchen and poured coffee. It was hot and tasted like tar. He emptied the coffeemaker and started a fresh brew. Soon Mary Beth would return and they would make the plans that had gone nowhere during the night. He felt more tired than he could remember and thought ruefully of what it was really like to be forty-two and a hundred pounds overweight, and miss a night's sleep.

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"You look like hell," Mary Beth said in greeting at ten. She looked fine, excited, a flush of her cheeks, her eyes sparkling. "is it okay? Has it moved? Come awake yet?" She charged past him and stood in the doorway to the bedroom. "Good. I got hold of Homer Carpenter, over in Portland. He's coming over with a video camera, around two or three. I didn't tell him what we have, but I had to tell him something to get him over. I said we have a coelacanth."

Eddie stared at her. "He's coming over for that? I don't believe it."

She left the doorway and swept past him on her way to the kitchen. "Okay, he doesn't believe me, but he knows it's something big, something hot, or I wouldn't have called him. He knows me that well, anyway."

Eddie thought about it for a second or two, then shrugged. "What else did you find out?"

Mary Beth got coffee and held the cup in both hands, surveying him over the top of it. "Boy oh boy, Eddie! I don't know who knows what, or what it is they know, but there's a hunt on. They're saying some guys escaped from the pen over at Salem, but that's bull. Roadblocks and everything. I don't think they're telling anyone anything yet. The poor cops out there don't know what the hell they're supposed to be looking for, just anything suspicious, until the proper authorities get here."

"Here? They know she's here?"

"Not here here. But somewhere on the coast. They're closing in from north and south. And that's why Homer decided to get his ass over here, too."

Eddie remembered the stories that had appeared on the wire services over the past few weeks about an erratic comet that was being tracked. Stuart Winkle, the publisher and editor in chief, had not chosen to print them in his paper, but Eddie had seen them. And more recently the story about a possible burnout in space of a Russian capsule. Nothing to worry about, no radiation, but there might be bright lights in the skies, the stories had said. Right, he thought. Right.

Mary Beth was at the bedroom door again, sipping her coffee. "I'll owe you for this, Eddie. No way can I pay for what you're giving me."

He made a growly noise, and she turned to regard him, suddenly very serious.

"Maybe there is something," she said softly. "A little piece of the truth. You know you're not the most popular man in town, Eddie. You're always doing little things for people, and yet, do they like you for it? Tell me, Eddie. Do they?"

"Let's not do any psychoanalysis right now," he said coldly. "Later."

She shook her head. "Later I won't be around. Remember?" Her voice took on a mocking tone. "Why do you suppose you don't get treated better? Why no one comes to visit? Or invites you to the clambakes, except for office parties, anyway? It's all those little things you keep doing, Eddie. Overdoing maybe. And you won't let anyone pay you back for anything. You turn everyone into a poor relation, Eddie, and they begin to resent it."

Abruptly he laughed. For a minute he had been afraid of her, what she might reveal about him. "Right," he said. "Tell that to Ruthie Jenson."

Mary Beth shrugged. "You give poor little Ruthie exactly what she craves -- mistreatment. She takes it home and nurtures it. And then she feels guilty. The Boland kid you intended to rescue

last night. You would have had her, her sister, and their mother all feeling guilty. Truman Cox. How many free drinks you let him give you, Eddie? Not even one, I bet. Stuart Winkle? You run his paper for him. You ever use that key to his cabin? He really wanted you to use it, Eddie. A token repayment. George Allmann, Harriet Davies... It's a long list, Eddie, the people you've done little things for. The people who go through life owing you, feeling guilty about not liking you, not sure why they don't. I was on that list, too, Eddie, but not now. I just paid you in full."

"Okay," he said heavily. "Now that we've cleared up the mystery about me, what about her?" He pointed past Mary Beth at the girl on his bed.

"It, Eddie. It. First the video, and make some copies, get them into a safe place, and then announce. How does that sound?"

He shrugged. "Okay. Whatever you want." She grinned her crooked smile and shook her head at him. "Forget it, Eddie. I'm paid up for years to come. Look, I've got to get back to the office. I'll keep my eyes on the wires, anything coming in, and as soon as Homer shows, we'll be back. Are you okay? Can you hold out for the next few hours?"

"Yeah, I'm okay." He watched her pull on her coat and walked to the porch with her. Before she left, he said, "One thing, Mary Beth. Did it even occur to you that some people like to help out? No ulterior motive or anything, but a little human regard for others?"

She laughed. "I'll give it some thought, Eddie. And you give some thought to having perfected a method to make sure people leave you alone, keep their distance. Okay? See you later."

He stood on the porch taking deep breaths. The air was mild; maybe the sun would come out later on. Right now the world smelled good, scoured clean, fresh. No other house was visible from his porch. He had let the trees and shrubbery grow wild, screening everything from view. It was like being the last man on earth, he thought suddenly. The heavy growth even screened out the noise from the little town. If he listened intently, he could make out engine sounds, but no voices, no one else's music that he usually detested, no one else's cries or laughter.

Mary Beth never had been ugly, he thought then. She was good looking in her own way even now, going on middle age. She must have been a real looker as a younger woman. Besides, he thought, if anyone ever mocked her, called her names, she would slug the guy. That would be her way. And he had found his way, he added, then turned brusquely and went inside and locked the door after him.

He took a kitchen chair to the bedroom and sat down by her. She was shivering again. He reached over to pull the covers more tightly about her, then stopped his motion and stared. The black mantle thing did not cover her head as completely as it had before. He was sure it now started farther back. And more of her cheeks was exposed. Slowly he drew away the cover and then turned her over. The mantle was looser, with folds where it had been taut before. She reacted violently to being uncovered, shuddering long spasmlike movements. He replaced the cover.

"What the hell are you?" he whispered. "What's happening to you?"

He rubbed his eyes hard and sat down, regarding her with a frown. "You know what's going to happen, don't you? They'll take you somewhere and study you, try to make you talk, if you can, find out where you're from, what you want here, where there are others... They might hurt you. Even kill you."

He thought again of the great golden pools that were her eyes, of how her skin felt like silk over a firm substance, of the insubstantiality of her body, the lightness when he carried her.

"What do you want here?" he whispered. "Why did you come?"

After a few minutes of silent watching, he got up and found his dry shoes in the closet and pulled them on. He put on a plaid shirt that was very warm, and then he wrapped the sleeping girl in the blanket and carried her to his car and placed her on the backseat. He went back inside for another blanket and put that over her, too.

He drove up his street, avoiding the town, using a back road that wound higher and higher up the mountain. Stuart Winkle's cabin, he thought. An open invitation to use it any time he wanted. He

drove carefully, taking the curves slowly, not wanting to jar her, to roll her off the backseat. The woods pressed in closer when he left the road for a logging road. From time to time he could see the ocean, then he turned and lost it again. The road clung to the steep mountainside, climbing, always climbing; there was no other traffic on it. The loggers had finished with this area; this was state land, untouchable, for now anyway. He stopped at one of the places where the ocean spread out below him and watched the waves rolling in forever and ever, unchanging, unknowable. Then he drove on.

The cabin was high on the mountain. Up here the trees were mature growth, mammoth and silent, with deep shadows beneath them, little understory growth in the dense shade. The cabin was redwood, rough, heated with a wood stove, no running water, no electricity. There was oil for a lamp, and plenty of dry wood stacked under a shed, and a store of food that Stuart had said he should consider his own. There were twin beds in the single bedroom, and a couch that opened to a double bed in the living room. Those two rooms and the kitchen made up the cabin.

He carried the girl inside and put her on one of the beds; she was entirely enclosed in blankets, like a cocoon. Hurriedly he made a fire in the stove, and brought in a good supply of logs. Like a hothouse orchid, he thought, she needed plenty of heat.

After the cabin started to heat up, he took off his outer clothing and lay down beside her, the way he had done before, and as before, she conformed to his body, melted into him, absorbed his warmth.

Sometimes he dozed, then he lay quietly thinking of his childhood, of the heat that descended on Indiana like a physical substance, of the tornadoes that sometimes came, murderous funnels that sucked life away, shredded everything. He dozed and dreamed, and awakened and dreamed in that state, also.

He got up to feed the fire, and tossed in the film Mary Beth had given him to guard. He got a drink of water at the pump in the kitchen, and lay down by her again. His fatigue increased, but pleasurably. His weariness was without pain, a floating sensation that was between sleep and wakefulness. Sometimes he talked quietly to her, but not much, and what he said he forgot as soon as the words formed. It was better to lie without sound, without motion. Now and then she shook convulsively, and then subsided again. Twilight came, darkness, then twilight again. Several times he aroused enough to build up the fire.

When it was daylight once more, he got up, reeling as if drunken; he pulled on his clothes and went to the kitchen to make instant coffee. He sensed her presence behind him. She was standing up, nearly as tall as he was, but incredibly insubstantial, not thin, but as slender as a straw. Her golden eyes were wide open. He could not read the expression on her face.

"Can you eat anything?" he asked. "Drink water?" She looked at him. The black mantle was gone from her head; he could not see it anywhere on her as she stood facing him. The strange folds of skin at her groin, the boneless appearance of her body, the lack of hair, breasts, the very color of her skin looked right now, not alien, not repellent. The skin was like cool silk, he knew. He also knew this was not a woman, not a she, but something that should not be here, a creature, an it.

"Can you speak? Can you understand me at all?" Her expression was as unreadable as that of a wild creature, a forest animal, aware, intelligent, unknowable. Helplessly he said, "Please, if you can understand me, nod. Like this." He showed her, and in a moment she nodded. "And like this for no," he said. She mimicked him again. "Do you understand that people are looking for you?" She nodded slowly. Then, very deliberately, she turned around, and instead of the black mantle that had grown on her head, down her back, there was an iridescence, a rainbow of pastel colors that shimmered and gleamed. Eddie sucked in his breath as the new growth moved, opened slightly, more.

There wasn't enough room in the cabin for her to open the wings all the way. She stretched them from wall to wall. They looked like gauze, filmy, filled with light that was alive. Not realizing he was moving, Eddie was drawn to one of the wings, reached out to touch it. It was as hard as steel, and cool. She turned her golden liquid eyes to him, and drew her wings in again.

"We'll go someplace where it's warm," Eddie said hoarsely. "I'll hide you. I'll smuggle you somehow. They can't have you!"

She walked through the living room to the door and studied the handle for a moment. As she reached for it, he lumbered after her, lunged toward her, but already she was opening the door, slipping out.

"Stop! You'll freeze. You'll die!" In the clearing of the forest, with sunlight slanting through the giant trees, she spun around, lifted her face upward, and then opened her wings all the way. As effortlessly as a butterfly, or a bird, she drew herself up into the air, her wings flashing light, now gleaming, now appearing to vanish as the light reflected one way and another.

"Stop!" Eddie cried again. "Please! Oh, God, stop! Come back!"

She rose higher, and looked down at him with her golden eyes. Suddenly the air seemed to tremble with sound, trills and arpeggios and flutings. Her mouth did not open as the sounds increased until Eddie fell to his knees and clapped his hands over his ears moaning. When he looked again, she was still rising, shining, invisible, shining again. Then she was gone.

Eddie pitched forward into the thick layer of fir needles and forest humus and lay still.

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He felt a tugging on his arm, and heard Mary Beth's furious curses, but as if from a great distance. He moaned and tried to go to sleep again. She would not let him.

"You goddamn bastard! You filthy son of a bitch! You let it go! Didn't you? You turned it loose!"

He tried to push her hands away, moaning.

"You scum! Get up! You hear me? Get up! Don't think for a minute, buster, that I'll let you die out here! That's too good for you, you lousy tub of lard. Get up!"

Against his will he was crawling, then stumbling, leaning on her, being steadied by her. She kept cursing all the way back inside the cabin, until he was on the couch, and she stood over him, arms akimbo, glaring at him.

"Why? Just tell me why? For God's sake, Eddie, why?" Then she screamed at him, "Don't you dare pass out on me again. Open those damn eyes and keep them open!"

She savaged him and nagged him, made him drink whiskey that she had brought along, then made him drink coffee. She got him to his feet and made him walk around the cabin a little, let him sit down again, drink again. She did not let him go to sleep, or even lie down, and the night passed.

A fine rain had started to fall by dawn. Eddie felt as if he had been away a long time, to a very distant place that had left few memories. He listened to the soft rain and at first thought he was in his own small house, but then he realized he was in a strange cabin, and that Mary Beth was there, asleep in a chair. He regarded her curiously and shook his head, trying to clear it. His movement brought her sharply awake.

"Eddie, are you awake?"

"I think so. Where is this place?"

"Don't you remember?"

He started to say no, checked himself, and suddenly he was remembering. He stood up and looked about almost wildly.

"It's gone, Eddie. It went away and left you to die. You would have died out there if I hadn't come, Eddie. Do you understand what I'm saying? You would have died."

He sat down again and lowered his head into his hands. He knew she was telling the truth.

"It's going to be light soon," she said. "I'll make us something to eat, and then we'll go back to town. I'll drive you. We'll come back in a day or so to pick up your car." She stood up and

groaned. "My God, I feel like I've been wrestling bears all night. I hurt all over."

She passed close enough to put her hand on his shoulder briefly. "What the hell, Eddie. Just what the hell."

In a minute he got up also, and went to the bedroom, looked at the bed where he had lain with her all through the night. He approached it slowly and saw the remains of the mantle. When he tried to pick it up, it crumbled to dust in his hand.

The End