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Science Fiction and Fantasy Stories

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by Siobhan Gallagher

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by Russell Adams

DIGITAL ART & COVER

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FLASH FICTION

Birth Of A Witch by Siobhan Gallagher

~1000 Words

The scent of mint and ginger filled her nose as she crushed the herbs together in the kitchen. The mixture was missing one ingredient. She poured a vial of blood into the mortar and started mashing it with the green pulp. This would do the fisherman's anemic wife well.

The front door opened. Footsteps echoed across the floor.

She undid her apron in haste and covered the workbench with it. Five men crowded into the kitchen, grim and tense. They ringed her at a distance as if confining a leper. She smiled and bowed her head, falsely demure.

This wasn't usual business.

The silence grew. At last one man, a scar etched into the side of his face, stepped up to her. She backed up into her workbench, tried to slide away--but he gripped her wrists with his sandpaper hands and jerked her towards him.

"Come along, witch," he said. "Village Patriarch sent us for yer head."

She squirmed and pulled, futile against his male strength. "I am no witch! Why such foolery?"

The scarred man stared her right in the eye, pupils dilated like a cornered animal. Of course, they believed it; they needed that faith. When crops were dying, and prayer had failed them, what else did they have?

"On my mother's grave, you must believe me."

They surrounded her, suffocatingly close.

#

She came back to herself with the sun's rays piercing her eyes and rough hands gripping her arms. They dragged her into the forest. A gigantic thick-limbed tree towered over her, its canopy cutting off the sun. Village folks were gathered 'round.

The forest seemed to scream, but no one else heard it.

Her stomach clenched, her bare feet furrowed the ground. Rocks and thorns scored her soles. She twisted in their grip, arms wrenched to the breaking point.

"Help!" she cried to the crowd, her voice dry and desperate. "Help me!"

"Quick --she's tryin' to call her imp!"

A heavy fist smashed into her mouth. Bits of teeth tumbled down her raw throat.

The crowd stared at her, dull and blank. Surely someone knew this to be wrong. Was there no friend to stand for her, to say "Let 'er go! She's no witch!"

Cowards all.

They hauled her atop a barrel. She tried to leap off, one last attempt, but the scarred man overpowered her. His eyes still held fear, but tempered with determination, as though hanging her would absolve him.

Foolish idiots. What good comes of a hanging? Nothing, absolutely nothing. Now the village will be without a herbwife, and they would rejoice at the loss.

They fitted the noose around her neck. She swallowed once before they tightened it. Hard to breathe. She gritted her shattered teeth and closed her eyes against her neighbors' uncaring faces. These ignorant cowards whom she had once called friends. They deserved the final circle of Hell.

And if only she could put them there herself, teach the lesson they so deserved. Let her soul be the Devil's, let her enact revenge in the name of Nemesis. She would steal their sleep.

The barrel was knocked from under her.

#

She awoke to the cool of twilight. Alone in the quiet forest. Her neck was still in the noose--but where was the rest of her? Here she was, breathing, dizzy and lightheaded, but with no hands to clutch or toes to wiggle. Then she looked down.

Lungs, heart, liver, and intestines were on full display. Her limp body, without head or organs, sprawled on the ground. She closed her eyes in shock. Opened them to gape at this new form.

She had heard about such things, rumors from the Far East of a witch capable of existing without a body.

Her tongue tested jagged shapes in her mouth, and her lips curled. She'd become the stuff of nightmares, the abomination they'd most dread... Her ghastly mouth hinged wide, row upon row of razors tearing through their flesh. Even death would not save them, for she would await them in Hell.

The lightheaded feeling was real as she discovered she could float. Head twisted, up and away, organs followed through the loop of the noose. She descended to her body. What to do with it? She couldn't abandon it to the scavengers. Her intestines felt as workable as an arm, albeit far more flexible and three times as long. After a few tries, she managed to wrap her intestine around her body, and drag it into temporary concealment in the brush. With some vinegar to shrink and pickle her entrails, she'd fit back into it like a well-worn dress.

But not now.

Her lips twisted into a grin at the thought of all those frightened faces, so eager to hang a witch in daylight. Tonight she would give them a taste of what a real witch was like.

Author Bio: Siobhan Gallagher is a graduate from ASU and wannabe zombie slayer, currently residing in Arizona. Her fiction has appeared several publications, including AE - The Canadian Science Fiction Review, COSMOS Online, Unidentified Funny Objects. Occasionally, she does this weird thing called 'blogging' at: defconcanwrite.blogspot.com

SHORT STORIES

Shorn of Lustre by Meg Jayanth

~4800 words

And when Satyavan's life had thus been taken out, the body, deprived of breath, and shorn of lustre, and destitute of motion, became unsightly to behold. And binding Satyavan's vital essence, Yama proceeded in a southerly direction.

- The Mahabharata

#

There is fear in me as I move through the dance floor, sticky with a mix of spilled drinks and glitter and blood. I'm not drunk, I'm not even close to drunk, but the beat of the music slides between my ribs and pulls everything I feel right to the surface, just under the skin.

Three nagas with jewel-scaled arms hiss urgently to each other as I pass, black eyes cataloguing the lines on my face, the grey at my temples, the heaviness of my step. I'm hardly old, but age is something unknown to this ancient place, full of monsters in the full flush of youth.

I manage to angle my foot just enough to step down heavily on one of their tails - she rears up and expands her hood, split tongue flickering out of her mouth as she looks at me in what is clearly reproach. "Sorry," I say insincerely, ignoring the flex of muscle underneath her violet-black scales, the coils and coils of her glistening like oily rope.

"You always were." She shoots me another glare but tucks her hood back and turns away with her friends, and I'm wrongfooted.

Do I know them? Did I once? Maybe I mistook their recognition for revulsion. Maybe.

Someone's arm tumbles the plastic cup of water out of my fingers, and I watch it fall in a spray before the liquid is arrested in mid-air by a man wearing fairy lights round his horns and the lamellar armour of a Byzantine soldier. A bright-haired woman wearing a thin chiffon sari laughs delightedly and leaps into the glittering spray, but the droplets stay as fixed as stone, sharp as shards of diamond as they rip open her flesh in long jagged weals.

She is blinking calmly at the coin-sized hole in her palm displaying edges of delicate bones when the water goes abruptly liquid again, splattering me with slivers of skin and pale diluted blood.

The horned man takes the woman's unmaimed hand and appears to be mouthing apologies but as I watch her face flares bright with power and the flesh reknits itself around her injuries. The streaks of dark arterial blood left on her now-whole skin give her the aspect of a warrior fresh from the battlefield. The man gives her a respectful half-bow before whirling her into a dance.

That was impressive, even by the very warped standards of this place. She gives me a friendly sort of wave which makes me feel somehow complicit before slipping away into the crowd; an involuntary shudder passes through me.

I try not to think about death, and fail. There are many ways to die here, and it appears they keep inventing new ones.

#

The bartender looks irritated when I tell him I want a glass of water, but it comes chilled and clinking with ice in perfect spheres and hexagons, carved with arcane symbols that melt into different ones as I try to decipher them. I sip, and ignore the infinitesimal tugs of power that accompany each mouthful. Every moment here erodes away my independence into a thousand tiny debts and fealties, and these are just a few more. Besides, I'm thirsty.

I lean over the bar as the barman serves another customer - six and a half feet tall, bronze muscled, wearing the face of Mahatma Gandhi, bloody hell, - and he rolls his eyes in annoyance. Maybe that's what makes me announce, rather pompously, "I'm here to see the Lord of Time and Justice."

I smile like I've practised, like I've got too many teeth jostling for place, but he doesn't look impressed. He's probably poured tequila into the mouths of creatures with the heads of sharks and handed glasses to dancers whose palms are ringed with sharp yellow teeth - my human mandible just can't compare.

He ignores me until I pull Yama's amulet from under my shirt and hold it up in the strobing lights: knucklebones discoloured with cobra venom, wound with peacock feathers. His eyes widen a bit, and I feel a thrill of dark satisfaction. He's clearly new flushed with the burning, beautiful madness of this place. Like part of me still wants to be, even after all this time away.

I let it hang in the air until he reaches for a rune-scratched glass bottle on a high shelf behind the bar. A droplet of his blood uncorks it with a shuddering hiss, and he reaches in and hands me one of the lotus blossoms within. He watches it darken from grey to a pale pink as it leeches the warmth from my hand.

"But you're not even his type," he blurts, face flushing with embarrassment.

"I know," I tell him, "He's mine."

#

I lick the firm petals of the flower one by one - a tedious task, but Yama likes his elaborate rituals. Everywhere my tongue touches the pink flushes a deep bruise-bright purple, and I pluck the petals off one by one and toss them in my wake, walking with a measured step. Soon enough, the ground begins to shift under my feet and the dance-floor fades away in shuddering slices of light and distorted music.

I make an effort not to look to either side, but I catch glimpses anyway: canopies of roses twisted with jewel-bright snakes, palaces carved out of sand flash-burned to black glass, blood-spattered

marble hallways draped in velvet, weightless paradises of wheeling stars, autumn orchards laden down with gold-sheened fruit, orchestras playing instruments made of living human hearts and stripped bones.

I pull the last petal from the lotus and the ground evens. It's my stop: a vast candlelit glass-and-metal stair that grows thick with flowering vines as it plunges deep into the earth.

#

I pass one of my clones sitting in a rock-cavern carved into a filigreed gazebo near the entrance. A woman with black-veined wings is lapping blood from her neck like an incredibly elegant tick. The clone's eyes catch mine and slide professionally away, playing by the rules, though I can see the curiosity settle into her features like they're my own. They are. Or were. Let's be clear: they're not mine any more.

I don't like my clones. It's not a psychological thing, some self-hatred thing. I don't like them because they know all about me, and I know very little about them, about who they've grown into. They've got a built-in advantage. It makes them unpredictable. Dangerous. Especially if you're unpredictable and dangerous to begin with - and I've been called both many times.

#

There's a deep pool in the centre of this underground realm, and that's where people tend to congregate, dipping their legs and arms and tails and wings and antlers and whatever the hell else into the navy blue water that's always the perfect temperature. Picking marigolds and lounging in the shade of silver-leaved trees as the filtered sunlight plays through them. Drinking long drinks chased with poppy seeds and sweet wine and palm liquor.

A swirl of neon pink and white leaves brush past me in a rush of cold laughter, singing a song from my childhood against the nape of my neck. A woman's high voice sliding over words of love in a language I barely speak any more. I reach out and pinch one of the leaves into powder and the swirl retreats, their song breaking into sharp shrieks.

He is - of course - sitting by the edge of the pool with his long brown limbs trailing in the water, watching the mermaids with their tails sharp as knives. Their fish-scales are glittering metal coins like armour in copper and gold. They're bloodthirsty, like all the beasts of this realm, but he splashes water at them and laughs when they flash their fins in contempt. He has nothing to fear from them, and they have nothing to gain from him. He doesn't bleed. His fine bones aren't full of rich sweet marrow; they'd probably break the mermaids' ragged teeth if they tried to take a bite. The mermaids all still as the wind carries my scent to them. Nictating membranes turn their hungry gazes blessedly opalescent as they watch me and chitter to each other.

That's when he turns his fire-red eyes towards me, ringed with kohl and the smoky glittering paste of crushed jewels.

"Oh my dear," he says, with a brightness that makes me want to turn back around and leave, "Oh my dear. How *long* has it *been*?"

I try not to look directly at the attendants and lovers and servants clustered around him, sipping wine and playing musical instruments and dancing. One of them offers me a plate of ripe-fleshed mangoes which turn into pomegranates as I watch. As if I needed more symbolism in my life. He picks up one of the pomegranates and crushes away the skin. Glowing red juice that's nothing like blood drips all over his fingers. I wonder whether he's the one playing the party tricks or whether it's just this place, picking up on all the emotions pressing against the backs of my teeth. He licks his fingers in between his words as I watch, half-revolved and half something else altogether.

"My dear. You're not paying attention to a word I'm saying," he complains, with a quick amused glance at his companions. "Not at all the proper aspect to present to the *Lord of Time and Justice*."

He punctuates his title with a grandiose bow to scattered applause from his retinue, and catches my eye to let me know he heard me announce myself to the barman upstairs. I had always derided those vainglorious affectations. Once upon a time, I had mocked them fondly. And he had let me.

"I asked how long it's been since you left," he prompts, making a face of exaggerated patience into the silence. "You know how terrible I am at keeping track of time."

He is no such thing as his title suggests. I unclench my jaw, careful not to let any unconsidered words slip out. "Ten years. Give or take."

His fingers dart forward too quickly for me to react, plucking a grey hair from my temple. "It has certainly taken." He looks at my hair glinting in the cool light, expression at once fascinated and revolted.

"That was not freely given." I think my voice is shaking, but it clearly works well enough because my hair disintegrates to grey ash in his grip. I feel an infinitesimal relief, which is foolish; I'm about to put myself much more firmly in his power.

He dusts off his fingers and makes a face. "So paranoid," he laughs.

"I know you."

He considers for a moment, then gives me an approving smile. "Ten years is an excellent duration. It's the perfect moment for a comeback. Suitably dramatic."

"I'm not staying," I say flatly.

"Oh, but ten years ago you said you'd never, ever, not in a million years, cross-your-heart never come back. And here we are."

I try to shrug. "Things change."

"Not here. Not unless I want them to," he corrects, with offhand confidence. "I thought you wanted all that. Change and growth and alteration. All those *messy* things that happen outside this realm."

I flinch.

"I need a favour," I say, and I think it sounds normal, but something must give away how much I hate to be saying the words because he smiles: his mouth has so many teeth that they seem to spill off his face, fractalling out into a wide grin that seems to stretch for bone-edged miles and hours.

He snaps his fingers and one of his servants totters over and kneels before him. Her body is painted all in green with vines of flashing silver across the bridge of her nose, her collarbones, her thighs. Her head is completely, baldly smooth, and I feel an absurd urge to put a scarf around the slim bones of her neck as she bends her head. He reaches out for her chin and tips her head up, and says, "Open your eyes, darling," just loudly enough for me to hear, and the girl does, and I realise with a sick jolt that it's me. Her eyes cut towards mine, and back away again, but in them isn't the calm nonchalance that I expect from a clone; it's a burning barely contained hatred.

I sit down, and it's just luck that one of the embroidered cushions happens to be under me. I force myself to look again at his retinue, his strange band of serfs and exquisite horrors and pick myself out of the crowd twice more. One of my clones is wearing the skin of a tiger, hands ending in long crystalline claws, and the other is dressed like a Victorian gentleman and clutching a bone-topped walking cane, complete with muttonchops and cravat resting over a tightly waistcoated chest.

"You kept them, then," I say, and even in my ears my voice sounds thin, almost plaintive. What did I think - that he'd have killed all the remnants of me in a fit of anger when I walked out? No - he wouldn't be so human, but maybe I'd just hoped. "That's sweet."

"Why would I do you a favour after all this time?" He asks quite seriously as he strokes my painted clone on the nose like a fucking animal.

I tear my eyes away from her, from his hands on her, from the tiny bitter flare of jealousy that I still feel under all the horror. "Because I'm willing to pay."

His hands still as his low laugh rings out over the water. "Now I'm so very curious. What is it that you need from me so badly?" He makes the last part of the sentence an insinuation that shivers over my skin and I look up - at least looking into his eyes means I'm not looking into my own.

"I want you to give me one of them," I tell Yama, and entirely fail to hide my guilty wince when my tiger-clone's head twists up.

#

I have to rush to clarify before I lose my carefully hoarded courage. No, I don't want one of my clones back. I don't need another me looking at me every day, knowing me, understanding me. I don't want to be known. That's the last thing I want.

"I want Satyavan."

"Your *boyfriend*? But why would you need his tribute? You left with him - unless, oh!" He clutches his hands together, enjoying his performance too much to notice my stuttering breath. "Did your mortal boy leave you, my poor girl?"

I shake my head too sharply and feel that strange giddy fear again, or maybe it's just the perfume of this place, of Yama, after so long outside. "He's dead," I tell him, and pretend not to see the glee hidden under his so-careful expression of sorrow undercut with polite disbelief. He doesn't believe my story. I am a good liar, after all. "He died."

"And I have his tribute," he adds softly, and hope tastes almost painful on my tongue - I hadn't let myself think about the possibility that Satyavan's clone was dead, or given to another, or turned into a scattering of stars. In this place, any of those outcomes was far too possible. "His only tribute."

Satyavan only ever made one bargain in this place, and that bargain had been with Yama. I don't even remember why he did it any more. He was so young when he found his way here, like so many of us humans do. Barely more than a child, and too trusting. He had trusted me, and I had watched him fall in love with me and found it completely hilarious until one day it suddenly wasn't.

I'd traded pieces of myself away for youth and life and power and thought myself half a god. Self-made and perfectly monstrous, but he didn't see any monstrosity in me. I'd taken him away from this place before it could steal too much from him, and tried to fit him back into a human shape in a human place with a human love.

I never asked Satyavan about his trade, but I listened to his childhood stories and wondered if any were missing. I catalogued each expression on his face to find a conspicuous absence, a blank space where a feeling should be. I had looked for cracks and manmade edges to match my own and cursed Yama's name with every breath and now - now, I am endlessly, pathetically grateful to him.

"I'm willing to pay," I repeat.

He moves incredibly quickly; between one breath and the next he is leaning over me braced on his fists on either side of the pillow, carefully not touching my skin. One of his hands rises up to brush the bones of my amulet gently, his fingers running over the Sanskrit script which repeats his true name twisting over and over. A mark of ownership that I'd taken willingly once upon a time. A mark that I'd sworn I'd never wear again, but what's one more broken promise? What I hated most of all was that I'd never thrown the bloody thing away.

I catch myself on his eyes, and they look surprisingly sympathetic - but then, he is a consummate liar. I learned from the best.

"The *clone*," he whispers, and I am actually shocked - I have never heard him use that word to describe his tributes. He likes to think of them as blood sacrifices, fealty offered through flesh in the old style. "The clone is not him. Any more than any of those delightful creatures is you."

Before I gather up the breath to say something small and childish like, *I know*, or *I don't care*, or *Close enough*, he is back to lounging on his cushions three feet away. The moment, whatever it was in aid of, has passed.

"How many bargains have you made, my dear? And no fibs."

"Six," I whisper, and try not to look at my own clones as their lips curl back in revulsion.

He taps his fingers against his lips thoughtfully. "So once more would be seven. Quite a number. A sacred number even. Mmm," he licks his lips, predatory in a way that isn't remotely sexual. "It would be extremely dangerous, of course. You'd most likely die. I'm frankly astounded you're not dead already." I say nothing, and he snorts. "Yes, you always were a stubborn girl."

"Do we have a deal?"

He shrugs and whispers in my painted clone's ear. She swallows and closes her eyes and throws back her head: flames erupt from her mouth as her lips part, licking into the sky like an unfolding banner edged in yellows and oranges and pale violets. A few of the dancers laugh and start spinning in circles, turning their eyes up to the firelit false sky. The music of the place slithers and shifts, faster into beats that sing of remoteness and joy: dead planets planted with slow seeds, the first harvest of sour green grapes bottled into thick glass and opened in ten, thirty, a hundred years in the light of a distant sun. Across the water, a mirror flashes in response and a coracle slowly rows its way back toward us.

"I changed his body. You know how I get bored," he tells me conversationally, with a little set to his mouth that worries me even more now that I'm so close. "You know, my dear, traditionally there's some playing of the lute, various tests of loyalty and courage and all that before the dead lover is returned to life. At the very least, I should be tricked into my boon by your womanly virtue and wit."

"I never took you for a traditionalist."

"No," his right eyebrow raises slightly. "Nor are you exactly a flower of womanhood, if you'll forgive me."

I snort with laughter - I think I had forgotten that he could be funny as well as jaggedly cruel - but then my breath catches as the figures in the boat come close enough for me to make them out. I don't know if I dare to look. I don't know if I can look away.

"I...I turned Satyavan into a woman, oh, six years ago," he says, seemingly careless but watching my face for any signs of dismay. He loves his gifts to be sharply barbed, but what the hell do I care? - I can see my love in the planes of her cheekbones, the way she arranges her limbs before stepping out from the boat, the way one of her shoulders is drawn up tense and waiting. "I trust that won't be a problem for you?"

"No," I say thickly as my hands knot themselves in my shirt. "That's not - that's not a problem."

#

My love looks at me and at him, and says nothing at all. I don't ask her anything either. There's no permission grand enough for what I am going to ask of her.

#

Paying the price is quick but not simple. I give Yama my hand and ignore my traitorous body that wants to turn itself toward him. I force myself to watch as he strokes the tender flesh of my forearm,

silvered with six raised scars. Three of them are his mouth; they have a similar pattern, thin and clean but deep. He presses his teeth down below the last mark and bites down sharply and then jerks his head - my flesh tears. I feel lightheaded with the familiar pain.

The blood drips onto the ground, and I spit in it, and he does, and we say some words in Urdu and Aramaic and Sanskrit that feel like they are made of fine steel wire, shredding my lungs and throat and mouth with the glistening tangle of them. He mixes the wet dirt with his hands and rolls it, still gleaming with my blood and spit, into a ball which he swallows. He bends his head closer and his mouth smells of rot and incense as I open my lips and taste my essence on his tongue and feel the sharp tug of something sucking itself out of me as my hands find his belly, already slightly distended with the life there.

I feel red-raw juices from my sinews, sensations from my nerves, memories from the flickering depths of my mind all flowing into Yama's mouth and down, deeper into the small, terrible creature that thickens and grows more corporeal with my stolen vitality. I try to pull my mouth from Yama's, but his lips are cold and beautifully yielding and taste of my own death.

He pushes me away. I drop to my knees and retch and try to pretend that I hadn't given up, just for one long knife-sharp moment, right at the end.

The clones grow quickly. Indecently, horrifyingly quickly. By the time my vision returns to normal, and my blood begins to move sluggishly in my veins Yama is incredibly pregnant, shining and healthy and laughing with the warmth of my life inside him. I start to turn away. He catches my hand and carefully binds my bleeding arm with a handkerchief while he whispers, "Oh, well done, my dear, well done - I think she's going to be strong as a mule, this one, I can tell."

#

I stay long enough to see him slice his own belly open half an hour later, and a full grown me covered in membrane, and pink fluids tumbles out naked and shivering: reincarnation for the godless. I start towards her but my tigress clone hisses long and low while my Victorian gentleman drops her cane and snatches the shaky creature in her arms and begins to soothe her in a voice so gentle I'm not sure I've used it before.

I wonder whether gentleness is one of the things I bargained away. If it was, I must have lost it early.

Yama is feeling exhausted and magnanimous and sated and so waves me off with only one amused look. "Thank you for *such* an entertaining visit, my dear," he whispers languorously, rough-voiced with exertion. "Do come again in ten years."

I rub my knuckles against my bruised lips and grab my lover by the wrist and leave.

I pretend not to see all three of my clones crowding around their newest - sister - their eyes soft and fearful and damning. I know I'm damned. Seven times over, and that's not even counting what I've done to other people.

The party is still glittering and sickeningly perfect when we get to the dance floor, always poised at the very edge of crescendo - but this time music slides over my skin like so much water. All I can feel is where we are connected by my hands, the blood rushing up to the surface of my skin like it wants to beat right through it and round in circles round Satyavan's body.

She looks at me like I am quite possibly insane and most definitely stupid, and I smile back.

"Who the hell do you think I am," she asks me, when I kiss her collar, her neck, just under her ear where he used to love to be kissed. She gasps a little and I stroke the hair back from her face and pull her towards me with my other arm. "Ah, god. You're a fool."

"Yes," I agree, between breaths, between moments. I am. I'm clever enough to know exactly how foolish I am, but right now it doesn't matter: everything is clear and beautiful and smells of her. Of my love.

She unknots Yama's handkerchief, soaked in my red blood. It falls to the floor as she traces my scars angrily with her long fingers. Each one of them is a piece of me sold or bartered or traded away. I can barely remember who I used to be, but I have Satyavan for that. I have her now.

"Who the hell do you think you are," she asks me with quiet fear, and she sounds so much like my love that I have to kiss her silent.

I have paid for today. And tomorrow - tomorrow there's time to make another bargain.

Author Bio: Meg Jayanth has a short story coming out in 'The Lost' published by Galileo Books, and is currently writing Samsara, an award-winning storygame of dreams and war set in Eighteenth Century Bengal: <http://samsara.storynexus.com>

Shaking Off The Chains by Jayaprakash Satyamurthy

~ 5000 words

I height Perdurabo but I am sick of it. To endure this dismal dross sickens me. I shall avault! Hie me away from these citted planes, this procession of moments that constitutes time, this extension of dimension in all directions that constitutes space, this A to Z within which have arisen only prisons and orisons. I shall find the keys that open doors most never see and I shall return with that which shall grant me dominion, that which shall place in my possession the power to escape all prisons, to direct all orisons at my own newly acquired godhead.

I was sleeping in the fire. Or trying to.

I was obsessed with breaking the chains of space and time that bind us to this single plane of existence; I wanted to explore other realms, realms that exist all around us, if we could only see them. I found clues in the writings of the alchemists, but I should have known that they had hidden as much as they revealed in their complex symbolism and allegory. So there I was, trying to become more like the salamander, trying to learn to live in elements other than air. All I needed was one glimpse of the other worlds, worlds that once seen could never be unseen again. So I was sleeping in the fire.

I had gained entry into the tiny hotel that occupied part of the ground floor of the shoddy lodging house I lived in and had created a makeshift bed of fire using the gas stove and an assortment of trays filled with cooking oil. The initial discomfort had passed, and I was beginning to feel almost snug when a sudden involuntary spasm caused flaming oil to overturn directly onto the naked flames. There was a loud explosion that hurled me across the kitchen and then a powerful jet of flame that would not cease until the gas was completely exhausted or firefighters arrived. Naturally the explosion attracted the attention of several people, and there was soon a crowd clamouring at the entrance to the grimy kitchen that was to have been the stage of my first step to the other worlds.

By this time, some of my clothes had caught fire, and I was resigned to a drawn-out and painful death, a culmination that was only orthogonally related to my desired outcome, but perhaps to be welcomed in any case. Fortunately, this was not to be my fate. All of a sudden, there was an upswell in the noise outside, culminating in the entry of a formidable figure, one who seemed impervious to pain and heat as he marched up to the gas range and, heedless of the white heat the fixtures had achieved, shut the valve on the gas cylinder. In a while, the gas flame died down. Next, the man flung a large, thick blanket over me, swaddled me in it and rolled me out of the kitchen, putting out my flames in the process. There was a sudden hush from without, and a brief pause before the assembled company would inevitably rush in on us with all their inane questions and statements. My saviour used this moment to lean over me and address me in a whisper.

"Were you trying to kill yourself? Tell me quickly."

"Uh..." My voice came out as a hoarse croak. Impatient, the man repeated his question. "I wanted to ... sleep in the fire...and wake in another world...not the next world..."

The man nodded and hauled me over his shoulder. Outside, he brushed aside the crowd without a word and carried me up to his room. He laid me out on a lumpy old vinyl-covered sofa and brought me a glass of water. He then briefly but efficiently examined me. I'd worn thick, cotton clothes in multiple layers for my experiment and was not badly burned except on my face and hands. He opened a box in which I saw various bottles, tubes, strips of pills and medical implements. He produced a salve and proceeded to rub it on my burns.

"Are you...a doctor?" I rasped out. I was a medical man myself and recognised some of his paraphernalia as being quite specialised and up-to-date – although other things seemed archaic, esoteric.

He shook his head. "I have studied many things. But no qualifications." He spoke in a soft voice, not much louder than his initial whisper. I later learned that he rarely raised his voice over the bare point of audibility. It was an unexpected delicacy in so large a man. "So why sleep in the fire?"

"I..." I paused wondering how much to tell this strange, formidable man. I looked into his eyes and saw a certain salutary alienation there. It won my confidence. "I am trying to break the chains."

"What chains? Life?"

"No. The chains of the elements. Of space and time. The chains of this dimension." I would have explained more, but a fit of coughing overcame me.

"To what end?"

"To...travel...to find...realms beyond..." I sputtered.

The big man nodded, and suddenly smiled. "Good enough! You rest. We will talk later." I was already beginning to fall asleep as the man covered me in a light blanket.

When I awoke, I was alone. It was mid-afternoon according to the wall-clock, but thick curtains drawn across the windows kept the room dark. There was a reading lamp left burning on the desk. I walked over to the light. On the desk, I saw a single notebook, an old cardboard-bound long notebook of the sort that you can purchase at any stationery shop, something with a few colourful drawings with labels – of birds in this case – to add to the educational value of a product that was mainly used by schoolchildren. On the cover of this notebook, someone had stuck a note that read: 'Start here. Back by 4.'

By the time I finished reading that first notebook, it was past sundown. Unnoticed by me, my host had re-entered his room and was sitting on his bed, watching me intently as I read. I only saw him when I finally finished the last page, closed the book and sat back to ponder.

"Oh, you're back!" I said, startled.

"I have been back for nearly two hours. What did you make of it?" This last question was accompanied by a nod in the direction of the notebook I had just set aside. He hunched forward a little in my direction, waiting for my answer.

"I-it-I.." I paused, sorted through the jumble of thoughts in my mind and then picked out my words with care. "I am fascinated. This is precisely the line of investigation that I have resolved to dedicate my life to. I see that you have been involved in this research for far longer than I, and I would be honoured if I may assist you in your future studies." What I did not know, then, was that he had left things out, entire volumes that expanded on his deeper reasons for embarking on what he called the Black Pilgrimage. But more of that later.

The man nodded solemnly then leaned back a little. He sat staring into space, for just long enough to make me wonder if he had heard me at all, before he spoke again.

"Good. I've taken the liberty of packing your things and bringing them up here," he said gesturing at a couple of familiar suitcases and few cardboard boxes piled up beside the door. "We can save on rent and pool our resources towards our studies. Does this suit you?" He looked directly into my eyes now, but with the same blank look as earlier. I was taken aback at the arrangement he proposed, but also thrilled. I longed to travel beyond this one reality, and this man seemed so close to the key.

"Yes, yes of course...of course, that would be perfect!"

The man nodded.

"Then it is decided. I will fetch the cot from your room in a while. But first, I must know how much of your medical training you still retain."

"All of it; it has only been three years since I was barred from practicing."

"Do you know the procedures for administering anaesthetics?"

"To an extent. I am not an anaesthetist, but I can manage."

"Good."

He pointed to another box, this one in between the bed and the desk. "In this box is a cage containing a rat. Please examine the creature and tell me what drugs you will need in order to render it insensate but not unconscious."

I opened the box to find a very large rat confined within a very small cage. I had no idea how much it might weigh or what precise quantity of which drug was appropriate; so I made a guess and asked for what I estimated was a small dose of an anaesthetic used on children. The man nodded and got up. Before he left the room, I asked him to stop.

"What is it?" he asked, his voice tense as if he feared that I might be having second thoughts.

"Names," I blurted out. "We don't know each other's names."

"Oh," he replied, relaxing a little. "I already know your name." At the door, he stopped again, turned to me and added, "I'm Suresh."

He returned in the evening; as the shadows outside had grown longer and darker, the flame within my mind had burned brighter and ever more fierce, fuelled by the revelations in Suresh's notebooks. I had been searching for this flame for so long, a flame to warm the spirit, frozen by conspiracies of silence and falsehood, to light up my intellect, shadowed by the vast bulk of acceptable learning. The flame had a name: truth. The truth of what we are and how we may leap beyond into the other planes, the co-existent dimensions that are always with us, within us and without us.

Know this, worldling: reality is a gem, a glittering, precious object formed by patient, wise nature and shaped by the skilled hands of the demiurge. I dwell within this gem, but I shall not be confined to this one flawed facet; nay, Father Time, Mother Space, I shall know all your secrets, I shall follow the thread even unto the inmost light. I shall pierce the veil and gain that assistance which I need to become the divine being I truly am.

That evening we performed the first of many experiments that involved much rending of flesh, tearing of sinew, manipulation of glands and membranes, administration of drugs, herbs and potions. Cruelty or killing were never our aim, you must bear this in mind as you picture to yourself the two men, one large, dark, impassive, the other (me) small, skittish, even febrile in my excitement, hunched over the prone beast, its heart still beating, lungs still working, in a state somewhere between vivisected life and galvanised death. It didn't feel any pain - we were careful to ensure that. They never felt any pain, of them. That was not the trail we were on. We did not seek to mutilate or murder, our manipulations were sacred mysteries; devout, loving essays in liberation. States near the edge of life in this dimension may be close to states considered natural in other, co-existent dimensions. Just as certain details in a relief sculpture may only be evident in a certain slant of light, these extreme states may enable us to perceive in things beyond, and partake of them.

After several experiments on ever larger and more complex organisms, augmented by readings from ever more sophisticated equipment that Suresh somehow kept procuring, we realised that we had gone as far as we possibly could with non-human subjects. We had established to our satisfaction that there was a fifth state in addition to sleep, wakefulness, coma and death – a neutral, receptive state, in which other worlds that lurk around us all the time may be seen and accessed.

We had also determined beyond all reasonable doubt that even when rigors began to set in, combinations of drugs could prolong the presence of certain so-called vital signs. But what of it? What did the organism perceive in that state? What was it that caused the appearance of REM and heightened adrenal secretions in these states?

We had to find a way to bring our subjects back, alive and hopefully whole, from the arcane states we had succeeded in inducing. "I call this the Valdemar Paradox," Suresh told me one morning as we broke our fast on slightly spoiled fruit - I had modified my diet to match his own over time - "What good is it to voyage beyond only to have to end your journey in death's realm? No," he declared, deftly stripping an orange of its peel, "the thing is to be able to venture back and forth at will. We must be able to return from the Black Pilgrimage." At the time, I accepted the phrase as a picturesque way to refer to our goal. Later on Suresh told me more about the Black Pilgrimage, but not everything.

We regretted it when some of our subjects died, and we disposed their remains with due care and respect. Those that lived, we released them in an empty lot behind the lodge. Suresh, again drawing on some mysterious resource, arranged for provisions to be delivered regularly to them. Some of them lived on in very strange forms, limbs flickering in and out of visibility, eyes focussing in terror

or delight on things that remained unseen in this particular slice of reality. Sometimes, around these changeling beasts, we caught a fugitive glimpse of unknown vistas, of previously unseen beings. But these visions were too murky and fleeting to slake our curiosity, and they brought us no closer to crossing over, let alone bringing something back.

We needed human subjects. I had some experience in this area; my previous experiments on furtively procured human subjects had been the cause of my expulsion from the medical profession. I drew on some of my old contacts and soon Suresh and I were taken on as nursing staff at a charitable clinic for the homeless, run by the municipality in conjunction with a non-governmental organisation.

Among these wretched rejects and misfits we found much grist to our mill. The clinic stayed open around the clock, but apart from a watchman and cleaner, there was no constant staff; a couple of doctors attached to the clinic tended to delegate as much as they could to the nursing staff; on the night shifts, this essentially consisted of Suresh, myself and an aging lady nurse whose imbecility and deafness ensured that she would present no serious hindrance to our activities. Most often, the doctors would barricade themselves in a consultation room and sleep, or prowl around in the supply room, looking for things they could steal. Sometimes, they would absent themselves from work for days or even weeks on end. All this suited us perfectly well, but it also contributed to the end of this stage of our research.

Our previous experiments had shown us that energy was consumed by the body at a rapid rate during the transcendent states we induced. It was the lack of sufficient sources of energy that had led to the various unfortunate deaths along the way. So our very first endeavour was to find a sort of battery that the subject could draw on. We had already experimented with different kinds of intravenous and subcutaneous drips, electrical induction, prior reinforcement of the body's reserves through an enriched diet administered for a sustained period and so forth. After a few weeks of experimenting on human subjects, we concluded that it was not a matter of better nutrients or electrical stimulation; there was a need for vitality itself in a more essential form. Air and fire from another living creature, a live pneuma transfusion from soul to soul, as it were.

We referred to old alchemical charts of the human body; we delved deep into Paracelsus and Charaka, correlating our findings with papers in the latest mainstream journals. Finally, we concluded that an electrode treated with a mixture of chemicals derived from herbs used in various shamanic initiations and inserted into an incision of a particular depth made at a precise point along the spinal column would serve as a tap, drawing out the vital spark needed to power our voyager-subjects. Our first forays with this new technique ended badly; both voyager and battery-subject began to vibrate frantically, giving off quantities of smoke. We broke the connection, but too late for the battery, which was reduced to a charred husk. Fortunately disposal of bodies is never an issue in these facilities for the indigent. We were convinced that our concept was sound. We only needed to perfect the details of execution.

What followed was a steady dash to success and the realisation of all our goals. At the height of our endeavours, we had perfected our power supply calculations and had a single voyager strapped to no less than twelve batteries, all drugged or merely too ill to struggle. Picture the scene if you will - twelve recumbent forms, laid out like markings on a sun dial, wrapped in linen, needles implanted at their energy centres, hooked up to wires, all of which lead to the kundalini chakra of the thirteenth, lying prone, also swaddled in linen. A dark supper at the intersection of dimensions. Suresh sits on a chair placed the voyager's head, I sit on another chair at his feet, taking notes. On

the boundary between life as we know it and death to this life (but birth into others!), a voyager will often offer narratives of his journey and even respond to questioning. It seems to be a purely reflexive action, one that leaves no conscious memories.

"Everything lives...the world lives..." The voyager is speaking, his words muffled a little but clear as if emerging from a very long tube. "Our world is still, perfectly still...I see the hills come out to play, I see the skies frolic...there are worlds around us, between us all the time...I see them now...I can touch them, join them...they are always with us. They are always with us!" These last words are uttered in an increasing rush as the voyager begins to convulse. Quickly, we break the connections with the batteries and he relaxes again. We move around the room, checking our subjects. One young boy, a crippled beggar admitted with pneumonia, has burned out. The rest are fine, so we replace him with another subject and resume the experiment.

"You said they are always with us," says Suresh. "Who are they, and where are they?"

"The things of the other worlds. They are always with us, within us, around us. As we are with them. We co-exist, in layers that meet at many points, but we cannot see them, although some of them see us. They know we're here. Sometimes they cross over."

Again, the convulsions begin. We break the circuit, check our subjects. Everyone is alright. We decide to cease our investigations for the night, dismantling our equipment and returning our subjects to their rightful places. Later on, a combination of mesmerism and drugs would wipe the subjects' memory. We further perfected our power source, so that a single battery, prepared suitably, could power the voyage with no ill-effects. Eventually, we wanted to carry on our experiments without any additional help, each in turn serving as battery to the other's voyages.

A few weeks later, we were shut down.

It had nothing to do with the experiments Suresh and I were carrying out. Instead, it turned out that the constant pilfering of medical supplies by the doctors at the clinic had attracted the attention of some self-righteous watchdog body and the facility would have to be shut down until an investigation could be carried out. It didn't matter. Suresh was confident that we had proven the worth of our method. It was time to stop testing the waters and to plunge in.

There was a reckless, brilliant man in the previous century. He was something of a scientist; he helped develop rocket engines, rocket fuel. In his free time, he was a magician, learning at the altar of Thelema but then going beyond Crowley. He took his cue from the old story by M.R. James. He did a series of invocations that were meant to bring him a helper. He brought forth a succubus, and she instigated him to destroy himself. He was on the wrong track, his obsession with playing with fire had set him astray. His plan was flawed, he was unwilling to offer the Logical Sacrifice in his zeal to offer to Ultimate Sacrifice. This is why I must lay my plans more surely. The dance of creation awaits me, the dance of destruction. The galaxies shall spin around my ankles like minnows around a leviathan. I shall find Chorazin. Not the village that lies in ruins in Israel, but a place that James caught a glimpse of when he wrote his story; a place that has rejected its own redemption and may conceivably contain entities that will aid me in return for helping them escape to a refuge in our own realm.

We set up our apparatus in our little room and started to take alternating voyages. I will never forget my first journey. I sat down in an old steel folding chair, and Suresh connected the various tubes

and cables that would keep us linked. He injected me with anaesthetic, and I began to drift away. I was staring at the curve of a dusty lampshade as I faded away. Then, everything became dim before fading out completely. A moment later, I could see again. I thought I could still see the curve of the lampshade's rim; as my sight cleared, it became part of a fruit, a large, spiky purple fruit hanging from something halfway in between a tree and a caterpillar. So far, so wonderland, and I was amazed.

I could still see our world; it was a faint overlay, like the image of the sun lingering in your vision. As it faded, the outlines of this other realm became sharper. So many unfamiliar things; perhaps even more unsettling, so many familiar things transformed. I saw mountains rise from their slumber, roaring with wild joy as they plunged through oceans of some viscid substance with a richly patterned surface. I saw the stars plunge down into pools of honey-coloured liquid where they lay pulsing out messages in a code I did not know. I saw tunnels through the air, tunnels inhabited by creatures that clung overhead like bats but had oversized tails with gleaming gemstones on their tips. I saw a race of pale, tall people burying their young at birth and harvesting them three months later, aged but horribly vital, and as pale and tall as their parents. I saw pathways that looped back on themselves but lead me far into new unknown realms when I tried to follow them. I beheld a man with a clock for a face smash a chunk of lead with a crystal hammer.

By now, our world had faded altogether. I walked up to Clockface and greeted him. He returned my greeting, and then we spoke, although I do not know in what tongue.

"What is this place?" I asked him.

"A place between places. A crossroads. Those are the paths," he said gesturing towards the air tunnels.

"I am looking for a place..."

"You may ask me. I may answer."

"Chorazin...some have called it Qurazin."

"I know Korasen. A benighted place. There are always places like that, places that remain in their own filth. They are lost in that place, but perhaps some are ready for anything or anyone that will help them find a way. Even if it is not the way. Do I understand you well?"

I nodded. The man tilted his head forward, and his shoulders began to work. It was only when a clear liquid began to course across the clock that I realised he was crying.

"That is the way," he continued, pointing to a tunnel beyond a checkerboard plain. I tried asking him more questions, but our own world was fading back into view.

Suresh and I undertook several more preliminary quests, all of which confirmed Clockface's directions - although we never saw Clockface on these subsequent visits. However, on Suresh's prompting I continued to search for signs of Korasen. Korasen was not my own main concern; I was glad merely to have broken the chains, to be able to wander between the co-existent dimensions. I was just a tourist, at best an explorer. It was Suresh who was the Pilgrim. He was obsessed with

becoming like a god, and he thought this place held the key. At some point in his research, he had decided that I should be the one to visit this place. And so I found myself speeding through the tunnel to Korasem at last, the bejeweled tips of the bat-like creatures' tails blurring above me as I flitted by, propelled by willpower.

On the other side, I came to a blasted, burned place. It had once been a mighty city, built from stone and throwing proud towers and domes up to the sky. Now, everything bore an air of decay, towers and domes were cracked and broken, twisted into strange shapes as if they had started to melt for a while. Even the sky seemed charred, somehow, burned out and hollow. I walked through the dusty, uneven streets of this city, looking for inhabitants. I had to find one of them, and attempt to make contact. Sometimes, I thought I could hear a chorus of voices whispering.

So weak. Tired, old. So very weak.

But I could not find the source of these voices. I passed a once-mighty palace on whose walls partly-melted bas-reliefs still conveyed the story of a proud race. Vaguely humanoid, but strangely hunched and equipped with vast wings, these people had fought their way through jungles and swamps to settle in this place. A host of tutelary spirits helped them to move huge rocks and build a mighty city. These spirits taught them the arts of agriculture and the crafts of civilization, taught them of music and dance and raised them up from the powerful but crude tribe they had been. As time passed, members of another tribe came by – a tribe that was fleeing its own ruined home and looking for a place to settle. After initial conflicts, they made peace with each other. Eventually, the tribes intermarried and became one. It seemed like a good ending. What had gone wrong later?

As if I had spoken aloud, an answer came. It was the fleeting, whispered chorus I had heard before, momentarily stronger and more coherent.

They broke their compact.

Who did, I asked, but not aloud. I had come to expect the unexpected in these strange lands, and to adapt to it quickly.

The winged people. They turned away from us, ungrateful children, no longer content with the tutors of their childhood. They listened to the lying promises of the gods of the others. And forgot us.

I could see shapes starting form around me; immense, hunched shapes with wings. They seemed to be listening to the voices with a cringing attention.

So we bided our time and gathered our powers. We sowed poison in their fields, we infested their woods and metals and fabrics with weakness so that all they made was flawed and shoddy. Soon, they and their new kindred were merely savages, living in the proud citadels of their lost past.

But the destruction?

The outland gods - merely overweening lares or penates if truth be told - rose up to challenge us. The damage you see around you was caused by the residue of the energies we unleashed to squash them.

And now you rule your people again?

No. They have turned ever more from the faith; they fear and loathe us but do not worship us. And we expended too much energy destroying those others. We are a spent force, watching over a doomed race. So weak, tired, so very weak...

The voices slowly faded into a vanishingly soft lamentation. I looked around me. The forms still seemed insubstantial; insufficiently real after all they had been through. But the outlines were clear, and the likeness to the winged things in the bas reliefs was clear. These, then, were the people of Korasen. The unredeemed. I spoke to them, out loud.

"I have come from another dimension. I come to offer you passage back to a world where there is no bane over you, where you can start again." Suresh had made me recite the words often enough; there would be no forgetting.

The forms around me began to disperse. None spoke, or uttered a sound, but I sensed a deep confusion and fear. Only one inhabitant lingered. I sat down on the uneven pavement and waited for it to make some gesture. Finally, it came up close to me. I stood; the being still towered over me. It reached down to me and, arms somehow substantial but still translucent, lifted me up toward it, into it.

Suddenly things changed; I saw things in triple vision. I saw Korasen through my own eyes, and I saw the faint outline of my own world; I also saw a third perspective, Korasen through the eyes of its own inhabitant. It was a searing, staggering vision, drawing on senses and frequencies the human mind has not learned to deal with. The experience was both shattering and ecstatic. I began to understand something of the bizarre state some of our early animal subjects had been left in after their experiences. I tried to blink my eyes, shake my head to clear it, tried to turn and flee, but my limbs no longer responded to me. Suddenly my body felt very small, very cloddish and ineffective. At the same time it felt vast and lonely, an isolated tower where I was locked away in the very highest room, gazing down helplessly as something animated a frail shell that used to cloak me.

I will not be dismissed or forgotten; I will not rest content in my own esoteric victories like some hermit, nor will I dwindle into a pitiful footnote in the chronicles of this world. I will rise from the ashes of my own burned life, I will rise like Daedalus yea, but with wings impervious I will tower over the world like a Colossus that shall never tumble. I shall bind a being to me, a being unredeemed and vile in its own world but capable of great things in this. Tremble, fool Faustus, scoff not vile Mefisto; I have drunk deeper of the waters of truth, I have scaled higher in the ranges of verity, and I shall conclude a bargain none has achieved before. I shall drink ichor from the flagon, I shall ride on the wings of the dragon. So let it be written, so let it be done.

I watch from my room up high in this tower as Suresh and a thing that wears my form consult with each other. Suresh is exultant, he gloats. I see emotions on his face I have never seen before. I see more emotion than I ever saw in our years together. Country after country falls before him, toppled rulers and defeated people bend their knees to the great unifier. No man has come this close to being king of the world. Now he is searching for a creature that can help him conquer other worlds.

And what of me? I am still trying to shake off the chains. Even this trap of the mind must have points of weakness. There are always other worlds around us, waiting for us to spot them. And once

seen, they can never be unseen. I have tasted that fifth state, neutral, receptive, I have walked between worlds. I can do it again.

I am keeping my eyes open.

Author Bio: Jayaprakash Satyamurthy is fascinated by the coherence of delusion and delusions of coherence. His story in this issue was inspired by M.R. James and the life of rocket science pioneer/occultist Jack W. Parsons. He lives in Bangalore and its co-existent dimensions.

Sleeping... Waking... Being... by Russell Adams

~ 4900 Words

My grandfather called me at college three weeks before the summer semester ended to say he'd stopped sleeping. "No need to any more, Rob, my head's clear as ever, but maybe we should think about seeing each other before too long."

He didn't ask me to come right away, but by the following midmorning, I was creating a dust cloud on the long driveway to the dozen or so acres at the heart of the farm. On either side, fields leased to neighbors were high with corn having a good year.

Though my father grew up here, farm life never got into his blood. Manufacturing close-tolerance jet engine parts for the military and the money that brought appealed to him more. As for me, well, the road to my eventual future in neurological research was already mapped out in some detail.

I'd driven all night without sleep, but going sleepless wasn't anything new for me. With finals close, I habitually shambled around campus, bleary-eyed, grunting at friends and getting no better response back. We were a serious, career-fixated lot, little more than academic zombies by the end of a term, too obsessed with stuffing our own brains with the knowledge to think about eating anyone else's. Still, if knowledge were transferrable that way, who knows how safe our professors' brains would have been?

The barn, with cows and milking apparatus sold off and used now only for storage, was freshly painted. Gramps still kept a small flock of alert, intelligent brown-and-white goats who kept the grass cropped close and gave a milk rich with six-percent butterfat. As I crunched onto the gravel turnaround, laying hens in the poultry yard looked up and immediately lost interest in me. This all felt perfectly familiar, wonderfully warm, better even than going back to my parents' home.

Gramps was rocking in the porch swing.

I used the moments climbing the steps to size him up --posture, muscle tone, expression. His grey eyes were clear. He looked fit, healthy, tanned. A lifetime of hard work will do that for a man.

"You really don't sleep?" I asked after our hug.

"Not a wink for eight days now. I don't get tired. I work in the gardens during the day, eat, then read all night. Occasionally, I'll close my eyes for a few minutes listening to music, usually recordings of your grandmother playing Bach. Before, the days were always too short. Now, I have time for things I never did before. I've even given up coffee."

That summer, I'd been studying my tail off trying to master the intricacies of cell biology and organic chemistry as I strove to graduate my premed program a year early. I was often so exhausted I hardly knew what I was reading, but so long as enough stuck, I couldn't let myself sleep. I could envy this man who didn't need to. Life without coffee was unimaginable.

"Everybody needs sleep, Gramps," I said. "You can't stay awake forever. It's got to catch up with you sometime." In a neuropsychology course, I'd read about an Eskimo shot in the head by a harpoon who'd lost a teacup of brain material but survived. Along with personality changes, his sleep cycle changed, six weeks of wakefulness alternating with six dead to the world.

Gramps shrugged. "When that happens, I expect to be asleep a good long while." He saw the way I was nodding and made his intention unmistakable. "At least until the last trump sounds and graves open up."

I wondered at this from a lifelong unrepentant atheist. He'd never been shy about sharing opinions which, often enough, appalled more traditional family members. Not my father though who was only devout about getting his share of federal defense dollars.

I was still figuring out my own answers to questions seemingly long settled in my grandfather's mind. Gramps had always said that once the fluorescent bulb stops flickering, the bathroom stays dark until we get a new one. When I'd tease, "So now you believe in reincarnation?" my grandfather just chuckled.

"On the phone, you mentioned a small stroke. That's what the doctors think?"

"I don't need a doctor to tell me my time is short. I hoped you'd come after exams. I'm selfish enough to want to spend some time with you--however much you can spare, but I never wanted you to take off when you need to be studying."

"You've never asked much of me, Gramps. I'd have come even if it meant missing finals."

"I appreciate that. I haven't said anything to your father yet. He's so busy, I hardly ever remember the sound of his voice."

We were a driven family, but we handled the demands of hectic schedules differently. "A couple weeks ago when I called Mom and Jan, Dad picked up. I got a 'Good to hear your voice, Rob', before he passed the phone."

We spent the rest of the morning outside drinking iced tea with sprigs of garden mint. After lunch, I looked around the immaculate yard, the well-tended house and buildings.

"I could use some exercise. What can I do?"

All afternoon, I weeded dense flowerbeds on my knees while Gramps tilled the vegetables and aerated my grandmother's magnificent flower garden. We washed off in the cold water of the hand pump toward evening, then switched to fresh-made lemonade with some limes thrown in for good measure as we did more catching-up.

The farm was stiller without my grandmother's lively presence. She'd died of heatstroke in her garden eight years before. After that, my grandfather's life shrank. That's when my solo visits started, and we'd become so close. Now, visits took more planning and were necessarily shorter.

With nothing needing to be done except things he loved, he had no one to talk to about them, either, except during rare phone calls. A lot of untold stories had gotten stored up. As the sun was close to setting, I sat on the back porch swing listening again to that strong, familiar Midwestern accent.

When the mosquitoes became too fierce, we went inside and fixed dinner to television news.

He cooked the way he did everything. Simple, efficient movements made hardly any mess to clean up. In biology labs, I'd taken the way he used his hands deboning a chicken as my model for performing dissections, but when I realized I'd never have his dexterity, I quietly put aside thoughts of an eventual surgical specialty. After dinner, Gramps allowed himself to be persuaded to sit down to his mystery novel while I washed and towel-dried the dishes.

This wasn't a traditional farmhouse. My grandmother had brought a fat dowry from her wealthy Eastern family. My grandparents used some of the money to increase the productivity of the milk cows and to strengthen bloodlines with a new prize bull. The rest was used to replace the original, ramshackle house on the top of the hill with an elegant Victorian that recalled the one she'd grown up in and loved. With numerous windows to catch breezes no matter how the wind blew, days in which light curtains over the windows failed to billow constantly were rare.

This was a house I could live in forever. It had changed subtly since the years when my grandmother's spirit filled it. Now, her presence was most strongly marked by the painting over the Steinway memorializing her last concert in Philadelphia, her birthplace. She sat at the keyboard draped in an elegant dress of lovingly rendered blue silk, but it was her beatific expression that held the eyes, the expression of one transported to places knowable only by those who could hear the actual notes she was playing. Although early arthritis was already interfering with the fluid dexterity of her fingers, only those who knew her playing intimately could sense the loss.

Memories of her were everywhere about the rooms, but there was no doubt that my grandfather's spirit had now made this place his own.

After midnight, he caught me stifling a yawn. "You don't have to sit up with me, Rob. I'm the one who doesn't sleep any more. You might as well get some rest." I did sit up a bit longer, but eventually I stopped fighting nature, said goodnight, and went upstairs.

My room hadn't changed. There were fresh flowers on the dresser, just as there had always been when my grandmother picked bouquets to brighten up visits. I could see the flower beds from the window and, just past, the large greenhouse Gramps build for her fiftieth birthday from wood and plastic sheeting that he still had to replace every few years. With hardly any moon, the whole yard lay in deep, mysterious shadow.

I'd always been susceptible to eerily beautiful atmospheric moods. I indulged my half-wish that this lovely night could be of forever. That my grandfather would be able to aerate his garden and prune his bushes and trees until he chose to lay down his tools and lie down in his rope hammock for one final rocking by the wind.

For the first time in months, nothing demanded my attention, leaving me unanchored with thoughts roving in odd directions.

If he'd stopped sleeping, I thought uncritically, perhaps other miracles could happen here as well. A part of me willed this existence to detach from the world, for time to pace itself differently, to flow more slowly because it had become so infinitely precious. No wonder my grandfather found sleeping such a wasteful intrusion. Although tired, looking out the window had somehow taken the edge off my sleepiness.

I turned the light off, pulled the wicker chair up to the window, and sat back with feet resting on the sill. Through the wide-open window, the breeze brought an elusive scent, floral and slightly musky. Did it come from something specific, unfamiliar to me, or was that tantalizing aroma a natural blending of everything outside in simultaneous bloom?

I didn't try too hard to tease an analysis from the aromas. Back at school, I had access to labs that could tell me what that aroma contained but never what it was. One unknown flower or many familiar ones--did it really matter? Even if my mind solved the mystery, what would really have been accomplished? A helluva attitude for a science major, I thought.

An hour ticked by and still I remained awake, more so even than when I came upstairs. I found it impossible to hold onto any thought for more than a few seconds. This should have bothered me intensely, but it didn't. My mind flowed and sometime merely oozed. When thought stalled completely, I sometimes reheard my grandfather's uncommonly deep voice making commonplace observations over the years.

In this quietness, this tranquility that I hadn't felt for a long time, anything, miracles even, seemed possible. Perhaps something, some spirit, of my grandfather's house, had slowly, unnoticed, infused into my own. Perhaps I too had lost my need for sleep simply by being here?

With every shift in night breezes, the floral intensity varied in an ever-shifting crescendo and diminuendo.

When my grandmother had to give up performing, she'd given her creative energy over to her gardens and especially the greenhouse. Creative gifts can come singly, but more often they cluster. Just as she had always been able to coax an arresting reading from a familiar musical phrase, she had a knack for persuading flowers to do interesting things. Her last developed flower was the crimson, full-fragranced Janica Rose named for my older sister that embodied perfectly her deeply passionate nature.

After Grandmother died, Gramps took me into a greenhouse filled with trays and racks of plants she'd been encouraging to grow in ways no plant had ever thought to on its own. "The first time I stood here alone and realized they were all my responsibility now, I was overwhelmed until I felt Helen close. 'Just keep everything watered and fertilized, John. Keep the greenhouse heated in winter. My plants know what they need to do. So do you.'"

Left on their own, the plants followed their own natures, producing rank growths as they fought each other for sun and nourishment.

Occasionally, when storms shredded the sheeting, seeds and even uprooted plants escaped the greenhouse. The garden was full of wild blooms from years of fugitives that had established themselves among the domesticated plants. I'd mentioned once that maybe he should weed them out, or else they might take over Grandma's flower garden completely, but he would hear none of

that. They were all her plants, he'd argued, those domesticated and those wild. "Your grandmother knows what she's doing. Always has, always will."

Inhaling deeply in my chair, I thought, maybe something new had escaped, taken up residence this summer in the flowerbeds, some new type of bloom whose fragrance dispelled the need for sleep altogether. Unlikely as it seemed, for the moment, I found myself hoping it might be true, just as I hoped it might make my grandfather eternally youthful and vital.

Toward morning, I caught a glimpse of motion in the yard. In deep shadow, my grandfather was picking cherry tomatoes into a small basket. Not infrequently, one found its way into his mouth. A few minutes after he came back inside, the sprinklers turned on, throwing arcs of water back and forth over vegetable and flower leaves with soothing whispers of gentle rain. It seemed like only the next moment that the sprinklers were off again. I had no idea how long I'd dozed off.

I lay down on the bed without undressing. Of course, I still needed sleep, just not too much. If this was one of the last times I'd have with my grandfather, then I didn't want to waste any more of it than I could help.

In the morning, about ten, I woke, ashamed of my sloth. There was orange juice already on the kitchen table. A pile of crisp bacon lay on a towel by the stove. The smell of home-made bread toasting was almost unbearably intense. My grandfather was taking a colorful garden omelette off the stove.

"Sorry, Gramps. I didn't mean to sleep so late."

"I really didn't think you'd stay awake all night in a dark, quiet room. I saw you at the window. Don't worry, you haven't missed anything."

"Except time with you."

He set our plates on the table without saying anything. But when we'd started eating, he glanced up. "We've had a lot of time together over the years. A long lifetime of memories. Don't worry overmuch about those few that won't get made."

The rest of my time there, a few days, we talked, we worked in the garden, we drank iced tea and lemonade and, occasionally, home-brewed beer made with hops he'd grown himself. When I needed to, I slept. When I woke up we picked up conversations left off and worked some more.

Some nights when that tantalizing fragrance rose up out of the flower beds to permeate my bedroom so intensely, I wondered if it could be some new kind of narcotic drugging my thoughts. Even when I could barely smell it, it was never completely gone. I never asked Gramps about it--too afraid, perhaps, he might give me a name and spoil the magic.

The night before returning to college, I sat at the window thinking that though my father would never willingly live here, even in retirement, a part of me very much longed to. If Gramps could still sense his wife's spirit, might I his? How could I allow this place so full of intimate memories to pass into the hands of strangers? How could I keep it from happening until I retired here myself, most of a lifetime away?

A breeze suddenly filled the room with that heady scent, as if the garden itself were urging me to reconsider with the only voice it had. What miracles might be awaiting discovery in that greenhouse? I imagined it suggesting. What about a lifetime of scientific research dedicated to the plants in the greenhouse? Who knows what such luxurious growths might produce? A few novelty varieties appealing only to amateur gardeners? Miracle drugs?

Ridiculous to dedicate the next decade to study only to become a rural GP or mad scientist obsessed with his grandmother's greenhouse. I had no choice but to give up this place. I had no choice but to cling to it. Any choice I made could only result in surrendering something intensely precious.

From someplace deep in me came a whisper, "This scent is nothing more than your grandfather's essence that will survive only until his light flickers off for the last time."

And from another came one of my grandmother's favorite sayings, "Everything unfolds naturally when you find the right tempo."

As the breezes shifted again, I could only sit back bewildered in my chair, feet on sill, wishing there was nothing to decide, that everything could remain unchanged. Forever. Indefinitely... for as long as it possibly could.

#

Finals over, my drive up to the house was leisurely. It had rained, and I stirred up no dust. At the turnaround, I pulled in alongside Martha Svenson's muddy pickup. Her three boys waved as they put out chicken feed and gathered eggs. The goats were nowhere in sight.

I was the first to arrive. Jan and our parents would be getting in separately later that afternoon. We had a lot to talk about but then decisions would come quickly and efficiently. Individually and as a family we were good at deciding things.

When I came into the kitchen, Martha was putting a dinner casserole into the refrigerator. A platter of assorted film-wrapped sandwiches, dishes of potato and macaroni salad, and a large bowl of fruit sat on the counter next to the hamper. A chocolate cake waited in a covered dish. The kitchen was filled with the welcoming aroma of strong coffee.

Martha put a thick tuna sandwich in front of me and set two full coffee mugs down between us.

"The boys come over every day to take care of the chickens and make sure things are secure," she said. "In case you're wondering, the goats are over at our place until you folks decide what to do with them. The kids want to buy the herd. Ted and I are willing if they're for sale--we all like goat milk..."

I didn't have to ask how she got in. Gramps had no reason to lock the door, especially once he stopped sleeping. Anyway, it was still common custom to exchange keys with neighbors because...well, you never know.

Two days before, at the end of August, she'd come over in late morning to buy goat milk for baking.

"When John didn't answer the door and wasn't in the garden, I let myself in and found him slumped in his chair. The reading light was still on despite the bright morning sun streaming in. At first, I thought the body's need for sleep had finally caught up with him. Then I noticed his chest wasn't moving, and when I touched his cheek, it was cold."

"On the phone, you said he looked peaceful. That he didn't seem to have died in pain."

"Peaceful?" She laughed. "Did I say that?... Actually, he looked mostly surprised."

Surprised was the last word I'd expected, but it suddenly made sense. I laughed with her, but for my own reasons. When I arrived, I'd noticed Gramps' book neatly closed on the reading table with bookmark lying alongside. Like all the family, Gramps took pride in finishing whatever he started. At surprised, I figured he hadn't guessed the killer before the detective's reveal.

"That's funny?" she asked after I explained.

"There's a family joke Jan made up. Gramps loves mystery stories, but, a farmer at heart, he's a sucker for any well-planted red herring."

She peered at me. "That's a joke? What do herring of any color have to do with farming?"

I bit into the sandwich. "The herring isn't the joke part; the well-planted is-- because he's a farmer." She still didn't get it. "Family jokes don't translate well, I guess."

I took another thoughtful bite. "What's different about this?"

Dill and a hint of anise, the way my kids demand it now. It's the only way I know how to make it anymore."

I swallowed. "How is Grams' garden?"

"As lush as ever. I've been picking flowers, but a lot of vegetables and fruit are going to go to waste."

"Take as much as you can use," I said. "If you put up any pickles or relish, Jan and I'd appreciate a jar or two."

I took a breath. "Have you been in the garden at night?"

"Sure. Ted and I made it our business to drop in on John regularly, especially after that sleeplessness thing started. Why?"

"Have you noticed an unusual aroma, sweet and slightly musky?"

"Can't say I did. That doesn't mean much, though. With so many different flowers, the smell of a garden is always changing. If you smell it tonight, let me know tomorrow at the funeral. I'll come over in the evening to see if I can identify it."

I finished the sandwich while Martha heated up our coffee.

"It doesn't feel the same here without John," she said. "It was the same after Helen died..."

John. Oh, yes, my grandfather had a name besides Gramps.

While Martha was cutting flowers to fill the bedrooms with bouquets, I went into the greenhouse. The plants were drooping, so I turned on the root irrigator. There was too much sun to risk burning the leaves with the mister.

I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply. Something hung in the air, but it wasn't the smell I was interested in.

An hour later, Jan arrived. When she reached up to kiss my cheek, I froze. She pulled back. "I showered this morning. I can't be that bad!"

"What are you wearing?"

"Don't your eyes work?"

"That perfume."

"I'm not wearing perfume."

"Kiss me again."

She laughed. "You really need to find yourself a proper girl friend."

I leaned down and smelled her neck. "You're wearing something."

She extended her arm. "How about here?"

There it was on her wrist. "That's it, almost. What is it?"

"Some cream Grams gave me years ago. It's all but gone now. I'll wear the last of it to the funeral. I think he might like being reminded of her at such a time. Now, what's all this sudden interest in how I smell?"

I explained as I carried her overnight bag inside. Martha had another sandwich out and a third cup for coffee. I took Jan's hand and held the wrist out to Martha. "Do you recognize that?" I asked.

She sniffed. "Spirosa," she said at once. "With the rain we've had this summer, it's all over. Pretty flower and smell, but a persistent weed that's hard to get rid of when it digs in. You usually have to

burn it out. That's the smell you were wondering about?" I nodded. "I don't smell any muskiness, though. It's no wonder you only smelled it once the sun goes down. The flowers close up during the day and reopen in the dark. In the old days, girls made a fragrant cream from the flowers to wear for a beaux and later to soothe baby rash."

That simple. I didn't wonder at her not smelling muskiness. People do smell things differently.

"Have you all decided what to do with the farm? If you need to break the lease on the fields to sell it, we can, but I'll be sorry losing use of that land. The corn's amazing. We're actually facing a decent profit for the first time in years."

I'd been thinking about this. "Do me a big favor, Martha. Don't tell my father that. If it comes up, insist we live up to the original term, ten years. Dad may grumble, but he won't try to break the lease."

She peered at me. "Family skullduggery? That's always fun. What do you have in mind?"

"I need to buy time. I can't bear to lose Gramps' place, and I'm not in a position to do anything with it yet."

"It would be a shame to leave it idle. A farm can go to hell in a hurry if it isn't kept working."

I had an answer if the Svensons would go along. Finals over and well-rested, things didn't seem nearly as muddled or desperate as they had that last night upstairs. I laid my cards on the table--always a good strategy dealing with honest, well-intentioned folks--ending with the question upon which everything hung. "Would you be willing to lease the rest of the farm for the duration of your lease on the fields? For a nominal rent. Just enough to cover upkeep?"

"And what do you propose we do with it?"

"All the plowing, tilling, and harvesting equipment in the sheds is still in good condition. Gramps never got around to selling it or couldn't bear to. You wouldn't have to haul your own all the way over and back again every time. The last I saw, your barn was at capacity with cows. Milk prices are pretty good now. You could bring in more and increase production. The milking equipment's gone, but terms of the lease could include replacement. Used milkers in decent condition are cheap enough with farms getting bought up for development."

"And who's to run things? Separated property is often more trouble than it's worth."

"How old is Donald?" Donald was nearly my age, and Gramps always said he had a good head on his shoulders.

"My Donald? Eighteen... Oh, I see! He's a bit young." She smiled. "But he's steady and works cheap...."

Mom and Dad arrived close to sunset, the first time we'd all been together in ages. Mom was drawn to a picture of my grandfather, young and dressed to kill. "It's no mystery to me how a talented, attractive woman of good family could have fallen in love with John at first sight," she said and

smiled at Dad, "because that's precisely what happened to me with your father." Physically, my father resembled his own closely, even if in other ways the apple had fallen rather far from the tree. "I'm glad you were the one to be with him," she said. "I'm proud of you for leaving school that way."

Dad shook my hand. "We both are. And congratulations on finals."

"How long can you stay?" I asked.

"We're leaving tomorrow right after the funeral," he said. "I don't know what Jan has in mind."

"Jan can answer for herself. I'll stay over tomorrow night so Rob and I can catch up and head back the next morning. With his fall semester coming up, and me about to be buried by a new project for a few months, we talk now or not until Christmas."

At the family meeting after dinner dishes were cleared, Dad made notes while I laid out my plan for the farm. I'd brought along a recent price list for surplus used milking equipment. Gramps had gotten a good price when he'd sold his. There were detailed records showing farm maintenance expenses that I'd only had a chance to skim, but my gut still told me we could make this lease work. There were still issues to resolve--use of the house, the buildings, the gardens, storage of my grandfather's and grandmother's personal effects. In the end, Dad said he'd look it all over and took the account books upstairs when he and Mom went to bed.

Jan came up to my room with me. In darkness, I pulled the wicker chair over to the window so she could experience the backyard the way I had, with feet up on the windowsill. A strong breeze filled the air with that familiar smell.

"It's close but not identical" my sister said. "Different variety of Spirosa, I suppose."

"Or a new one." I told her about my theory of greenhouse plants crossbreeding with wild and producing... Who knows what?

The funeral was uneventful. After our folks left, Jan and I walked the farm then sat drinking Gramps' homemade beer as we caught up. I'd have the house to myself for a couple days longer waiting for Dad to overnight the lease agreement for signing. The Svensons and I were delighted by the terms, everybody else seemed merely satisfied.

In the morning, Jan looked closely at me before getting into her car. "You know, Rob, you take after both of them. In twenty-five years, I could imagine you looking just like Dad. In fifty, you might be the spitting image of Gramps."

"So much for my personal uniqueness," I grumbled, secretly pleased.

"You know what else that suggests?" When I only shrugged, she continued, "Think of Grams and Mom, two elegant, lovely, talented women. You could have one hell of a girl in store of you, Little Brother, if you put yourself out there to meet the good ones."

"How long might that take?" I wondered aloud. Jan, I knew, was still looking, waiting.

"Hard to say. It doesn't happen overnight, but you've got ten years to find yours before you have to make your big lifestyle decision." When I only shrugged, she added, "However you choose, I'm guessing she'll be content."

Author Bio: Russell Adams is an American writer who has written short stories, novels, and plays, speculative and otherwise, most of his life. Russell is presently retired and treating writing as a full time challenge. His stone age fantasy-farce "I Need a Story" appeared in *The Adventure of Creation: With a Foreword by Holly Lisle* (Think Sideways Writers Anthology) (Volume 1) [2013] available from Amazon.com.

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