

joined him on the rue Quelle Blaque. Claude thought the person might be a burglar, his outlines distorted by a sack of loot, but instead of hurrying away, the figure stood there, drinking in the neighborhood as Claude himself had done.

Since the figure was not threatening, was, in fact, compelling, Claude approached it. He was instantly glad, for it proved to be a woman, a dark, Asian woman, quite beautiful, but dressed in a seventeenth-century costume and behaving as if drunk or drugged. When the woman saw Claude, she drew her hand to her mouth and gasped. Evidently, he appeared as odd to her as she to him, yet she did not seem overly afraid.

"I thought I was back," the woman said. Her French was formal, old-fashioned. "But now I am unsure."

"What do you mean?" asked Claude.

"It is not the same as it was. My shop is full of silver wheels. There is a tower next door so tall I cannot find its top. And you, sir . . ."

She seemed actually in shock. *She must be on some drug,* Claude thought. Got loaded at a costume party, no doubt, but what was she doing in a locked bicycle shop? "Uh, how long have you been gone?" he asked.

"Only an hour or two."

He chuckled. "Well, my dear, nothing's changed in the past couple of hours, I assure you." He told himself that he should walk away, but he stayed. She was so exotic, so lost and lovely. Despite an otherworldly aloofness, she radiated an erotic heat that melted his customary caution and reason. Even should she prove to be an actress on heroin, and not the creature of marvel that she seemed, he nevertheless craved her company. His loins tingled, not merely with lust but with a kind of spiritual adventurism, almost Promethean in character, as if he might steal something from her (from her lips, her breasts, her breath) that would allow him to surpass himself. He hoped that his limo was stuck in traffic again.

"Where have you been?"

Kudra didn't hesitate. "I have been on the Other Side," she said. For the first time, she looked into his eyes.

Claude felt weak. It was a result of the eye contact, not her reply. He thought that she meant the other side of the Seine.

"And how are things on the other side?" He hoped he didn't sound flip.

"Oh, sir . . ." A tremor ran the length of her, causing her voluptuous flesh to quiver like the throat of a lovesick frog. Her bustle gown was lacy and had three-quarter-length sleeves, with which she wore neither muff nor gloves. Assuming that she was cold, Claude draped his topcoat about her shoulders.

"Actually," said Claude, "I much prefer the Right Bank. Did you really find it so unpleasant over there?"

"Oh, I would not describe the Other Side as unpleasant, sir. It is quite beyond the scope of words such as pleasant or unpleasant."

Her seriousness made him smile. "Impressed you, hey? Well, how *would* you describe it?"

Kudra neglected to answer right away. Instead, she searched the block, pivoting stiffly, like a figurine atop a music box, to stare back into the bicycle shop. She was looking for someone, although in her dazed state she may have been confused as to his precise identity.

Gradually she turned to Claude again, fixed him with a hypnotic gaze, and began a monologue so lengthy and bewildering that had it come from any mouth but hers, he would have done something rude. As it was, there was no question of interruption. She spoke softly and slowly, as if in a trance, and Claude, himself, became entranced. Her manner, her voice, her heat, her scent combined to hypnotize him, binding him with spider wire, wrapping his mind in a web of vision so thick that he could actually see the scenes she described as vividly as if he were dreaming them.

*Released with a sudden puff from the electromagnetic convulsions of dematerialization, Kudra finds herself inside a covered wharf, an enormous building of damp granite and soiled marble, extending for two hundred yards or more beyond the shore of some dark sea.*

*Obviously a terminal, the wharf is teeming with travelers of every race, nationality, and era of time, arriving, departing, waiting.*

*The travelers murmur, occasionally they moan, but they do*

start  
next  
←

not converse among themselves. They hustle in. They bustle about. They stand in long lines. They go.

Although Kudra's body feels normal and intact, there is something insubstantial, almost vaporous, about most of the others. She is soon to learn that that is because they are dead. They have left their bodies behind and are walking about in mental projections, in their ideas of their earthly bodies. They have fleshed themselves in their imaginations of themselves, which explains why the majority of them are rather handsome.

Only the dematerialized are housed in actual bodies, and in all the throng, there are but two or three of these. The dematerialized, moreover, are exempt from the rules and regulations governing the dead. Conductors in white uniforms herd the dead arrivals into groups, form the groups into lines, single-file, but Kudra is allowed to roam at will.

The conductors seldom speak, but they act with irresistible authority. Their faces are radiant, their movements fluid and fluttery. Kudra is reminded of snowflakes, of the fluttering pages of books upon which poems in white ink have been written.

Acutely aware of her own smell, for there is no trace of odor among the dead masses, Kudra wanders throughout the great wharf, which, though miserably crowded, is steeped in a solitude more complete than any she has ever known.

No newspapers are for sale in the station, no sweets or tobacco. Travelers arrive. They go. They arrive in streams through wide marble portals, carrying neither luggage nor souvenirs. But where is it they go from here? To find out, Kudra pushes to the head of a line. All lines, it turns out, lead to the same place: the Weighing Room.

Timidly, Kudra slips into the room, where she is surprised to find a tall, androgynous figure, half priest and half harlequin, wielding a gleaming knife.

One by one, the dead approach the harlequin priest. With a swift, practiced stroke, he (or she) cuts out their hearts.

Upon a stone altar, there is a set of scales. The scales are ordinary, made of brass, not gold. On the left balance, there is a single hawk-brown feather.

The harlequin priest passes each freshly rooted heart

his/her assistant, a young woman in a white tunic. The assistant lays the heart upon the right balance. If the heart is heavier than the feather—and time after time it is—the person is motioned to the rear of the room, where he or she joins another line, this one filing down steps that lead to the docks.

At regular intervals, ships moor at dockside. The ships are sleek and luminous. In fact, they seem fashioned entirely of light, a cold light, as staid and ordered as a Victorian drawing room. The heartless dead board the ships, which, once loaded, sail away at tremendous speeds. In a matter of seconds, they are no more than distant stars in the obsidian night of ocean.

The woman in the snowy tunic notices Kudra. She smiles. "Do you understand what is happening here?" she inquires. "We weigh their hearts. Should a person possess a heart that is as light as a feather, then that person is granted immortality."

"Indeed? Are there many?"

"Few. Precious few, I am sorry to say. One would think that people would catch on. Those who pass the test are usually rather odd. The last was a tall black fellow with bee dung caked in his hair. The ordinary rarely beat the scales."

"Where do they go, then, all those who fail?" Kudra pointed toward the water, where another ship of light was just whooshing away, leaving a milky wake.

"To the energy realms."

"Never to return?"

The woman shrugs. "As energy, perhaps. As light."

"But the ones who pass the test . . . ?"

"The immortals? They are free to take any direction they like. Free to embark on a sea voyage, to return to your world, or to some different world." She places yet another heart upon the balance, squealing with delight when it does not send the balance dish plummeting to the altar top. "Look," she says to Kudra. "Look at this one. Now here is one that comes fairly close."

This organ was ripped from the corpulent breast of a jolly-faced troubadour. He doesn't comprehend the commotion, but he is winking at Kudra, rubbing his belly, and looking as if he'd gladly trade his butchered heart for a pint of ale.

"Had he combined his hedonism with a pinch more wisdom, had he poured slightly less into his gullet and slightly more into his soul, he might have made it," says the weigher of hearts. "Still, he earns a pink ticket."

She hands the troubadour something strongly resembling a carnation petal and motions him to a side door. Kudra follows him and learns that this door, too, leads down to the water, but to an empty dock. From above, the woman signals him to wait.

For quite a long time, the troubadour stands there. To relieve his tedium, he whistles a tune, a medieval ballad of courtly love. Suddenly, he is silenced in mid-whistle, his lips periwinkled in a frozen pucker. A ship is pulling into view.

As it nears dockside, Kudra sees that it is a barge, of considerable length, and canopied with pink linen, from whose edges fringe and tassels dangle. The barge is hung with paper lanterns, in which candles blaze gaily. Scattered about the deck are tables and chairs, resembling those of an inn, and here sit people eating spicy southern foods and sipping beer and pineapple coolers. Minstrels with droopy black mustaches wander the deck, strumming guitars. Women in shoes with heels like daggers dance, rattling tambourines all the while and cooing lubricious phrases to the many parrots that occupy crude wooden cages. From below deck, a katzenjammer of libidinous voices is heard. On the side of the barge, the name Hell has been painted.

Despite the fact that there's no odor to give magnitude to the foods on deck or to the sex below, the passengers seem merry. Kudra believes that she recognizes one of them. Unless she is mistaken, it is Fosco, the calligrapher from the Samye lamasery. He is at table, in repartee with a pair of elderly Chinamen, whom he addresses as Han Shan and Li Po. They hurl lines of spontaneous poetry at one another, each trying to top the last, often slapping the tabletop and laughing wildly. Kudra waves and waves, but it is impossible to get Fosco's attention. The dead have little interest in the living, she surmises.

The barge scrapes against the dock with a careless rasp. The captain, a seedy Spaniard in a comic-opera version of a military uniform, leans over the rail and takes the trouba-

dour's pink ticket. Once the fellow is aboard, the vessel floats lazily away, bound for unknown sprays.

As the barge departs, it turns, affording a view of its starboard side. On this side, the vessel wears a different name entirely. Heaven is what it says.

Kudra returns to the scales. The young woman is hard at work, testing hearts, assaying the precious metals of the life well-lived. "How did you land this job?" asks Kudra.

"I was not feather-light, but I was feather-bright," she answers.

"I am not sure I understand. Yet I cannot help but notice that we strongly resemble one another, you and I."

"Indeed we do."

"Are we related? Am I an incarnation of you? Or something?"

"What makes you suppose that you would be an incarnation of me, rather than me of you?" She giggles and shakes her skunk-black curls. "It is so amusing the way that mortals misunderstand the shape, or shapes, of time."

"I am not sure I understand."

"And I cannot help you understand. In the realm of the ultimate, each person must figure out things for themselves. Remember that, when you return to Your Side. Teachers who offer you the ultimate answers do not possess the ultimate answers, for if they did, they would know that the ultimate answers cannot be given, they can only be received."

Kudra nods. She looks around her. Once one is accustomed to it, the scene on the wharf is neither dreadful nor thrilling. It is, as a matter of fact, fairly boring, an ongoing performance of bureaucratic routine. Death is as orderly as life is disorderly.

The weigher looks up from the scales. "Perhaps you ought to be going," she suggests.

"Yes. I should. But . . . how does one get out of here? Must I once more dematerialize?" As exciting as dematerialization was, Kudra was not looking forward to an immediate encore. Spiraling, ring by ring, through that zone of spin and crackle, was more exhausting than a month in a rope yard.

"That will not be necessary. There is a doorway on yonder side of the station."

Kudra stares in that direction. She is less than assured. "This place is so huge," she says. "There are so many doors."

"Do not worry. You shall find it. There is a sign above the door."

"What says the sign?"

"Erleichda."

"Pardon?"

There is a ledge on the altar, caked with dirt and blackened by blood from the dripping of the strange fruit that is weighed there. With her finger, the woman writes the word upon the ledge.

Thanking her, Kudra studies the letters until they are memorized.

"One last question, if I might," says Kudra. "Why are there no odors here?"

"Outside the portals of our station, there is a holding area, brilliantly illuminated. Had you arrived in the usual fashion, you would have been detained there until it was positively determined that you wished to be dead. The holding area teems with thousands of odors of every description; it is a vast net of odors, a clearinghouse of odors, the odors of a billion personal lifetimes, each separate and distinct. But once having accepted their demise, and having been admitted to the terminal, the dead can no longer smell nor be smelled. Otherwise it would be too difficult for them. Smell evokes memories. If smell were permitted here, the dead would still be connected to life and could not, therefore, accept their fate. As long as there is odor, there is hope of life everlasting. Because you carry odor, my lady, your presence here is potentially disruptive. Do you notice the uncomfortable manner in which the dead regard you? They cannot see you, they can only see what is dead, and they cannot really smell you, either, yet, still they sense something. Smell is like that. Did you realize that a ghost is but a dead person who has not completely lost his ability to smell? Smell is the sister of light, it is the left hand of the ultimate. It fastens the eternal to the temporal, This Side to That Side, and thus is highly sensitive; volatile, if not dangerous. So go now, dear lady, go in good

scent and good fortune. It is not the last time, perhaps, that our paths shall cross."

Kudra says good-bye and rejoins the hoard in the terminal, moving with some difficulty against the flow. Despite the jostling—were the travelers more physically substantial, her global breasts might have been pounded into flatcakes—she decides to have a quick peek, a sniff, outside the main entrance before searching for her escape.

She pushes through heavy traffic until she is standing in the portals, beneath the mammoth stone archway, facing an immense plaza that is without a pigeon, without an ant, without a leaf or the shadow of a leaf, yet teeming with people of every description, each and every one basking in a soft but relentless light. Some of the people are marching systematically toward the portals, others approach obliquely, hesitantly, while still others are sitting about the plaza looking as if they had been camping there for days or weeks, with no real mind to come inside.

As the weigher has promised, the plaza is smelly. It is, in fact, an ocean of scent in which the travelers are bobbing, each clinging, at first, to his or her favored aroma as if to a life preserver. Often, their final action before entering the wharf is to inhale one parting whiff of whatever it was—a child's blanket, a backyard garden, a mother's kitchen, a horse, a factory, an artist's brush, an opium pipe—that was keeping them afloat.

As one man, sniffing, enters the portals, he accidentally brushes against Kudra. He is red-nosed, rough-edged, proletarian, less than young, but creased with such a mischievous, insouciant smile that Kudra finds herself thinking that this one is a likely candidate for a pink ticket, a berth on the barge called Hell—or is it Heaven? As he takes his last sniff, he is practically pressed against Kudra, so that it is she whom he smells and not the memorable cargo of his terminated life.

Kudra is sorely embarrassed, for her jasmine perfume has long since weakened and its residue is mixed, she is certain, with grime and sweat and the body's other ardent emissions. However, the man's grin only widens at the unexpected lungful of her, and as he passes, in his hospital gown, through the

marble gates, he heaves a sigh and mutters in a language alien to her, "The perfect taco."

Puzzled by what he might have meant and ashamed that she interposed herself between him and his farewell taste of earthly existence, she feels that she had better be getting back to where she belongs. She seems to recall a companion from whom she has become separated. A bit apprehensively, she reenters the wharf and makes her way laboriously to the distant wall. Indeed, there are doors aplenty there, but eventually she does come upon the one to which she was directed. It is marked neither EXIT nor ENTRANCE but

ERLEICHDA.

And it is the right door.

So absorbed had Kudra been in the telling, Claude in the listening, that the limousine managed to glide unnoticed to a stop beside them. By the time the driver got out and opened the rear door of the long black Mercedes, Kudra was finished, but the spell held them, like moths pinned to a blowing curtain. At last, the driver cleared his throat, piercing the membrane surrounding them. Claude blinked and wiped moisture from his brow. The driver wondered how his employer could be perspiring on such a night. "Will you join me?" asked Claude. Even as he asked, he was assisting Kudra into the car. What sort of weird carriage she was boarding she had not a clue, but after the events of the past few hours, she was prepared to accept virtually anything. The door closed. They sat in the leather-scented darkness, thighs touching, eyes open but unseeing, like waking dreamers, asleep yet lit by dizzy lamps, prey to some silky fever. And in that condition they were driven to Orly Airport, where Claude was to greet his cousin, Marcel the Bunny, Marcel's new wife, V'lu, and a certain friend of theirs, a man named Alobar.

## THE BILL

For Darrell Bob Houston

THE BEET IS THE MOST INTENSE of vegetables. The onion has as many pages as *War and Peace*, every one of which is poignant enough to make a strong man weep, but the various ivory parchments of the onion and the stinging green bookmark of the onion are quickly charred by belly juices and bowel bacteria. Only the beet departs the body the same color as it went in.

Beets consumed at dinner will, come morning, stock a toilet bowl with crimson fish, their hue attesting to beet's chromatic immunity to the powerful digestive acids and thoroughgoing microbes that can turn the reddest pimento, the orangest carrot, the yellowest squash into a single disgusting shade of brown.

At birth we are red-faced, round, intense, pure. The crimson fire of universal consciousness burns in us. Gradually, however, we are devoured by parents, gulped by schools, chewed up by peers, swallowed by social institutions, wolfed down by bad habits, and gnawed by age; and by the time we have been digested, cow style, in those six stomachs, we emerge a single disgusting shade of brown.

The lesson of the beet, then, is this: hold on to your divine flesh—your innate rosy magic, or end up brown. Once you're