

THE CABIRI

A Fairy Tale for Grown-Ups

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It was laundry day, and Kasi could not shake the dream of dwarfs. The dream had come in the vague hour before waking, and in the aftermath of a small earthquake (magnitude 3.8, with an epicenter near Long Beach). Just enough to rattle the china figurines on her dresser. The dream had lingered through her coffee, disturbing but not unpleasant. The dream dwarfs had been licking her like little kittens gathered around a dish of warm milk.

Kasi was undergoing psychoanalysis for the first time in her thirty-three years, and had been told by Dr. Beck that the process would “stir things up.” Childhood memories, repressed desires, that sort of thing. So she supposed that a dream of horny midgets must somehow come from the basement of her mind, and looked forward to telling the doctor about it on Tuesday. In fact, she wanted to tell him right now. Would he take her on a Saturday?

She began to think about her choice of words. Kasi was no prude, but still, it was a little cringe-making. She shuddered at the lingering image and felt it way down deep. She decided that the least embarrassing way to relate the dream would be ‘in character,’ and chose one of the bit parts she’d played in a *Lifetime* movie some years back, a murderous schoolteacher named Alice Klebold. Kasi was an actress who got hired mostly for her body. In her twenties, she’d been okay with that, but now, at thirty-three, it was causing her some anguish and three-hundred dollars each week to Dr. Vincent Beck, because she could already feel gravity’s pull on her flesh and knew

that the juicy parts would stop coming soon. She closed her eyes as she sipped her coffee, and instantly regretted doing so. The face of one of the dream dwarfs filled her mind's eye. He looked up from her lower half and waggled his long, red tongue at her.

Kasi shuddered again, and this time the shudder felt like the agonizingly sweet onset of an orgasm.

The dwarf was a monstrous infant with an old man's wrinkles and a little red hat. Hideous and adorable at the same time.

It wasn't his ugliness that she found disturbing, so much as the uncertainty of his age and nature. Eight months or eighty years? Man or monster? We are frightened, Dr. Beck had told her, by things and people we can't readily identify. Neither/Nor things. Dreams mix them all up.

She picked up the phone and punched the speed dial for Dr. Beck. As it rang, she strode to the balcony door and opened it, letting a wave of wiltingly torrid air into her air-conditioned apartment. September in Los Angeles. Earthquake weather. She left a message with his service, requesting a four o'clock appointment, and then proceeded to the laundry room with a week's worth of dirty clothes.

Vincent Beck was on professional probation. The APA and the medical board had come down hard on him as a result of Susan Coyle's charges, but they could have come down harder. They might have recommended that his license to practice in the state of California be suspended, but fortunately, the sole woman on the disciplinary committee had voted against this sanction. Vincent had screwed up with Susan Coyle in two ways. He had prescribed

morphine for imaginary pain (specifically, the pain from a phantom limb that she'd never actually lost). And he had slept with her.

He had been seeing Susan for nine months in the Tuesday afternoon slot now held by Kasi Paar. She'd come in that day on crutches, as always, and complained that the pain had become unbearable. Susan believed that she had lost her left leg to a shark while swimming in the warm waters off Cabo San Lucas. The shark, she said, had removed the leg in one bite, at the upper thigh just below the inguinal ligament. Her limp and her use of the crutches was well-practiced. Susan, too, was an actress, as were many of Vincent's clients. But it was no act. No matter how many tests, x-rays, or physical therapy sessions he ordered, she refused to believe that her left leg was entirely intact. She could feel it only as a phantom.

The pain was real for her, too, and that was why he'd finally prescribed the morphine. It was the only thing that worked, and on the day that changed everything, she'd come in with a soft smile and more than a little languor of movement. With the frown lines and panic missing from her face, he'd seen how alluring she was.

"How's the pain?" he'd asked.

"Much better," she'd answered. "Thanks to you. And I think I've finally decided to get a prosthetic. I want to walk again."

"You will."

"Maybe...but I'll never work again. Nobody wants to look at--"

"Susan," Vincent said, holding up his right hand. "Tell me what you see."

"I see your hand, Doctor Beck."

"Good," he said, scooting close enough to put his hand on the arm of the overstuffed chair she sat in. "Where is my hand now?"

“On the arm of the chair. This is a silly game. Shall we play Simon Says?”

Over those nine months of treatment, Vincent had tried any number of approaches to dismantling Susan Coyle’s delusion. He knew that she would accept only a truth that was *evident to her*, or to that place in her psyche she now inhabited, not to him or any number of specialists, technicians, or colleagues. Nothing had worked. And so, finally out of tricks and exasperated, he breached both the code of ethics and the regulations governing his trade. Impulsively, he put one hand on Susan’s blue-jeaned knee and the other over her eyes.

She raised her chin and pressed into his hand a little.

“Where is my right hand now?” he asked.

“It’s where my knee used to be.”

“But you can’t see it, can you?”

“I can feel it, Doctor. You know about phantom limbs. You feel them. That’s why you gave me the morphine, right? Your hand is warm. There’s energy from it. It even helps with the pain.”

“No, Susan,” he said, in a firmer tone than he’d taken with her before. “You feel my hand because you have nerve endings in your skin. My job is to treat you, not to indulge you. There is a lot of good work we can do. Need to do. But not until we get past this.”

She pulled his left hand away from her eye, but tellingly, let the other one stay.

“I shouldn’t have to tell a psychiatrist that we feel in our brains, not in our skin. And I don’t need your indulgence.” She began to get up. Even in a huff, she was careful to put the weight on the right foot.

Vincent had never committed an act of malpractice. He was forty-three, divorced, and knew he was attractive to women for any number of reasons, but his record was clean. A case might be made that a doctor whose practice consisted in large part of film and TV actresses might have a hidden agenda. But until this moment, with this patient, he'd never pictured himself as a transgressor. It was therefore with some self-surprise that he found his hand had moved from her knee to that place just below the groin muscle where she claimed the shark's teeth had sunk in, and that he was exerting pressure to restrain her movement.

"Now where is my hand, Susan?"

Her voice dropped into her chest.

"You're getting warmer." Her legs parted almost imperceptibly, but the effect was instant and electric. "That's where he—Where it—Now, yes. You're very close to the bite. It hurts." She slipped forward, and her hand floated down to his. She lifted her hips and he felt the dampness and heat in his fingertips.

She'd laid a curse on him in so many ways. There were, of course, the legal and professional issues. But beyond those, he would no longer be able to regard a female patient in his big, overstuffed chair without seeing Susan Coyle's legs in the air.

It had happened only that once. The least he might have hoped for was a breakthrough in her treatment. But her pain continued, and foolishly, he kept prescribing the morphine. He now realized that he'd done it in part to keep her quiet. After three more sessions, he told her that he was referring her to a colleague and would no longer be her doctor. It was after this that she'd filed the report.

He noticed the voice mail light blinking on his telephone receiver and checked the message. Kasi Paar, asking to move up her appointment. Something urgent. A dream she couldn't shake. He checked his calendar. Other than his Saturday hike from the Griffith Observatory to Old Mulholland, which was something of a ritual, he was clear until dinner. He phoned her back and then tied the laces on his running shoes. Once around the Silver Lake reservoir before breakfast.

It was hot. By the time he left for his run at 9:20, the sun had already bleached out the stuccoed façade of his bungalow on Tesla Street. Even in Los Angeles, it was hot at 9:20 only in earthquake weather. And hadn't there been a tiny one just before dawn? He took off at a canter and was sweating by 9:25. Coming around the bend onto Silver Lake Boulevard, he saw a flash of red in the tangled brush on the banks of the reservoir. A scarf. A cap. What went through his head was, "someone climbed the fence and left something behind."

Jack Flynn was due at the Kodak Theater at 3 to receive his "Spirit of Hollywood" award. Of all the trophies he'd received, this one seemed the least legitimate. What the hell was the spirit of Hollywood? All he could think of was Jacob Marley dragging his chains. It was all part of the wrap-up of this year's Hollywood Film Festival. Talk about selling coal in Newcastle. Hollywood was for making movies, not honoring them. Anyone on the inside knew how little honor there was about it, and Jack was way inside.

But he would get through the ordeal, wear his white tux, smile broadly, maybe get a little drunk. And when it was over, he'd have Kasi for a *digestif*. The limo would bring her at nine, and she would

come bearing gifts. White powder and pussy. A strawberry tart frosted with confectioner's sugar. Now *that* was the spirit of Hollywood.

Jack peeled off his hoodie and dove into the pool. Six laps in the morning and he was good to go, even at nearly sixty. The sunlight, already white hot, blinded him as it glinted off the surface of the water. September fucking sun. This time of year, he ought to be in Tuscany. From his aerie in the hills high above Mulholland (nobody's house was higher than Jack's), Los Angeles looked a little like Italy. If you squinted. But it was a fake--*ersatz*, like everything else here. He opened his eyes mid-lap and was blinded again. In the midst of the white-out, there was a transient smear of color just outside the security fence.

Goddamned papparazzi, he thought. *I'm putting in land mines.*

He thought about his speech. *Old actors never die, they just collect trophies*, he'd say. Or something equally sardonic.

Vincent's office was in Larchmont Village, an enclave within the greater enclave of Hancock Park, where the old money lived. The houses were big and stately, but not Beverly Hills ostentatious. And Vincent liked the fact that his patients had to travel east from their gilded palaces on the west side to see him here, in "old" L.A. It was as if they were traveling from present to past, from what they'd made themselves to what they'd been, and that served their therapy well.

Before the Susan Coyle incident and the ensuing damage to his reputation, Vincent had had some very famous clients, women whose fame was exceeded only by their terrible fear of falling. Now, most of them had left. It wasn't what he'd done, or even the taint of scandal, that had driven them away. These things could be turned to pro-

fessional advantage. It was that his stock had been devalued, and that in order to restore its worth, he might have to trade on the secrets they told him. This was a line he would never, ever have crossed, but he understood their caution, and accepted their abandonment as his penance. His income had dropped fifty percent in less than a year.

Kasi Paar wasn't famous, except on the internet, where a raunchy photo spread she'd done at twenty-two was a cult item. At this point, it was likely she never would be famous. 28 or bust was one of Hollywood's brutal truths. If the big role hadn't come before your thirtieth birthday, it probably never would, and Kasi was thirty-three. She was also self-destructive, duplicitous, and presented signs of borderline personality disorder--though this was a diagnosis easier to make than to defend. He liked her because she was willing to dig into herself despite the ugliness of much that was buried there. Her education had stopped with high school, but her curiosity hadn't. She was looking for a woman she could be comfortable being at forty.

"So," he said. "Tell me about the dream."

"It's a little embarrassing."

"Dreams often are. That's why they're disguised in sleep."

"I googled 'Jungian.' You're a Jungian shrink, right?"

"You know what Jung said? *'Thank God I'm not a Jungian.'* But yes, I'm a fan of his work. I practice depth psychology. Why?"

"Well, this whole idea that the things we dream come from some big, deep well that everybody drinks from. Does that mean that the same dream could be dreamed by more than one person?"

"Yes, but not like the same video playing in everyone's head. It would be colored by your own experience. And it might or might not *mean* the same thing. Why? Did someone else have your dream?"

"Maybe," she said. "I'm not sure."

"Well, tell me your version of it," Vincent said.

"I was on my back, on some kind of wooden table. Like a picnic table, but bigger and heavier. Much bigger. Much heavier. Oak, or something. And I was naked. My arms and legs were, like... Well, like I was tied down, only I wasn't."

He had noticed her voice drop and her posture change, as if she were affecting a different persona. She had also developed a little tic. A twitch of the nostrils. He'd seen this before, and made a note.

"Did you feel like a captive?" he asked her.

"Yes. No. *No*...but I couldn't get up. I couldn't leave."

"Why not?"

Kasi giggled and averted her eyes.

"Because it felt too good. What they were doing."

"*They?*"

"The midgets."

Vincent scrawled '*midgets*' on his pad. Then, as an afterthought, he wrote '*digits?*'

"Go on," he said. "Tell me about them."

"There were dwarfs. But smaller than real ones. Little tiny wrinkled men no bigger than babies, with little pointed red caps and long, pointed red tongues. Lots of them all around me, sort of feeding on me. Like kittens or puppies."

Vincent cocked his head. "Red caps, you said?"

"Yeah. Pointed and kinda saggy, like-" She laughed.

He smiled at her. "Like what?"

"Like the seven dwarves, almost, and me as Snow White!"

“When you say, ‘like kittens,’ do you mean you got the feeling they were hungry? That they wanted nourishment?”

“Yes. No. Not really. I got the feeling they were really horny.”

“Okay. And how about you?”

“Weeelll... It wasn’t exactly the worst dream I’ve ever had. The weirdest, but not the worst. There were three of them... Three rough little tongues. I’m pretty sure I had an orgasm, but it might’ve been the earthquake. And then later, when I was awake, just thinking about it gave me another one. That, believe me, has *never* happened before.”

“Well...congratulations. Things may be breaking up. Old habits. Complexes. Orgasm is a rare experience for you, right?”

“Right. Unless—”

“Unless it feels like you’re a captive.”

“Yeah.” Her chin dropped. “That’s bad, right? Was I ‘abdicating my will’ to the dwarves, like I do with men?”

“Pleasure isn’t ever bad in and of itself, even when it comes from make-believe captivity. Pleasures become threats when they become obsessions, or when we do bad things to get them. Like stealing to get a fix. We talked about the abdication thing. Where it might come from. The business with your father. Our deepest pain can become a source of guilty pleasure. And being object rather than subject is a sexy thing for most people. I’m curious about something.”

“What?”

“Well, first...can you remember what sort of space you were in? You’re on a table, right? Look up toward the ceiling and tell me what you see.”

Kasi rolled her eyes heavenward, then closed them.

“Wooden arches. Like in an old building.”

“Uh huh. And how about the lighting? Is it bright and sterile, like an operating room...or dark and mysterious?”

“Definitely dark. Not pitch dark. There are...candles.”

“Candles.”

“Yeah. Like in a church. I wonder-“

“Who is worshipped in this church?”

Kasi took a shallow breath, closed her eyes briefly, then fluttered them open again and said, “I think I am.”

Vincent nodded, made a note, and let a moment pass.

“Sooo,” Kasi said softly. “Does this mean I have a thing for little boys or something like that? Midgets....children. You know.”

“I don’t think so, Kasi. I know your dream life pretty well, and children don’t figure into it much. The *Snow White* idea is interesting. So’s the fact that you’re not *really* a prisoner. A captive only of your own desire. It might even be that you’re asserting your strength and sexuality after years of feeling held down by men.”

“Wow,” she said. “Ya think?”

“Let’s go back to the place. If it’s a church, and you’re the object of worship in this church, what does that make the dwarves?”

“I dunno. *Priests?*”

“And if they *are* your priests, and the table is an altar, that puts a new spin on what they’re doing to you, doesn’t it?”

Kasi made a smile, then crossed herself.

On the trail in late afternoon, with little more than a half-hour of daylight left, Vincent sat down on a boulder to rest. From here he could see the Pacific. Santa Monica Bay and Catalina Island beyond.

He felt the rock and the ground beneath his feet tremble. An aftershock, he supposed. The shudder subsided quickly, and in its immediate aftermath, there was a disturbance in the brush on the far side of the path. Possibly a family of quail, or if something bigger, a deer or a coyote. Whatever it was, the little quake had stirred it into motion. The scrub oak trembled again, and this time Vincent saw something amid the tangled undergrowth.

Dark red. Like blood on a mule deer's brown flank.

2

Jack Flynn was reclining on the veranda when Kasi arrived. *On the veranda*. He liked the sound of that, even though he wasn't sure *veranda* described the sprawling, tiled deck that overlooked the wild canyon and the mosaic of swimming pools below. It sounded genteel, refined, powdery, everything he wasn't.

He was wearing a robe of red Chinese silk with a dragon motif and drinking a very expensive port, partly for the same reason he liked to say 'veranda,' and partly because he liked sweet things. He rose from the chaise longue at the sound of her tires on his driveway and felt his paunch drop below the sash with the force of gravity. Gravity was making him old, pulling him down there where the worms lived, but gravity had a fight on its hands. He tightened the sash and watched as she walked to his door and rang the bell.

Kasi had indeed brought gifts, but also a message, and she trembled at the thought of delivering the message because she knew how badly he received unwelcome news. It hadn't occurred to her that wearing fuck-me pumps and a bustier might not be the best way to say goodbye. Or maybe it had, and she'd done it anyway.

"Hi, gorgeous," he said at the door. "You look delectable."

"Thanks," she said, stepping in. "Nice robe."

“Jackie Chan gave it to me. I wore it for you.” He struck a martial arts pose and stepped back to let her in, admiring her backside as she made her habitual walk across the atrium toward the pool deck.

“New snow in Aspen?” he asked her.

Kasi nodded and set her Chanel bag on the coffee table. She reached in and handed him a small rectangular pouch of aluminum foil, not much thicker than a stick of chewing gum.

“This isn’t gonna get me through the night,” he said.

“Just wait. They call this Incan Silver. It’ll blow the top of your head off. Be careful. You’re not twenty anymore.”

“I’ve got the heart of a racehorse,” he said, and dropped down to the sofa facing the pool. From a glazed Chinese pepper pot on the coffee table he drew a narrow glass tube about two inches in length, and pinged it with his fingernail to shake the residual powder loose. It rung like crystal. He opened the pouch carefully, put the tube to his right nostril, and took a snort of the cocaine.

“Oh, baby,” he said. “Macchu Picchu, here we come. Put your ass down here next to me. I’m going to eat your pussy all night long.”

“That’s a nice thought, Jack, but I don’t think so.”

“You don’t think so? What does that mean?”

“I’ve got someplace to be.”

Kasi braced herself against the wall. She was already trembling.

“This is the place to be, sweetheart. You and me. We make a world. Quit talking bullshit.”

“I need to see my daughter,” Kasi said in a half-whisper.

“Since when do you see your daughter at ten o’ clock on a Saturday night? It’s past her bedtime. Your mother’s probably already tucked her in.”

“That’s just the thing,” she said. “It should be me.”

He took another noseful of the coke and sat back. He felt the grin coming on. “Sit down, Kasi,” he said. “I’ll tell you all about parental guilt and why it’s unhealthy for people like you and me.”

Kasi pushed herself away from the wall. It took some effort because she felt glued there. She dropped to the sofa and began.

“Listen, Jack,” she said. “You’re great. This...has all been great. But I’ve learned some things. About myself. And I-“

“Oh. Right,” said Jack. “Your therapy sessions with the discredited Dr. Beck.” He went to the granite-topped bar and poured her a glass of chilled Sancerre. Next to the bottle was a Tiffany crystal bowl filled with hard candies and Tootsie Pops. He unwrapped a lemon sour and popped it into his mouth. “And what have you learned? That I’m your father? That you can’t be ‘whole’ until you stab me in the heart and throw me over?” He handed her the wine.

“Something like that,” she said. “But I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Bullshit,” he said. “Of course you want to hurt me. That’s what makes it so good.” He leaned over and took another snort. The grin came on full, pulling at the corners of his mouth like rigor mortis. His jaw ached, his head throbbed, and it was good.

“I told you to go easy with that stuff,” she said. “It’s uncut. Pure. Oh, Jesus. Your nose is bleeding.”

Kasi found a tissue in her bag and tried to wipe the blood from his upper lip. He batted her hand away and took the tissue. He held it to the bleeding nostril while drawing a tubefull of cocaine into the

other one. Kasi got up and strode to the plate glass patio door, wringing her hands. She stared out at the lights in the canyon and said:

“I need to get well.”

Suddenly, he was behind her, his hands under her skirt, his weight against her. “I’ll make you well,” he said.

“No, Jack,” she said flatly. “You make me sick.”

She tried to slip out, to break into the open, still hoping for a peaceful ending, but he had her pinned.

“What the fuck, Kasi?” he demanded. “What the fuck?”

She looked into his eyes and saw mayhem. His pupils were fully contracted and the whites bloodshot.

“Please, Jack. I just need some time.”

“Time?” he roared. “I *am* time. I am the eternal spirit of Hollyfuckingwood! I’m the ghost of Christmas past, present, and yet to come! No matter where you go, you don’t get away from me!”

“Then why don’t you kill me?” she said softly.

He took her head in his hands and began to beat it, slowly, rhythmically, insistently against the thick pane of reinforced glass. It might almost have seemed tender if not for the look in his eyes.

“That’s what you want, isn’t it? That’s why you come. You can’t stand yourself.” The hammering continued, more forceful, and she stopped struggling. She began to feel dizzy, and remembered she hadn’t had anything to eat. “I’ve tried to get it through your thick fucking skull that you don’t have to repent for your sins when you’re already damned. The only way out of Hell is to go all the way in.”

He paused for a few seconds, awaiting her response, his thumbs against her temples and his thick fingers gripping her skull.

Kasi's eyes had been closed, but now she opened them and said, "I'm done, Jack. I'm not coming back."

"The fuck you say." He pulled her to his chest and let her rest there for a moment. A shudder ran the length of his body. Then he took hold of her head again, cocked back, and threw it with full force against the glass. The glass, designed to withstand a baseball bat, did not break. But Kasi did, and she crumbled to the floor.

"Oh, fuck," he said under his breath. "Now I've done it."

He knelt and put his knuckles against her white throat. She was breathing, but shallowly. "Goddamnit, Kasi," he said. "You bring out the worst in me." He reached for a pillow from the sofa and slipped it under her head. For some reason, perhaps because he'd done it in the movies, he lifted her eyelid and inspected the state of her pupils, but he really didn't know what he was looking for. It was something you just did, like boiling water when a woman was in labor.

Jack sat back down on the sofa and contemplated doing another line. That didn't make a lot of sense. That would be the behavior of a crazy man. Briefly, he considered doing her while she was out. Then he contemplated calling 911, but concluded that would be stupid. He drained the rest of his port, got up, and paced for a minute. Finally, he decided that the prudent thing to do was to call Doctor Al.

After he'd made the call, he soaked a wash cloth in cool water and sat down beside her to dab her forehead. At one point, her eyelids fluttered open, and he was frightened by what he saw.

"They're coming out," he said to himself. "The little fuckers are crawling out." He decided that he had better call his lawyer, as well.

Vincent pulled up to the curb in front of the L.A. Free Clinic and let the motor idle. It was 9:56 and Mina was off at ten. They had booked a late dinner and maybe a sleepover, depending on how much in need of comfort Mina was feeling after a day of ministering to the city's tired, poor, and uninsured.

He could see her through the glass doors. She was at the admitting counter, still in her white lab coat, and in rapt conversation with a darkly handsome guy in scrubs who looked to be her junior by about ten years. Something about the way Mina was looking at the man gave Vincent a twinge, and impulsively, he gave two quick honks of the Saab's horn, then immediately felt foolish for having done so. Both of them turned to look toward the street, and Vincent saw the young doctor's lips move. He imagined him saying, "Better go, Mina. Your daddy's here."

Sexual jealousy makes apes of us all, Vincent thought, and resolved not to grill her about the young medic. Still, there'd been something about his stance. A presumption of ownership, a suggestion of shared secrets. Mina got into the car, redolent of hand sanitizer and *White Linen* perfume. She gave his chin a nip.

"How'd it go on the front lines today?" he asked her after they'd pulled onto Western Avenue.

"The usual damage," she said, checking her face in the visor mirror. "Ear infections, strep infections, yeast infections. And one bleeding ulcer. God, I'm exhausted. I've got circles under my eyes."

She took a make-up kit from her bag and went to work.

"You look fresh as the dew," he said, and it was only a small exaggeration. Mina was of Estonian descent and had a durable Baltic beauty that withstood even the ravages of a full-time residency in the

pediatric wing at Cedars Sinai and her volunteer work at the clinic. She shone with goodness. Her hair was naturally dark, but she'd recently gone blonde, the better to look the part of angel.

"No battered women today?" he asked. "No drive-bys?"

"Not today," she replied, deftly applying mascara. "There was one odd thing."

"What's that?"

"A woman came in with scratch marks all up and down her inner thighs. Not deep, but long, and she said the itching was driving her crazy. She said her cat had done it, but that had to be an unusual cat. They were really inflamed. I gave her a shot of cortisone and some ointment and told her to stay away from tomcats."

"How did she respond to your advice?"

"She said, 'but the little fuckers won't leave me alone.' Mina laughed. "Maybe she's got a house full of them. Or maybe she needs to see you." She daubed at the delicate skin beneath her eyes, then gave him a look. "On the other hand, maybe not. You don't do so well with nymphomaniacs."

"I've taken the cure," said Vincent. "Nothing clarifies the mind like the prospect of professional disgrace. Where do you want to eat?"

"How about Cliff's Edge in Silverlake?"

"Sounds good to me," said Vincent. "So was that the new orderly you were talking to?" He couldn't help himself.

"Orderly?" she laughed. "He's an orthopedic surgeon! A good one, too."

"Nice guy?" he asked.

She hesitated just a beat too long before answering.

“Yeah. Nice guy. Greek, I think,” she added for no good reason.

The restaurant had trees growing inside. Big trees, garlanded with twinkling Italian lights. Mina said it reminded her of Prospero’s island. They came here a lot, Mina because she liked the trees and the fresh ingredients, Vincent because he liked the way it made her glow. He ordered a 2003 Brunello, a taste left over from the days when he’d had disposable income, and one he’d have to part with soon.

“One of my patients dreamed of horny dwarves,” he said. “Lapping at her naked body like hungry little animals. But in a nice way. Ever have that dream?”

“Not that I remember,” she said. “And I think I would.”

“How does it strike you? I mean, as a woman, what do you make of it?”

“I dunno,” she said. “Maybe her maternal clock is ticking.”

“Hmm. I hadn’t considered that one.” He put the wine to his nose and smelled loamy soil and marmelade. “It’s funny... I’ve treated so many women that I sometimes feel like I’ve got a phantom vagina. But when it comes down to it, I can’t cross over to the physical. To their body memories or their cycles. I try, but I can’t imagine what it must be like to bleed. Or to be-“

“Penetrated?” she asked.

Most women Mina’s age, especially those in a comfortable, modern relationship, would have said “fucked,” but she was careful with words.

“Right. I just can’t. I feel like if I could, I’d be a better doctor.”

“You’d be a better doctor if you knew what it was like, physically, to be a woman?”

"If I could carry the body memories. If I could be Jung's androgyne. If I could make that sort of alchemy in my own psyche."

"This is why put up with you, Vincent. You make even your craziness seem like a search for psychological truth." She took her own taste of the wine. "What does the dream mean to you?"

"I told her it might mean that she's finally taking control of her sexuality."

"By being ravished by midgets?"

"I think she might be the one holding the reins."

"Ah. Like Catherine the Great with her horses?"

"Not quite," he replied with a laugh. "But it's a pretty rich dream... archetypically speaking. I have to do some homework, but I think dwarves go a long way back. I remember reading about these little guys from Near Eastern mythology. *The Dactyls*. Tiny men who lived under the earth. You remembered their names by counting your fingers, and eventually the fingers *became* the Dactyls. My patient...has never been able to masturbate manually. I think maybe that changed last night, thanks to her dwarves."

"Why can't she masturbate?"

"That I probably shouldn't go into," he said. "But she's got some kinks."

"It's a wonder you don't fuck them all," she said, and this time she used the word as purposefully as she had avoided it the first time. It didn't sound right on her angelic lips.

"Believe me, Mina. Most of the time, it isn't any sexier than a gynecological exam. They're just too damaged."

"You sure that isn't what turns you on?" she asked.

"I'm sure," he said. "Let's order."

As it turned out, Mina did come home with him. She said she was spooked by the earthquakes, but on the evidence of her behavior in bed, it struck Vincent that she might also have been aroused by the Kasi story. If so, it wouldn't have been the first time the relating of his patients' tales had had an aphrodisiac effect. It wasn't the stories themselves that seemed to turn Mina on, so much as the fact that these faceless women had confided them to him. The intimacy of this trust, the tingling envy it gave rise to, made her want to share her secrets. These were not--as they might have been with his actresses--narcissistic or fetishistic fantasies, but earthy expressions of animal lust as healthy and untroubled as Mina was. She was especially fond of the kitchen table and other food preparation surfaces.

If Mina did have a hang-up, it was that she never spent the night without some sort of pretext. She was "in a funk" or "the clinic had gotten to her," or some event in the news—a terrorist attack or a murder--had made her shaky. In this mostly unconscious way, she denied Vincent the satisfaction of ever feeling that she was there for him. In the months following the Susan Coyle episode, she became especially inventive with her rationalizations. Her apartment was being fumigated or there were painters in there all weekend. Anything to avoid admitting that she loved him in spite of his sin.

But Mina had recently let slip a number of things that told him that she was ready to seal the deal. Get married, maybe even have children. If not to Vincent, then to someone else who could make her laugh, cry, and scream. If anyone's clock was ticking, it was Mina's.

"Tell me about Dr. Dreamboat," Vincent said, when she lay in his arms after sex.

“Why? Does it turn you on to be jealous?” she asked.

“If that were the case, I’d have asked you about it an hour ago.”

“Ah, I see. But now that you’ve made your conquest, you feel confident enough to ask about the competition.”

“Okay,” he said. “Busted. Now tell me about him.”

She shaped herself into the curve of his body, leaving a small gap as a hedge.

“Well, like I said, he’s a surgeon. Kind of a rising star in his field. He volunteers twice a week. Wednesday night and Saturday.”

“What a coincidence,” said Vincent. “Your shifts.”

“It *is* a coincidence,” she insisted. “At least it is...for my part.”

“The plot thickens. He’s after you, I can tell.”

“Oh, yeah? How can you tell?”

“Body language,” said Vincent. “He’s...protective.”

“He *hears* me,” she said. “Maybe it’s all an act, I dunno...but he has this knack for seeming completely *present* when we talk, and days later he can still remember some tiny detail of our conversation.”

“Impressive,” he said. “Am I ‘present’?”

“You are for your patients. Totally. I promise you that five minutes after this conversation ends, you’ll be with them in your head. Studying their stories the way the old Jews studied the Torah to figure out what’s beneath the words. But not for me, Vincent.”

He pulled her closer, saying nothing. Once he felt her release herself to his embrace, he began to drift, and soon they were asleep.

At 2:44 AM, the phone rang.

“Shit,” said Vincent, from somewhere in his dreams.

“Better get that,” Mina mumbled. “I’m on call.”

“Okay,” he answered, and fumbled for the bedside telephone. Mina watched him from the pillow, one eye open, hearing him say only, “Yes, this is Dr. Beck,” “I’m her psychiatrist,” and “Okay, tell her I’ll be there soon.” In between those utterances had been two minutes from the other side. Mina knew this was not a good sign.

“What is it, Vincent?” she asked. “Who?”

“That was Dr. Kanters from Neurology at Cedars,” he replied wearily. “The patient I told you about...the one with the dream.”

Mina nodded.

“They brought her in unconscious three hours ago. A concussion. He didn’t say how. Some intracranial bleeding.”

Mina sat up. “That’s pretty serious. Is she-”

“Stable, but under close observation. They’re concerned about epidural hemorrhage. She’s conscious now, which is good.”

“And she asked for you?”

Vincent nodded.

Mina dropped her chin unconsciously. “Well, then, you’d better go.” A pause. “Why do you suppose they’d call her psychiatrist?”

“Maybe I’m the only head doctor she has,” Vincent answered. He kissed her and added, “I’ll be back before you wake up.”

The night had sealed in the day’s heat. Los Angeles nights usually brought an easy ten degree drop into what is known in seasonal climates as “sleeping weather,” but not this one. A Santa Ana condition, with bone-dry winds driven from inland desert, had taken hold. The winds, along with the grit they carried, set Vincent’s teeth on edge. And with good reason. The murder rate in Los Angeles always seemed to rise when the Santa Anas blew.

He drove east on Beverly Boulevard with the windows down and the air-conditioning at full blast. The streets always seemed broader at night, the sidewalks as empty as a deserted movie set. L.A. wasn't an after-hours town, and it felt illicit to be out at this time of night, as if he were violating an army-imposed curfew. Los Angeles, like some third world metropolis, seemed made for martial law. Despite the palm trees, there was a certain severity.

The Cedars Sinai Hospital complex loomed ahead, plate glass walkways spanning the street, a small city of white coats and torn flesh. There were other hospitals, but if you were white and could afford it, you booked at Cedars. All the best of the new-breed specialists practiced here. Even the food was state-of-the-art.

They had put Kasi in a private room, which surprised Vincent. Her Screen Actors Guild medical insurance wouldn't have covered that, and if she'd come by an ambulance following a 911 call, they'd have followed standard procedure and gone semi-private. Private rooms at Cedars were as hard to come by as one-bedroom suites at L'Hermitage. There were waiting lists for them. Somebody else had paid for the room, someone who could open doors.

There were already yellow roses at her bedside.

"Kasi," he said softly from the door. Her eyes fluttered open.

A weak smile. "Dr. Beck," she said. "Thank you."

"What happened," he asked, moving to her side.

"So stupid. I fell in the shower. You know what they say. Ninety percent of accidents occur in the home...so stupid."

Her reply had felt transparently rehearsed. So transparent that he was certain she'd wanted him to hear it for a lie.

"It happens to the best of us," he said. "How do you feel now?"

"All right I guess. A little nauseous."

He leaned in to check her pupils, then laid a finger against her throat. "Stick out your tongue," he asked her, and she did.

"How're my tonsils?" she asked, after she'd swallowed.

"Nothing to do with tonsils. Chinese medicine. The tongue's an indicator of overall organ health. And lots of other things."

"Oh, right," she said. "My acupuncturist says the same thing. "So what's the verdict?"

"You seem okay," he said. "Did you do any coke tonight?"

"I told you I stopped. It was making my nose bleed."

"Completely?"

She turned her head a few degrees to the left.

"Kasi," he said softly. "I looked at the x-rays. There's a hairline fracture. It's tiny but it's not a small thing in terms of healing and cost. I'm your doctor, so tell me. Did you go to see your 'customer' again? Did things get rough? Does that explain the yellow roses?"

Her eyes moistened, as they always seemed to when he'd hit a vein. Still, she shook her head no. A reflex.

"We've come a really long way, Kasi. You're not the same person who walked into my office a year ago. And the rule in therapy is the same as with any other transformative experience. Don't backslide."

Her eyes remained unfocused as she said, almost under her breath, "My father told me once that I had a head made for beating."

Here, and in other instances like it, the doctor in Vincent came to odds with the man, the lover of women. What he wanted to say was, "May your father burn in Hell." What he said instead was,

"And was there a part of you that believed him?"

Her answer, in a voice tiny and far, far away, was, "Yes."

"Let's start with that, then," he said, and drew a chair to her bedside. "Can you imagine any little girl, anywhere in the world, so damned by the universe that she deserves to be told such a thing?"

"No."

"Then why you?"

Kasi didn't answer, but Vincent had an idea what the answer was. She was deserving of punishment because she had fed the beast. She'd traded physical intimacies with her father in exchange for reprieves from his cruelty. And maybe, in that upside-down reality where the absence of pain is felt as a kind of pleasure, she'd even enjoyed the attention and earned further damnation. And so, though it was a crudely simplistic gloss on a complicated condition, pleasure for Kasi was inextricably knotted up with punishment, and this was why she couldn't orgasm normally, and this was why the appearance of her lustful dream dwarves was a potential breakthrough.

Out of the blue, her head still turned, she said, "There was something I heard him say. *'The little fuckers are coming out.'*"

"Heard who say, Kasi? Your father?"

"My customer. I think he dreamed about them, too."

"The dwarves? Ah...so he's the one—""

"Yeah."

"Like you said, we all draw from the same well," Vincent said. "What do you think it might mean if he had?"

"Maybe that I'm going to die."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because they're pulling me under. Under the ground."

“I don’t think you’re going to die, Kasi. But I do think you’re going deep. And I think it’s about time.

Mina found herself unable to sleep, and got up to make a cup of tea. *Valerian Root? Chamomile?* No! *Hot cocoa*. That would do better to drive away the dread; to make her feel small and protected again. It was Sunday night and she wished she'd gone to church that morning. She wasn't much of a churchgoer, but she felt the need to have the flesh and blood of Christ in her belly.

Archie, her silver-gray Scottish terrier, nosed through the doggie-door that led from her tiny backyard into the kitchen and began to lick her toes, the toes that Vincent had nibbled the night before. Archie liked Vincent, and there he was on her feet. Dogs had an amazing ability to conjure presence from scent. She'd decided not to sleep over at Vincent's a second night, and had come home to her little West Hollywood bungalow. Sunday nights were rare for them anyway, as both felt they needed the alone time to recalibrate for the work week ahead. But Mina had other reasons for the hiatus, as well.

She believed that she was about to sleep with another man, and did not want to feel horribly guilty about it. Two nights in a row with Vincent might have felt like a vow. Somehow, it seemed to her that her betrayal would be both less hurtful and less sinful if it didn't follow so closely on intimacy.

What silliness, she told herself, turning to mix the cocoa. It's not betrayal. I'm a free woman. He's not my keeper. He screwed around. And it won't cause him any less pain if I cheat on him after a recess.

But none of this logic could shake the magical thinking, the moral superstition that had made the “I love you” she’d wanted to say last night catch in her throat. If she’d said the words, she might not have been able to do what needed doing, which was to find out if Dr. Gregori Papus was really all he seemed to be. She knew what Vincent was. Vincent was great, but Vincent would never *really* take care of her in the way she wanted to be taken care of. Before she accepted that as her lot, she needed to do some comparison shopping. *Ugh*. She hated the sound of that, and remembered that she *was* a good person at heart. But, oh, how her belly throbbed when Dr. Papus was standing near her.

The bungalow’s kitchen had an old-fashioned breakfast nook, the sort that had come as standard equipment in the forties. She slid onto the bench to drink her cocoa and read what remained of a *Vanity Fair* article about the riotous youth of actor Jack Flynn. The author was a woman, and clearly enamored of all the things about Flynn that made Mina wince. Halfway through the piece, however, it struck Mina that some of Flynn’s aggressively alpha qualities were present in Dr. Papus, and this disturbed her greatly. Maybe she wasn’t such a good person after all. Maybe she had a dark side. She reached for the Xanax bottle that sat on the table next to the saltshaker, and took two. Thirty minutes later, she curled up on the bench and fell asleep, promising herself that it would only be a nap.

On the tiled floor beside the bench, Archie circled his position twice and dropped to his belly, his black nose pointed in the direction of the flap Vincent had put in the back door to allow him exit and egress, his nostrils dilating and contracting with each breath of scent carried through the flap on the wild Santa Ana winds. Time passed

without markers, as it does for dogs. A half-hour, perhaps an hour. Archie slept, then woke. The doggie flap squeaked on its hinges.

Archie began to growl. He managed two muffled barks before the silence came over him.

Mina woke on the kitchen floor with her legs apart and her right hand resting on her pelvis. Her pink and black plaid pajama bottoms had been cast aside. Even stranger was the position of her left hand. Her arm was thrust halfway through Archie's doggie flap, as if she'd been reaching for something.

Or as if something had been trying to pull her through.

She lifted her right hand and brought it to her nose. Her fingers were damp and smelled of her sex, and the limpness in her limbs told her she'd had an orgasm. This might have made a certain sense given that she'd fallen asleep thinking lewd thoughts about Gregori Papus, except that she was on the floor with one arm sticking through the doggie door. Something licked her left palm and she screamed. She pulled the arm in quickly, scraping her wrist on the rough wood. Archie followed, whimpering.

And then she remembered.

She had watched them come in from her place on the bench. Even if her eyelids had been closed, her mind's eye had most certainly been wide open. Through the flap, one by one, and Archie mesmerized, unable to move. Ugly little men, with faces as wrinkled and red as a newborn's. Not angry faces, but instinct-driven like any animal on the prowl for food. Crawling through on all fours and then standing in turn to a height of not more than eighteen inches. Red caps, floppy like those of some Serbian shepherd. They'd come

beneath the breakfast table to the bench where she lay. They'd slipped off her pajama bottoms and scrambled onto the bench.

The faintest smile crossed her lips before she clapped her hand over her mouth. "Jesus Christ!" she shouted, and frightened Archie. "Jesus Christ! Am I losing my mind?" She saw that the fur along Archie's spine was as stiff as if it had been moussed into place. This was a reaction he had not so much to cats and squirrels as to the perception of abnormality. A blind man with a limp and a hairlip. A bag lady swaddled in layers of stinking rags. Dogs and children fear the uncanny. But usually, the reaction was temporary. She'd never seen his fur remain standing for so long.

Oh, fuck, she thought. They're still in the house.

The compressor behind her refrigerator switched on suddenly, and she started. Mina scrambled to her feet and hurriedly pulled her pajama bottoms back on. Then, moving from room to room in barely controlled panic, she turned on every light in the house, all the while whispering to herself, "Ridiculous, ridiculous." The thought that a posse of eighteen-inch lechers in red caps occupied her house was indeed ridiculous, but Mina was now in the grip of the irrational.

Vincent had told her once of a theory that when the ancient Greeks had felt the sensation of panic, they'd *seen* an image of Pan. They had actualized the god. The theory held that the left and right hemispheres of the ancient brain had not been sufficiently integrated to synthesize emotion and reason. They had abided with daemons.

Rather than following at her heels as he usually did, Archie remained crouched in the kitchen, which gave no comfort to Mina. But once she had set the house ablaze with light, pulled open every

closet and looked under both beds, her heartbeat slowed a little and her mind began the process of reconstructing the world she knew.

She made a pot of tea. No more chocolate, thank you. She brought her laptop to the table and checked her e-mail and resisted, for the moment, the urge to Google “dreams of dwarves.” It was, of course, very strange that she’d had the same dream experience as Vincent’s sexually dysfunctional patient, but maybe this was a case of dreaming by suggestion. *Dream-seeding*. Ha! She decided to Google *that* and found only some verse by an obscure Scottish poet, a song by a punk band in Tulsa, and a porno site in badly Russian flavored English that featured awful, grainy videos of purportedly sleeping women being mounted by men and animals. She exited after one stealthy look and, with a shudder, promptly deleted the web cookie from her file as Vincent had taught her to do, but the exit was not fast enough to keep the memory of the dream from coming.

It was a dream. It was a dream. It was a dream. She said this in a kind of incantation as the images came flooding back into her brain.

They had been all over her, top to bottom, front and back, and neither the little creatures nor her had shown the slightest shame. It had been as if she were floating in ether, weightless, with the dwarves holding her limbs, bending them, stretching them, opening her up to the inspection of their eyes and tongues. She scratched suddenly and reflexively beneath her right arm, and this triggered a vivid memory of a rough tongue scooping out the shaven cavity of her underarm. Of all the lovers she’d had, only Vincent had ever done this. Was the dream a reminder that he was the man for her? And why had it seemed so vivid, so fucking real? She slipped the silk

strap of her camisole off her right shoulder and lifted her arm to inspect the tender cleft. That was when she saw the scratch marks.

Mina began to scream, and didn't calm until the sun came up.