



Corner Bar Magazine

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Page 1 – WHERE PLUTO USED TO BE by D.L. Shirey. Mr. Shirey lives in Portland, Oregon under skies the color of bruises. Occasionally he lightens up, but his dark fiction can be found in Confingo, Zetetic, Liquid Imagination and in anthologies from Truth Serum Press and Literary Hatchet. Find more of his writing at www.dlshirey.com and @dlshirey on Twitter.

Page 7– DREAMS OF THE DEAD by Simon Di Nucci. Mr. Di Nucci writes, “I normally write science fiction, so this slightly surreal piece is a departure for me. I am currently unpublished as a fiction writer, but I have several non-fiction conference papers to my name.” He resides in Vale Park, South Australia.

Page 11 – MID-CENTURY MODERN by Erik Bergstrom. A resident of Richfield, MN, Mr. Bergstrom writes, “Recent and upcoming publications of mine include stories in Typehouse Magazine and Coffin Bell. I was also a finalist in the STORGY: Shallow Creek competition.”

Page 19 – THE VANISHING by Tom Di Roma. Mr. Di Roma writes, “ Spaceman is my nickname, writing is my game, and has been since 1966 when I wrote my first story about a doomed love affair. Since then I’ve produced numerous short stories, and longer pieces for both adults and children. Presently, I work for an in-house advertising company that’s part of a car dealership here in the San Diego area.”



“WHERE PLUTO USED TO BE”

by D.L. SHIREY

The nausea hadn't started yet, but it was just around the corner. Right now the problem was itching, and those awful thoughts that if she scratched too hard, too often in the same spot, her skin would shred like grated cheese.

Elsa tried not to scrape her manicured nails where it itched most, on her ankles. Instead she crossed her legs, placing a foot on her knee, then gently rubbed at the itch beneath her pant leg. But a laying-on of hands wouldn't sooth it, nor would a lotion to moisturize skin. Oxy or Vikes would do it.

Compared to the others at Ninth Street Clinic, Elsa's immodestly hiked leg wasn't the most obvious thing that set her apart. A half-dozen people of color were waiting when she came in and few more had entered afterwards. Two women looked to be Elsa's age, early twenties, but most of the others in the waiting room were older. Although Elsa had no way of knowing for sure, to her, they all looked poor; or in the case of a couple of raggedy men, destitute and filthy from the streets.

Elsa was white and clean and comparatively healthy, if you didn't count her runny nose and the impending sweats and stomach cramps, perhaps a day away. Ninth Street Clinic was Elsa's go-to. All her girl-

friends had a fallback when in need: stealing from Mom or Dad, trading sex for a few pills, grab-and-run at a pharmacy, or heroin. Only Elsa and her friend Leigh knew about Dr. Shermer, and Leigh probably would have kept the secret to herself if she hadn't wanted someone to go with her. This wasn't the best part of town.

When they were here together the last time, Leigh was really strung out. After the visit she disappeared. That was six months ago. Elsa imagined her friend had turned to heroin. It was cheaper, easier to score, but a whole different lifestyle. Elsa knew plenty of people who ended up hanging out with that crowd and figured Leigh was with them now. Playing around with pills was one thing, but when you started on the needle, the problem became serious.

Elsa felt very lucky to have Dr. Shermer. Sure, he would stare at her cleavage, but he didn't want anything else in trade to write a prescription. He never touched her inappropriately or extorted cash, he just warned her not to come in too often; every couple of month seemed fine with him or when she was desperate. Other than looking at her chest, Elsa thought the man was simply being kind. And if ogling was his thing, if it helped to get the pills, Elsa was happy to oblige. She was wearing

yoga pants, over which she had a cute sundress with a short, lacy hem. If the spaghetti straps didn't advertise that she had no bra, then the front placket did, with three buttons undone.

Elsa's long, mouse-brown hair was still damp from a fresh washing. She decided to rake her fingers through the wavy hair, thinking that her fingernails should be otherwise engaged than in close proximity to the itch.

"Elsa Landrow."

The nurse was waiting at the door as Elsa slung up the shoulder bag. Elsa assumed the woman was a nurse, but couldn't tell by the uniform. Everyone who worked at the clinic wore light gray drawstring pants and white, comfortable shoes. Their tops were different colors and patterns, as if each was trying to bring a unique fashion sense to run-of-the-mill scrubs. Elsa followed the one dressed in navy blue with white pinstripes, the one who never smiled.

In the narrow hallway, all doors were on the right-hand side. Down the long wall opposite were photos of the current staff, side by side, in one long line. Each frame was labeled with a first name. Almost all had young faces, so Elsa guessed they were med students padding their résumés with volunteer hours. Over the eighteen months Elsa had been coming here, all but one of the photos had changed. Only pinstriped Nancy remained, with her pulled-back hair and foxy face; vulpine, that is, not at all attractive. And Dr. Shermer's portrait had never been hung, which Elsa assumed

meant he ran the clinic.

Nancy opened the last door, Dr. Shermer's office. After her first visit, Elsa had always been ushered to this room, always by Nancy. That first time, Elsa was shown to one of the tiny rooms off the hall, each dominated by an examination table and cabinetted sideboard. Dr. Shermer's office had these too, but his room was a much larger, holding his expansive desk, three framed graduate certificates and a wall of books. Above the desk was a mobile of our solar system with eight plastic planets and a snipped string where Pluto used to be.

"Nancy will take your vitals. I'll be with you in a moment, dear." Dr. Shermer didn't look up from his desk. He was hunched over, engrossed in a book.

As she was weighed, thermomtered and blood pressured, Elsa's skin started to itch at an almost unbearable magnitude. It was as if the discomfort knew it would soon be abated and, in desperation, was making one last stand. Elsa forced herself to concentrate on something else fearing she would flay open her own skin if she started scratching. She stared at the mobile in the corner, hanging from the ceiling. On both walls behind it were poster-size photos of space, a panorama of starfields, as background for the dangling orbs. It was a galactic aquarium, Elsa thought, like fishes swimming in a fake seabed, only with planets and stars.

The rip of the Velcro cuff usually signaled the end of Nancy's duties, and it brought Elsa back from space. But the

nurse wasn't done. She opened a closet and wheeled out a piece of equipment Elsa hadn't seen before. It looked sort of like a sewing machine, except for all the dials and gauges, and where the fabric would have gone there was a padded cradle.

"Just one more test," Nancy said, "Give me your arm, please."

Elsa didn't have to move from her seat on the exam table except to extend her arm. Nancy deftly maneuvered the machine and adjusted the height, until the cradle snugged up against Elsa's armpit.

"Just relax," Nancy said, bending Elsa's elbow up ninety degrees. "Make a fist and flex me a muscle."

Elsa did and Nancy put an adhesive patch on Elsa's skin atop the biceps.

"Okay, good. Now relax completely," Nancy said, laying the arm out straight. "I want you to hold this sensor in your fist. No, not so hard, hold it loose in your grip. I need your muscles completely relaxed."

"Like this?" Elsa asked and received a nod from the fox-faced nurse.

Nancy flipped a switch and every meter on the sewing machine lit up, all indicated zero. A faint glow brightened the housing just above Elsa's arm and bathed her flesh with dull red light. The color grew more intense as the red light snapped to the edges of the skin patch. Within that rectangular boundary the beam intensified to bright neon and Elsa felt the sting of heat.

She did more than tense up; Elsa threw her other hand over the skin patch. The light diffused to its original pinkish glow.

"What the hell! What is this test for

anyway?"

"Opiate saturation," said Dr. Shermer in a frank, flat tone. He finally looked up from the book he'd been reading. "Did you feel discomfort?"

"God, yes. Is this test really necessary? I mean, it's the first time you've done it. Usually she takes my blood pressure, we have a little chat and that's it."

Elsa tried to pull her arm from the cradle, but Nancy urged her not to move. The nurse's grip was gentle, but quite strong.

"Is there something wrong?" Elsa asked in a panic, "Something you're not telling me?"

"No, nothing's wrong." Dr. Shermer did a slow spin in his office chair, book in hand. Cosmos by Carl Sagan.

Seeing the book, Elsa immediately started wrestling a trio of emotions. Anger, because instead of her, the doctor was paying more attention to his stupid astronomy hobby. Fear that she was being tested for something dreadful. And an overriding anxiety that the prescriptions would stop at a time when she desperately needed them.

"Just keep your arm where it is and we'll give you something for the discomfort," he said. "People sometimes have a sensitivity to the test, usually not. We'll give you a local anesthetic."

The doctor left the book, rolled his office chair next to Elsa and sat down beside her. Shermer eventually met his patient's eyes after lingering on Elsa's cleavage. He didn't smile.

"It's quite important to complete this test. You're at a very critical stage. The

results will tell me the strength of the prescriptions you'll get from now on."

"For opiate saturation, you said."

"Yes." Shermer turned to Nancy.

"Lidocaine, five cc's."

Shermer then asked Elsa to describe the pain from the test and had her rate the intensity from one to ten.

"Hmm. I was going to numb the skin around the patch," he said, "but the way you described the deep burning, I'm more inclined to give you a general. Something to help you stay relaxed."

Shermer nodded at his nurse who plucked a different needle from a drawer and handed it to the doctor. Elsa looked away, in case there was blood. She flinched at the prick.

"There. In a minute or two you shouldn't feel a thing."

A warm syrup flowed beneath her skin, draining away Elsa's anxiety. She didn't even mind that the doctor and nurse were both staring at her. He sat in his chair and gaped at her breasts while Nancy stood over his shoulder with a fox-like grin. Funny, Elsa never noticed the resemblance before. Perhaps because Shermer's bald head didn't have the thick, ginger mane of his nurse. His snout was a little less pointy than hers, but he too had a small, round face. And his eyes, like Nancy's, were set very close together. Elsa wanted to ask if they were brother and sister, but was distracted when her vision began to swim. The fox faces now looked like reflections on a ripply pond.

"All right," said Shermer, "We should

be good to go."

Elsa savored the effects of the injection. The itch was washed from existence, replaced by a luxurious numb. She tried to ask Dr. Shermer to give her a prescription for this stuff, but Elsa was unable to make her tongue form words. She would have swooned from pleasure if the fox faces hadn't smiled.

Their mouths had too many teeth; a second row behind the first, it seemed. This had to be a hallucination, didn't it? Dr. Shermer's lips were moving and Elsa was fascinated by the way his mouth formed words around all those teeth. It appeared he was talking to her.

"Opiate addiction is a funny thing. It takes more and more amounts to achieve the same level of sedation. Over time, your body has become saturated with the stuff. To a point where the high is no longer enjoyed, and you need the narcotic to stave off symptoms of withdrawal."

Nancy uncovered the skin patch, pulling Elsa's hand away and leaving her arm suspended in mid-air. Elsa felt like a wax doll, her joints only working when somebody else moved them. She worried that the drug she'd been given had paralyzed all her muscles, so she wouldn't be able to breathe. She inhaled deeply and was also able to swallow and roll her eyes, but otherwise could not move. Dr. Shermer glanced over, watching her chest rise and fall.

"Western medicine is all about moderating symptoms rather than curing the underlying cause, which makes opioid

addiction the perfect medical condition. The addict has nothing but symptoms, and prescribing more drugs only compounds them. It's a perfect cycle of symptoms and relief, symptoms and relief, with no real underlying illness to worry about."

The red lamp reframed its intensity on the skin patch, the needles of light causing the meters to spike. Shermer studied the readouts and nodded to Nancy who flipped

a switch on the machine. The skin patch turned to toast and Elsa could smell her flesh sear. She didn't feel pain, but neither were her eyes capable of registering panic as she flicked them toward Dr. Shermer.

"Addicts like to think they have a disease, but they don't. It's compulsive self-medication to relieve discomfort. I just happen to be different than most doctors because I want the cycle to continue for as



long as possible, to see my patients achieve a certain saturation level.”

The hum of the machine changed noticeably. A sound like a dental drill accompanied the descent of a two-tined fork, slowly lowering from the machine. It pierced the square of flesh and juices welled up around the twin points of entry. White noise deafened Elsa’s brain, supplanting her inability to recoil and scream. Sparkles swarmed at the edges of her vision.

“Then the day comes when the body reaches the perfect saturation point. The permeation is so complete that the opiates begin to tenderize the meat. Given enough time it practically ‘falls off the bone.’ Isn’t that how your people say it?”

The hum changed pitch only slightly as the fork reversed course bringing up a toasted square firmly affixed to the skewers. When Elsa blacked out, the only outward sign was that her eyes stopped moving. Before today, she had only fainted at the sight of her own blood. With this procedure there wasn’t any, only cauterized walls adjoining one missing piece, like a brownie removed from a baking pan.

Dr. Shermer prattled on, “But alcohol addiction has the opposite effect on meat. Dries it out, makes it chewy, which some of us prefer. Nancy, here, enjoys a good chew.”

Nancy opened a cabinet drawer and removed a delicate porcelain bowl and chopsticks in a matching pattern. She pulled the morsel from the tines and set it in the bowl, testing the texture with one of the chopsticks. Nancy nodded.

“Personally, I don’t care for alcohol infusion. Gives the meat a peculiar after-taste that is a little too, I don’t know, metallic. Opiates, for me, are the best marinade. In addition to making the meat tender, the taste is...”

The doctor paused and chuckled to himself. “The flavor is quite addicting. Nothing like it where we come from.”

Shermer sighed, turned his head toward the star maps behind the dangle of plastic planets. His introspection was interrupted when Nancy offered him the first bite.

“No, you go ahead,” he said, “It’s been a while since you’ve eaten.”

Nancy popped the square of meat in her mouth. Her foxy eyes drooped with pleasure and she tilted her head, shoulders slumping as she savored.

“Besides,” Shermer said with a two-rowed smile, “I’m partial to breast meat.”



“DREAMS OF THE DEAD”

by SIMON DI NUCCI

Do you dream, Father?

You are not dead but sleeping, waiting to awake when the final trumpet sounds for judgement day. *‘And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne... The sea gave up its dead, and Death and Hades gave up their dead, and each one was judged according to his deeds. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire.’*

Physics says I exert the same force on the planet as it does on me. Can that be true of other forces? Other bodies? Do the great mass of dead souls in the underworld relate to the living, the one group effecting the other with the same power to move, influence, inspire? I have no answers, but my suspicions form an idea.

Where are we in all this, Father? Between the grandeur of scripture and science, we are only two people, one relationship, one link. We don’t seem to amount to much, but I am (I assume) all I have, and you are unique too: my only Father. I am your continuation in body, habits, attitudes and thoughts, as are my brothers and sisters. Surely that means something?

The dead outnumber us. We are many,

but people have been people for eons, for so long we have shaped a new age, left our indelible mark on the Earth. Did we wakers do this work alone? Perhaps not! You sleepers helped us. Your thoughts continued as the world turned, wobbling on its axis, rocking you, stirring your thoughts.

Those thoughts ran around your head for so long, you could not stop them. Once, when I was very tired, I remember thoughts, voices, racing around my head unasked for. As our bodies tire, does the gyroscope of thoughts continue in the momentum of thought, amassed over decades of waking and sleeping? It cycles on, turned into a habit, into character. Stubbornly continues, as I try to sleep...

As the sun travels through the galaxy, the planets circle her like great moths around the light. They glide on the surface of space-time, curved by the huge mass of our star, but pulling her too. Does this helix, spiralling in space, trace out our destiny, encode our stellar ancestry and predict our future path? Do humans on the surface of the spinning earth do the same?

The rippled surface of our brains, the folded terrain of our consciousness, overlay the deeper mantle of animal thought. The



emotional core. The unpredictable weather of thoughts plays over our minds, overlay the eruptions of emotion from below, the savage drive to survive. Oh, I need to get back to sleep: where is all this coming from?

We humans think of our lives as days interspersed with sleep. Useful days interrupted by nothingness, helpless, unthinking inactivity: but what if it was not so? What if

it's a continuous whole, beginning as unborns, as newborn babies tipping the balance from sleeping to waking as we mature. Then it runs back down in old age, as the waking world recedes and sleep returns to claim more and more of us...

The young look forward and the old look back, but the dead are eternal: in the now, disinterested in time and its fads, distanced from space. They are free to contem-

plate more fundamental things, like the blessed stasis of the firmament. They see the celestial spheres, but they do not roll. Their dreams do not move these souls, no rapid-eye movement or flailing paws for them. Do they review their past lives and loves, celebrating their enthusiasms and healing themselves of the hurts of life and dying - the shock of departure? Perhaps they renew their minds in preparation for judgement - to give their best account of themselves.

I imagine the elder ones have grown tired of this long rehearsal, of justifications - excuses, if you prefer. They turn their thoughts elsewhere. Instead of excuses for past wrongs, they make amends by fixing things from their eternal and everywhere vantage point. It must be tempting. Now the eons-dead dreamers can use their peace to reach into the turmoil of the living. Fatalistic, they see, too late, they've passed the point where they can alter their own fate, so they decide to intervene for the quick, who still have options.

Maybe our miracles are their epiphanies of doom, which lead them lend their dreams to others, a vicarious favour to the living congregation. Even now they influence my thoughts, my pen in my hand, my fingers on the keyboard. 'All models are wrong, but some are useful'; so a dear, departed colleague used to say (he did not die but retired to Spain). Are all such musings as this wrong? Yet I hope some of mine might be useful. But it's too easy to dwell on these things in the middle of the

night...

I wake. The surface froth on my stirred coffee swirls like stars in the galaxy, albeit a tiny two-dimensional version. My flat white is of no consequence in the great, two-hundred-billion-star scheme of things, but it stimulates me. I think about these representations, and my coffee-fuelled thoughts reach you and rouse you. Thoughts rise like curls of steam from the twirling liquid and disperse. They seem insignificant, but I am confident - your confidant - that in a universe of causes and effects they make a difference.

Is silence kept in heaven to hear to prayers of the saints? Because I dreamed this, did we have a connection? Do the dead dream? I don't know, perhaps I don't even care. I fill my days with waking thoughts, and the sleeping ones fade. I have no room or time for them in my busy Monday morning. What will I do with them? They slip away to the darkness at the back of my head, their job done, my brain repaired, prepared for waking thoughts, useful thoughts. What use are sleeping thoughts anyway, slippery threads that spin away out of my grasp?

At least this one did not get away. You did, Father, and now I wonder about you and your dreams. ❖

“MID-CENTURY MODERN”

by ERIK BERGSTROM

It's only when Arnold sees the spot of blood on their white womb settee that he knows his wife's been killing men in their house. All evening he's been preparing the place for potential buyers, using methods learned from Miriam like how to tuck the corners of the afghans or spray lemon duster on their polyurethane Eames lounge set. He'll never match her ability to keep the house looking like a catalog photo, yet he knows he must try if he's to sell the place to some young post-war couple looking for that little piece of Europe they experienced overseas.

Rotten timing, he thinks.

He's been without Miriam now for close to a month—the Miriam *he* knew. Though Arnold's been cooperative in searches and interviews with local police, he keeps hidden all the clues she keeps leaving behind to prove she's not so very far away at all. It's these clues, more than anything else, that led Arnold to a decision to sell the house and move far away; far enough, he hopes, to ensure she'd never make him her next settee stain.

He's paused now, staring at the spot, questioning once more the days leading up to her disappearance when she'd grown more erratic, floating through their cold house while fraught with some dreary mov-

ing picture in her crystal-colored eyes. *Had she been bringing men here this whole time?* Arnold considered. An affair was never out of the equation; he'd been ignoring her an unfair amount while off with his company, working on a pipeline in the Northwest plains of Minnesota for two, sometimes three weeks at a time. In the weeks before she left for good he'd come home to find the house quiet, dark, and empty, sometimes in disarray, the cotton duvet on their Nelson thin edge bed thrown to the floor, drinks half-filled on the walnut credenza, a trail of her clothing laid like shrapnel on the floor leading to their attached bathroom.

This time it's that tidy, iron-brown drop on the ivory white settee that's frozen Arnold in time. The buyers—a young, well-off couple like he and Miriam had become—were set to arrive in less than twelve hours. They'd seen the house once already when Arnold was off working. They wanted a second look.

And what might they see? he wondered. Might there be more than just one simple spot of blood scattered throughout the house? Could there be strands of her white fur he never beat out of the afghans or cleaned from the creases in the davenport? Would they see the clues the way Arnold

does now, spotlighted by a beam of moonlight slicing through the clerestory windows as if to say *Here we have age-old stories of wilderness and death?*

He looks out back out through those same windows, sees the moon-cruled snow and ink-black trees set against the canvas of night, and he searches for Miriam. The blood on the settee has dried, though Arnold knows it wasn't there yesterday. She's been here recently, inside the house. She's always been here, in a way. The house is every bit hers as it is his own, perhaps more so with all the days he left her alone here.

Now he sees her, emerging from his thoughts like a dream might, roaming that first line of trees in the gibbous moon's light; like the spot in reverse, her fur a bright, clean white, glowing against the black trees. She's small like Arnold supposed she'd be, though she's well-fed unlike the other deer he's seen in winter, their spine and hip bones jutting out, their bellies distended from hunger.

She grazes at the ground a bit. Her ears quiver, shaking off an itch. Now she's lifting her head again to look back at Arnold, and he notices her eyes are not the glossy black marbles of deer he knows but colored like the Northern lights.

She trots back into the forest and disappears like a lighthouse in the fog. Arnold doesn't call out for her. He knows she'll be back.

He's got the evidence to prove it.

When he first met Miriam, Arnold was

in his twenties, living in a trailer rented from her old man and beginning his work on the pipeline. He'd wanted to bunk in the nearby hotel with the rest of the crew, yet Miriam's thrifty father—it was his pipeline then, and he could only afford so many workers at The Wayside—sold Arnold a bill of goods, convincing him the cozy trailer would keep a man warm through their teeth-chattering winters *on account of being so cramped.*

Arnold grew to know his new home well enough to begin imagining everything in its place. Mornings he'd reach out in the frosty dark to find his coffee mug, for instance, or his worn-in Maine Guide wool cap. There were other mornings he'd roll over in bed and find Miriam had snuck her way inside, and they'd huddle close like two wild animals fighting off the edge of night, the aluminum walls of the trailer flexing around them in the wind.

Bracing for the cold from beneath the down comforter one morning, she said, "I'd probably want to live as a rabbit."

Arnold said, "You'd be hunted day and night."

"Same as any animal," Miriam said.

"You'd live each day in fear. Wouldn't you? Not finding enough to eat. Of *being eaten—*"

She turned a smiling face to him.

"Same as any animal."

"Why not a deer then? A deer's far prettier than a flea-ridden rabbit. You could be like Bambi."

"I don't think I'd like to be shot in the back by you or Garth from a mile away."

“We don’t shoot Bambis,” Arnold said. By then his fingers were caught in the ribbons of her Nordic-blonde hair. “And we don’t shoot at Bambi’s mom, either.”

On the day he came home to find Miriam gone for good, Arnold had been away at the job site for over a month—his longest stint to that point. He might’ve stayed away even longer with how the mild weather was dragging out across October, but then God had flipped a switch and the deadening days of mid-November arrived to stall them in their tracks. It was time to go home for a while.

They’d taken the morning to tarp the site. By noon, a small crew had gathered around the pickups; there was Arnold with his head foreman Garth, a lifer named Steve Ingebretsen, and the Anderson twins, Lars and Boden, who’d come fresh to the job around early September. A thick, noxious exhaust fed the hazy blue sky as Garth held court in the gravel turnaround, angling for the possibility of a quick hunting excursion the next morning—Dave Casey, who had a cabin near Arnold’s place, had told him about an albino deer he’d been hunting.

“I seen a white deer before,” said one of the Anderson twins. “Our dad said we’d get twenty years bad luck just for aiming at it, so we just kept our guns down and let it pass like a ghost.”

Later in the afternoon, coming up the dark and lonesome corridor of a forgotten county road, Arnold turned down the dial to the Glen Campbell song and asked

Garth if he would’ve taken the shot at the albino deer. The silence between them grew. Wind hollered in the wheel wells while the steady engine of Garth’s pickup churned.

At last Garth said, “Actually Arn, there’s something I kept from the boys back there. Something Casey told me ‘bout that deer.” His jowled face had gone a dark shade of blue against the snowy evergreens outside his window. He stuck a cigarette in his mouth and pushed in the lighter. “I don’t know how you feel on the subject. But me, I’m sort of a spiritual guy myself. All the way down to my marrow. The way Casey put it makes it sound like there’s more to that albino deer than just white fur.”

Arnold scoffed. “A ghost, I suppose.”

“No. It’s something like... oh, I don’t know. You know how all kinds of cultures got their own legends? Natives ‘round here, ‘specially, with the vampires and wolf men.”

“So, you think it’s a vampire.”

“Never said that, personally.”

“Aren’t vampires supposed to fly around as bats?”

The lighter popped out. Soon Garth’s face was a glowing ember while he fired his cigarette. Arnold turned up the volume to the radio to find Glen Campbell was gone, replaced by a static fuzz.

“I don’t like it when you leave me alone here so long,” Miriam said. Arnold was on a short trip home, his last to see her. They were tangled together on the set-

tee, feet propped up on their Danish teak wood coffee table.

Arnold said, "What's not to like? You've got everything here you ever wanted."

"I'm scared here by myself."

"We've got a security system in place."

"Oh, it's not that."

"Then what's the problem?"

She pulled away from him and sat upright, holding her elbows, keeping watch over the small fire set inside their open-corner concrete masonry fireplace. "If you have to leave again for so long, I don't know what I'll do."

"What do you mean you don't know what you'll do?"

"I can't be holed up here any longer all by myself."

"What about Betty Harmon's parties? Don't you like socializing there anymore?"

"Oh, I don't need her to tell me how to burp for a proper airtight seal. I need... something else. Something magical. Like an affair, maybe."

"An affair?"

She turned to Arnold and looked at him resolutely. "Yes. Maybe."

"How is an affair *magical*?"

"I don't know." She looked away again, her cheeks blooming red. "It's something... different, anyway."

"Why don't you go visit that shaman or whoever she is in town if you want something magical."

"I don't know who you're talking about, Arnold." Her tired voice crackled with the fire.

"She lives in the brick house. The one with the dead hydrangeas out front, bed-sheets in the windows. Cats prowling around, coming in from Lord knows where."

The oven timer went off on a dish of rewarmed scalloped chicken supreme. Miriam breathed deep, then stood and pressed her skirt against her thighs. "I said I don't know who you're talking about."

Though with the way she quickly broke eye contact with him and turned into the kitchen, her shoulders stiffened, there was every indication to Arnold that she did.

He lay on the firm guest bed in Dave Casey's cabin after a night of draining Steve Ingebretsen's Old Milwaukee, listening to the wind outside grow from a soft rustle to a howling gale, rushing along the cracks in the wood and flapping the shingles. The windows nearest to his bed rattled in their frames. He thought of the nights he had Miriam alongside him in the trailer, holding fast to the forearm he'd draped across her chest. One time she told him she could hear the panes of glass frosting next to them; that it sounded like foil slowly crinkling or the soft tap-tap-tapping on the glass. Arnold, drifting half-drunk into the hazy land of dreams, thought he could hear that same tapping at Casey's window like it was the ghost of Miriam, returned.

His eyes shot open. A dark silhouette came in through window and splashed along the wood-paneled walls.

He roused from bed and looked out. He saw only the trees at first, their branch-

es scraping against the clouded night sky. Then, deep in the woods, something moved beyond the black trunks. He tried to focus, yet the moon was too full and bright; the snowy landscape gleamed a garish blue beneath it like the reflection on an oil spill.

Something nearer to Arnold caught his eye then: a tuft of white fur caught in the jamb of the window. Yet as soon as he noticed it, the fur caught in the wind and blew off, gliding across the face of the moon that looked down upon Arnold, its two black craters for eyes and miles of rock forming a beastly smile.

He wanted to believe he'd only been playing tricks on himself, forming images and shadows that weren't there. For so long he believed it was only women like Miriam who were interested in things like ghosts and vampires, reading her fairy tales by the glow of her Ombré-glazed ceramic lamp. The fur might be days old—years old. Might be from any manner of animal. Something small as a rabbit, maybe.

The cabin's front door slammed. One of the Anderson boys was shouting, "I saw her! I saw the albino!"

The boy rushed past Arnold's window and into the darkened woods, wearing nothing but his canvas pants and an open flannel shirt, and carrying a rifle.

What was it Miriam had said so long ago, in the days before she and Arnold began cohabiting the cramped quarters of her father's old trailer? She'd been waiting for her old man outside his office, itself only a roll-away shack with stained cream-

colored curtains in the windows and a dent in the corner of the aluminum door; the relic of a disgruntled hired hand.

Arnold had been standing alongside Miriam; waiting, like her, for his bi-weekly allowance. She was wearing a fringed buckskin coat. Her white-gold hair was parted in two separate braids that ran past the front of her shoulders. She was a robust twenty-two years old then, and world-wise for having traveled to Boston, and then Key West, paying her way with short-time jobs that included bartending and deveining shrimp right on the docks.

She said, "I'm all the best parts of a Norwegian with all the worst parts of everything else."

Arnold said, "I got a little of the Norse in me, myself."

"Yeah? Which god's your favorite?"

"Whichever one's the best-looking, of course." He looked to her father's office door, wondering if he'd seen it move. He recalled warnings from the crew about avoiding her come-ons in case her old man caught wind. The fellas who didn't usually ended up thumbing it on the highway two miles down.

"I'll go with Nott."

"Not what?"

"That's her name. N-o-t-t. She rides at night on her horse, Frostyman. The morning dew comes from the horse's spit."

Arnold crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow. The door to the office shook in its frame once more. "Interesting, that."

"Elli's pretty interesting too. She's an old crone, but she beat Thor in a wrestling



match.”

“You know an awful bit about it, sounds like.”

And so the minutes swiftly turned into a half-hour and the office door never opened. Along the way, Arnold’s stand-offish affectations had turned towards something genuine. Soon his hands were in his pockets and his shoulders were slouched, and he smiled from beneath his once-upon-a-time bristly brown mustache.

“I like the Norse gods just fine, though it’s a tragic Lapland myth that’s my favorite,” said Miriam. “It’s about a lonesome wife who turns herself into a monstrous beast to hunt men at night with her pack. Only, she finds she messed up the spell and can’t be turned back.”

Arnold shuts the front door to the house once Miriam shows no sign of returning. He’s quick to close out any of his daydreaming as well, knowing how dangerous circling those thoughts might be—like a moth to a flame, or a squirrel to a trap filled with sweets. He reminds himself of the buyers’ impending arrival and feels the weight of it draping across his tired shoulders, remembering how much is left to be done.

He considers making the unfinished basement his next project, content to remove himself from the floor-to-ceiling windows that expose him like a fish to a hungry cat. He walks to the stairs and descends. Once at the bottom, he pulls the chain to an unguarded light bulb and gathers his bearings.

The concrete floor is smooth and cold like a block of ice under his feet. Around him are exposed beams and insulation he never had time to cover; a task he told Miriam he’d get around to so many times that she finally stopped asking.

He fixes on something in the furthest corner of the basement—a featureless shadow slumped on the ground, out of reach of the single bulb’s light. He considers fetching a flashlight when the shadow moves in the corner of his eye.

“If I set you free, would you resent me?”

“That’s a selfish thing to ask,” she said.

“How is it selfish? I’m giving you permission to have your silly affair.”

Miriam, in the middle of wrapping the cord around her Electrolux vacuum cleaner, sighed. “That’s not the point, Arnold.”

“Then what is the goddamn point? Do you mind telling me?”

The cord came off its hook and fell in a tangled heap on the floor. Miriam started to cry.

“Oh it’s just a cord, Miriam. Here, let me—”

“It’s not about setting me free, Arnold!” She pulled the vacuum away and dragged it to the closet. The cord bounced across the floor like a happy child in a wagon. From the hallway, she said, “It’ll simply be the death of us.”

“Death of us? That’s rather melodramatic—”

“Oh don’t patronize me.”

“It’s just a separation, Miriam! For

chrisstakes.”

“What’s the difference? Something good will have been destroyed.”

Arnold couldn’t stand to see her hurt—to know he’d been the one to hurt her—yet he was too confused and angry to help. Couldn’t she see that he absolutely *needed* to be away so long so that he could *afford* their beautiful home? So he could *afford* all the dressings she required? He wondered whether she ever felt such conflict or could ever feel it. He wondered if, when it came right down to it, she could ever hurt something good in the name of necessity.

The body, once Arnold feels it, is naked and cold to the touch. It’s likely been there a few days, stiff as it is. Something had caused it to shift—an escaping gas pocket, maybe—yet it seems the perpetual chill seeping through the cracks in their masonry had aided the body’s rigor mortis, leaving Arnold unable to inspect it further. He can’t see the face, can’t tell who it is, though he gathers an idea once he sees the rifle propped up in the corner of the room, the canvas pants and flannel shirt folded neatly next to it.

Dave Casey’s cabin had been close, though it wasn’t running distance, not in the winter. Twenty miles by car, perhaps half that as the crow flies. *Had he really run so far for a deer?*

From upstairs comes a thunderous sound of the front door blown open by a hoarse wind and slamming into the wall behind it. Arnold jolts upright. Soon the cold air’s snaking its way to him, looking

for the lowest ground it can find to settle.

He hears the footsteps—four of them at once. Tap-tap-tap-tapping on the tile landing.

When he arrives at the bottom of the staircase and looks up, he sees that Miriam’s there, blue with the moonlight reflecting off her fur, her face now a wolf’s pantomiming a smile.

She makes a noise—a deep, guttural moan that comes from the depths of her belly. She snorts once, scrapes her paw along the tile, and growls once more.

Arnold shouts back at her, “I’m sorry!” Stinging tears well near his eyes. He wipes them away. “Miriam, you have to—”

She blinks and Arnold pauses, catching her crystal-blue eyes again. It’s how he knows for certain it’s her, knows how—amid all that mangy fur and angry snorting—she’s still so clearly human behind all their warmth, anger, and ugly passion.

“What can I do? You want me to quit my job and come home? Is that it? Knock down what we’ve built together? All this?” He throws his hands out and begins to sob. “You’re too late. I’m already selling it. I’m moving on.”

She backs away from the door. The wind’s died down, and in its place Arnold can hear a sound like what had come out of Miriam—those loud, accusatory bellows—off in the distance and beyond the treeline.

“How can I get you back?” he says.

But he knows it’s too late to ask.

An hour passes before Arnold manages his way up the stairs. He admits to himself,

once he's in his kitchen mixing a sloe gin fizz, that he's selling the house because he hates it. Everything about it, from the high flattened ceilings and cantilevered overhangs to the floor-to-ceiling windows. He understands he might've hated it all along. The day he took over Miriam's father's pipeline and moved them out of the old trailer was the day they began to die. Still, Arnold knows he has to keep it. He'd call off the buyers, tell them he changed his mind and catch hell for it. But it was his house. It'll always be his house now, so long as Miriam was out there, carrying her own burden.

New snow is falling by the time Arnold looks outside again. Miriam's still there, though only for only an instant. He loses her quickly in the swirling, fat flakes. He watches them drop from the sky and collect in wispy dunes, and as he does, he thinks about driving into town to look for the shaman or mystic he believes did this to her so he might beg her to break the spell. He'd repent. Hell, he *would* quit the pipeline. They could spend time looking for the fork in the road where it all began and take the other path this time.

It's late when he picks up the phone. He stands next to one of the long, high windows sipping his drink and he winces at his realtor's reaction over the course of a half hour, even as he holds fast to his decision. By the time he hangs up, his drink's drained and so is he.

But then, through the same window, Arnold sees a flash of white moving against the rhythm of the falling snow, zig-zagging

over the ground. Soon it's followed by another, and then another, until the flash becomes a storm of glimmering white pack of beasts bursting from the darkness, crossing up the hill towards him.



“THE VANISHING”

by TOM DI ROMA

“What do you mean they’re all gone?” growled the evil dictator.

“Exactly what I said,” replied his second in command. “We’ve searched everywhere. On the ground, above the ground, even underground. Every living person has vanished!” While the commander fumed, his second asked, “If there is no one left to torture or kill, what do we do now?”

After thinking a moment, his commander got a nasty grin on his face. “How many men totally did you say we have under our command?”

The next day, the wizard shepherding the people of the village announced, “It’s time to return.” Then with a wave of his wand, all the people appeared in front of their homes. Not one of their torturers was alive, except for one very frightened dictator, who looked on with terror at his one-time victims.

“Now it’s our turn,” announced the village elder with a feral grin. ❖

END TRANSMISSION