



**Walk the Dark:
Bonesongs for Apocalypse in D-Minor**

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Dedication:

To Janis Joplin. Just 'cause.

Introduction

Dear reader:

Gathered together here are a number of my favorite nightmares, turned out nicely for your enjoyment. You might call this collection of offerings “Pandora’s Toybox” – keeping in mind that the original’s last gift to the world was hope. Like a cross between a box of See’s Candy and Australia, it contains scattered poisons with occasional chances of beauty.

To paraphrase Alice Cooper, welcome to my nightmares!

It’s not all bad, though . . .

Trump XIII of the Tarot, Death, is considered to be a scary card. And after all, why shouldn’t it be scary? It represents Scorpio, the realm of Hades, Lord of Death.

But Scorpio is also the realm of transformation, transmutation, regeneration, renewal, and, ultimately, resurrection and redemption. It governs mass extinctions – and the rapid, astonishing radiation into extremely biodiverse new life that comes after them. It governs fungi, without which we would have no bread, beer, or cheese, and detritivores, without which bodies of dead creatures would pile up and up until the Earth was smothered with them. It governs the airless voids of outer space – and the endless possibilities for wealth and expansion that space offers Earthly life. It governs cast-off things – and the recycling thereof into new products, new life, and new possibilities.

In the midst of life, we are in death. In the midst of death, we are in life. Death is birth and new beginnings. And Life . . . is horror turned inside-out.

What follows are creations dedicated to Life, its dark side as well as its bright one.

Please come walk the dark with me.

1. Rosebud

*O Rose, thou art sick!
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,*

*Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.*

– William Blake

Chapter 1: Songs of Innocence

Little Lamb, who made thee?

– William Blake, from “The Lamb”

Whenever I can, I take long, long walks alone through the byways, fields, and woods around my home. I live in the suburbs of Santa Reál, California, a smallish city in the South Coast strip connecting Ventura and Santa Maria. In Santa Reál, a short walk or, at worst, an easy afternoon’s bicycle-ride will get you well away from the urban sprawl and into regions approaching wilderness. So during my walks I can escape all the invasions, alarms, and excursions of city life and get away to places where I can hear myself think – which is as much a matter of necessity for me as it is pleasure.

I’m a writer, you see. I need a lot of time alone, without any interruptions or distractions, to work out some of the knottier details of plot, characterization, or other aspects of a story I’m currently writing, or hash over the hows and wherefores of some article or essay I’ve been asked to write for this magazine or that journal. On my walks I can find the privacy and peace I need for this – and rarely can any other time.

I live on Camarillo Street, over on the southwest side of the city. My house is about three blocks from Fairchild Elementary School, which is right on the city’s western border, next to the semi-wilderness of fields and woods that hedges the city there. The school’s immediate neighborhood is a very nice residential area, upper-middle class/Yuppie classic, with large two-story homes intermingled with townhouses, sprawling ranch houses, \$120,000 “cottages,” and all the other gorgeous homes, big and small, I’d never in my wildest dreams be able to afford. Nevertheless window-shopping is one of the great pleasures of my life; so often on the way to the fields during my walks I stroll through that area, past the school, wistfully daydreaming of The House, modeled on some of the larger, more awesomely priced houses near the school – the one I’ll get when I’ve finally worked out all my bad karma, about three Ghidrillion incarnations from now, and can get some of the *real* goodies instead of the cheapies and freebies I have to pretend now are truly the best things in life.

Several months ago, I decided to take a walk through that area, past Fairchild Elementary, on my way to the fields beyond. It was Saturday, mid-morning of a lovely Summer day. I set out feeling marvelous. The warm sunshine was interwoven with a cool, iodine-y breeze of the nearby ocean to make an endless, endlessly unwinding bolt of silken delight brushing seductively against the bare skin of arms, face, legs. The homes along the streets I followed were nearly all landscaped with almost obscenely brilliant, riotously abundant flowers, shrubs, and trees of every description, many of them, like the flowers, descended from ancestors originally imported into this country from the most unlikely places. (Someday, maybe a million

years from now, when civilization once more begins to arise out of radioactive ashes, the cockroach paleobotanists try their damndest to reconstruct the evolutionary history of our planet from the record of the rocks, just like we do today. But when they begin digging up the plastic-cruded rubble of Santa Reál, they will all have nervous breakdowns trying to figure out how in *hell* Sudanese gorse-bushes, sub-Saharan cacti, Yukon *prima flora*, and English tea-roses all managed not only to establish themselves here, but to flourish on such a scale that they were all able to produce thousands and thousands of varieties and sports!)

The city limits coincide on the west with the western boundary of Fairchild Elementary School. By some miracle, the land beyond for about half a mile is completely undeveloped. The school itself faces away from the fields, which come right up to its back boundaries. The land on which it sits is partially fenced, but for about fifty feet each way from place where they intersect, its south and west boundaries are completely open to the land beyond. Only a few low shrubs mark the place where the tamed, zoned piece of land belonging to the school district meets relatively wild country. The exception is a stand of several oleander bushes right at the southwest corner of the school-yard. Every Spring these put forth gigantic clusters of glorious white, electric pink, cerise and scarlet blossoms in vast profusion, enormous cloaks flaunted by the bushes to set the style of the season. Now that it was Summer, most of the chromatic riot they had incited was gone, dispersed in dying, brown, rotted shreds which, poor ghosts, did not even hint of the fantastic, splendid beauties of the season just past, of which they were only the necrotic revenants. A lone yew, rooted at the exact place where the southern and eastern sides of the school-yard met, accompanied the oleanders.

A well-trod footpath runs across the city limits and into the fields along the southern edge of the school-yard, right next to its border. At the time, this path was bordered by luxuriant grass, for the winter and most of the spring just past had been far wetter than average. I decided to follow it out to the fields.

Walking across the far edge of someone's front yard to get to it from the sidewalk, I inadvertently trod upon the numerous herbs growing all about, largesse from the previous season's rains; the fleeting, succulent odors of young sage, rosemary, rue, and countless others which I unthinkingly crushed underfoot in my passage tantalized my palate. The breeze had set such that all the smog from U.S. 101, which ran along the south side of the city, was carried out to sea rather than toward my part of town, and the air was exquisitely clean and fresh. I felt much, much younger than my forty-plus years as I made my way along the southern boundary of the school-yard.

I was just coming abreast of the group of oleanders that guarded the corner of the school-yard when I heard a small voice singing contentedly to itself, so softly it was almost whispering. The words it sang, coming to me as clearly on the light breeze coming from the voice's owner straight toward me, froze me in my tracks:

“Bidge-ee . . . bidge-ee . . . hoooo-reeeee . . .
Dir-dee . . . bay-bee bidge-ee . . .
Hoo-ree . . . bay-bee . . .
Bay-bee bidge!”

sang the voice, to the tune of “Ring Around the Rosy.”

Not quite able to believe I had really heard it, I unfroze enough to tip-toe closer to the bushes which hid the singer from my view as quietly as my hole-y old sneakers allowed. I succeeded in doing so undetected; in fact, I could probably have marched in their with the U. S. Marine Corps Band playing “Stars & Stripes Forever” and not have been noticed by the singer who, completely oblivious to my presence, went right on singing:

“Dir-dee bay-bee hooo-ree,
Stooo-pid bay-bee fuck-ee,
Bidge-ee, fuck-ee,
Bay-bee *HORE!*”

sang the voice, ending the last line somewhat more emphatically than the rest of its song.

Appalled, I tiptoed around the side of the nearest oleander and peeked into the pan of school-yard dirty which the oleanders enclosed, terrified of being spotted by whoever was singing – though why, I couldn't say: that voice couldn't have belonged to anyone – or *anything* much heftier than Tinkerbell.

I needn't have worried. The owner of the voice, deep in that awesome, laser-like concentration that only young children, saints, adepts, and the totally mad can achieved, remained completely oblivious to me as she sat and crooned softly to herself. She sat there on the ground, her profile toward me, legs stuck straight out before her in the manner of very young children, whispering her song to herself as she scratched at the dirt between her legs, eyes closed, concentrating intently on something deep in the middle of her skull, a small, Lovecraftian version of a Hindu holy-man at his meditations.

At first I estimated her age as about three or four, in spite of her great size and the weird, hard note in her voice that crept silently along under the words and notes of the song. But at last the proportions of her arms, legs, and torso, all wrong for a small child, managed to shout through my befuddlement that she could have been no less than seven or eight years old.

She had very long, glossy, black hair hanging down her back like an ink-fall, obviously carefully and lovingly brushed earlier that morning. She wore a blue-and-white checked gingham outfit with a white apron, short sleeves, and a little unpleated, ruffly, blue-and-white-checked skirt that came to about her knees. On a child of five or so it would have been darling. On one her size and age it looked bizarre, like a Barbie Doll dressed in snuggies.

“Dir-da bay-ba hooo-ra . . .
Nas-ta bay-ba fug-gaaa . . .
Bidja, bidja,
Bay-ba *fug* . . .”

she sang. Then, with hardly a pause, she switched to another song, this one to the tune of “I’ve Been Workin’ on the Railroad”:

“Bidg-ee, bidg-ee, bidg-ee *HOR*-ee,
Fug-ee bay-bee bidge . . .”

Now I stepped out quietly from behind the oleander to see what she was doing. Her concentration never wavered; she remained completely oblivious to me, so absorbed was she in whatever she was doing. Curious to see just what it was that required such horrendously powerful concentration, I looked at her hands, scrabbling busily before her in the dirt.

At first I'd thought she was making designs in the dirt with something, a child's equivalent of the sort of doodling adults do when talking on the telephone or at a committee meeting. But her fingers weren't touching the dirt. They made odd patterns in the air just above it, as if she were simultaneously making a cat's-cradle out of thin air and pretending to practice on some strange musical instrument. Her blissfully unawareness of anything in the world beyond her closed eyelids made me bolder, and I stepped farther out to get a closer look.

She sat on the ground, leaning back slightly, legs making a V before, with her busy hands, like two big white spastic, amputee spiders, held out stiffly before her, close to the dirt. It suddenly hit me that the dance which those hands were engaged in was a highly stylized if jazzy parody of masturbation – masturbation carried out several inches away from her genitalia or, indeed, any other part of her body, performed solely upon the air. And beyond that, woven into the hands' eerie dance were flourishes and clutching gestures suggesting strangling, the gesticulations of heated political debates, the cruel confidence of the born tyrant, the will-to-power of a trial-sized Caligula.

For a timeless moment, I watched the dance of her hands in aghast silence. Those hands moved with a controlled precision that was literally impossible in anyone her age. The vision of a master surgeon or a concert pianist trapped in a little girl's body, gone crazy from such imprisonment and weaving bedlam Magicks in the air, came back to me. And now back she went to her original song:

“Dir-dee . . . bid-jed-ee hooo-ree . . .
Fild-zee bay-bee bid-jee . . .”

Fuck-ee . . . fuck-ee . . .
Mom-eez-a hooore . . .”

I never made a sound, or moved at all – in fact, I had been unconsciously holding my breath all the time I was watching her – but the girl suddenly stopped what she was doing, opened her eyes, and looked straight at me as if she’d known all along that I was there. She smiled, a carnal, cruel smile that contained all the knowledge of an old, jaded prostitute and none of the wisdom. Her hazel eyes glowed with spots of burning sulfur. “Filts-ee *hor-ee*,” she said conversationally, as someone else would say “Good morning.”

“Who – who are you?” I asked her lamely, stumbling over my words in sheer shock.

Lazily, with the economical ease of a healthy predator, the little girl climbed to her feet. Suddenly the thousand-year old jade in a child’s body vanished. In her place was The Idiot: the girl’s eyes became wetly glazed and distorted, turning in different directions, their color going a lightning-shot gray-blue. Her mouth gaped slackly in a wide, vacant, drooling smile of complete imbecility; she spraddled her legs, which ended in little black patent-leather shoes, so that they were splayed wide apart on a vertical plane, just as they had been on a horizontal one while she had been seated on the ground. She held her arms out straight to the sides from her shoulders, her open hands turned palms-out towards me, the fingers spread out widely. Bent over slightly toward me from the waist, her body wove and wobbled as if her sense of balance were defective. She began to rotate her hands back and forth on her wrists, weaving her body from side to side in spastic, greasy bends and shudders. “*My name ith Debby!*” she simpered in a spittle-shot, baby-girl voice burdened with a pronounced lisp.

“Debby –”

Now her idiot-child pose began to slowly mutate into more and more elaborate and complex behavior. Putting the forefinger of her left hand to her lips, she pulled out the hem of her dress with her right hand in an archaic sort of half-curtsy. She began to blink her eyes frantically, the lashes going up and down like insect wings; behind her finger her mouth opened and closed in a drool-rimmed doll-gape, her red, red lips shiny with saliva. Her eyes went huge and glistened strangely. A trembly, ingenuous, utterly phony smile spread across her face. Her whole seeming was a terrible parody of a small, emotionally crippled, socially backward, badly cowed child in an agony of anxious need for acceptance by the adults around her, trying her best to present herself as winningly and disarmingly as possible. For a minute or two the horrible caricature went on and on.

Then, as suddenly as she’d first assumed the idiot act, she forsook it for another, that of a supremely confident, poised little being whose eyes were hard and cold as reptiles’ are supposed to be, but aren’t anywhere outside of badly-researched fiction. “What do you want?” she demanded of me with peremptory hauteur.

“Do you live around here?” It was all I could think of to say.

“Who has to tell *you*?” Then she changed again. This time I was treated to a performance of The Loon, jaw askew, vapid grin, eyes rolling, limbs going every which way. “Duhhhh . . .” And, mouth agape in another version of the Idiot Smile, she hawked up a tremendous wad of phlegmy mucus with a vile, tearing rasp and spat copiously in my direction. I jumped just in time. “Now *look here* –” I started to roar at her.

In yet another of those lightning-quick changes, she turned back into The Idiot once more. “I bet *your* Mom-ee’s a *hooooor*,” she told me, smiling ingenuously at me, her eyes pools of brainless malice.

“Oh, *Deeeeeee*-bby!” a voice called from behind me somewhere, mercifully interrupting this Cook’s mini-tour of Hell. At the sound of that voice, the little girl underwent one more instantaneous, startling transformation, the last I was to see that day. Between one point of time and the next she turned into a more or less normal little girl (except for that too-short, Dorothy-from-Kansas gingham dress and frilly white pinafore), completely composed, as if the past few minutes hadn’t taken place at all. “Yes, Mommy?” she called demurely to whoever it was that was coming up behind me.

Chapter 2: What So Rare

I happy am.

Joy is my name.

– William Blake, from “Infant Joy”

I turned. Coming toward us along the same path I’d come here by was a handsome woman in early middle age, dressed in a very conventional white shell top, blue skirt, and white sandals. She smiled pleasantly at me. She seemed rather weary, and there were white roots in her otherwise luxuriant, short, auburn hair. “Oh, *there* you are!” she exclaimed upon seeing Debby, relief and concern filling her voice, “Baby, where have you *been*? You *know* we’ve got to go to the dentist now! – “Hi,” she said, turning to me. “I’m Sarah Rotberg. We live over there, on Las Aceitunas, you know, near the corner of Montaigne . . .” She waved vaguely back in the direction of the homes near the school. “I hope Debby hasn’t been bothering you –?”

She seemed very kind, a compact, pleasant woman who could have been an executive in a local company, perhaps, or a staff or faculty member- out at UCSR, the local campus of the University of California, about ten miles west of here, next to Golightly and Ano Vista. Though she was very attractive, nevertheless there were crow’s-feet of chronic weariness and worry around her eyes and mouth. I wasn’t about to do her the ugly favor of telling her what her daughter had been up to just a minute before – assuming, of course, that it hadn’t all been just some horrible hallucination on my part. “Oh, not at all – in fact, I was just taking a walk along the path here, going over to the field –” I pointed – “and got here just a minute or two ago. – Uh, I’m Linda. Linda Cutter. I live back there, over on Camarillo Street.” I offered my hand. She accepted it, shaking my hand warmly.

“Well, I’ve just come to get Debby,” she told me. “We’re going to the dentist for a cleaning, and it’s nearly time to go. She loves to play over here on weekends . . .” She seemed so terribly apologetic, though entirely unaware of what I had just stumbled over on my morning stroll. It was as if constant apologizing had become sheer habit for her. She went on, unnecessarily explaining in a nervously controlled calm: “So I thought I’d come here to see if she were here – and she was – well, I *am* glad to meet you!”

“Yeah, it’s nice to meet my neighbors. I’m still getting to know people here – I moved here from Golightly about a year ago, and I haven’t really net everybody here yet. – Uh, I’ve got to get going . . .” Not that I had anything to do, really, but I wanted to get out to those fields, away from this little corner of Hell, so badly now that I could taste it.

“Oh, of course! I didn’t mean to keep you!” she said graciously. “Come on, Debby,” she said, turning to her daughter. “We’ve got to go.”

An odd look crossed Debby’s face, as if she were trying to make a decision as momentous as Truman’s concerning whether or not to nuke Japan. For a fleeting moment, an ancient, rage-crazed wolverine looked out of her hazel eyes, but her Polite Child mask never quite cracked. Finally she said, with studied politeness, “Yes, Mommy.” Her mother put out her hand; Debby took it, eyes downcast. Heaving an enormous sigh of relief, Mrs. Rotberg headed back toward the tract east of the school, her daughter dutifully accompanying her.

I felt as if all the last twenty minutes or so had been an evil dream from which I was just now awakening. That child *had* to have been a figment of my imagination! Only the two sets of footprints in the dirt of Debby and her mother testified that the whole hideous episode had been something more than just a nightmare or hallucination. At least, a child had actually been here, in this playground, and I had encountered her and, a few minutes later, her mother. But a 7-year old child, talking and acting like the nightmare vision I’d just had? Sure – such things were common in horror movies and the more sensational best-sellers. Writers from Taylor Caldwell to whatever turkeys wrote *The Omen* and *The Bad Seed* had made obscenely opulent fortunes on the public’s appetite for scapegoats, especially archetypal “evil children,” who very clearly served as a means of rationalizing harsh methods of child-raising and the sort of pedophobia that made so many cultures, particularly America and Europe, so prone to child-abuse and other forms of violence. The idea that, just incidentally, there might really be children who fit those caricatures was a little too fantastic to credit – and just too convenient as a “justification” of the sort of “poisonous pedagogy” about which the marvelous Alice Miller has written so movingly in her *tours de force* on the psychodynamic ravages inflicted upon children by child-abuse, neglect, and even just highly negative attitudes about children as that are integral parts of the cultural dynamics of many societies, such as she

describes in her tremendous introduction to the subject, *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware*. . . . No, if anything, I'd had some sort of temporary psychotic break, projecting on to a poor little girl some of the nasty garbage still down there in my own unconscious mind as a result of having grown up and lived all my life in just such a society.

I shook myself, trying unsuccessfully to throw off the vast depression that had fallen on me, a leaden weight that alternately went hot and cold and had grown spurs, one of which had thrust its venomous shaft deep into my psyche like a poisoned dagger. The mood stayed with me the rest of the day, spoiling it entirely.

Chapter 3: Omens

*To see a World in a grain of sand,
And a Heaven in a wild flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
And Eternity in an hour.*

– Blake, “Auguries of Innocence”

I took a few walks during the next week, but I avoided that part of town entirely where Fairchild Elementary was. The following Saturday came and went, along with Sunday and Monday. Then Tuesday came, and with it one of the loveliest mornings I've ever seen in Santa Reál.

A vision of the fields on the west side of town overwhelmed me. I remembered the lush birdsong that poured from the air there on fair days, along with early summer's honeyed light and sweet winds. It was a relatively unspoiled area, rather rare, these days, near any city in Southern California, all but extinct near Los Angeles, where I had grown up. I yearned for its fragile wildness, so strange to find near city limits. If any important fragments of memory of the Saturday before last lingered in my mind, the loveliness of the day must have pushed them entirely out of my mind, and I decided to take my walk out to the fields that day.

In fact, it was such an extravagantly beautiful day that I decided to make a regular hike of it, carrying a picnic lunch and some books in a rucksack and hitching a canteen of water to my belt. I thought of doing a bicycle jaunt over the bike trails to UCSR and back along the cliffs above the ocean, and almost decided to take the bicycle instead of going on foot. But I really wanted a walk, though I would have liked to see the view of the ocean from the cliffs, and the grounds of the University, too. So I finally decided to hike as far as I could through the fields to the bike trail that ran along the other side of the freeway, then walk along the trail until I'd gone about as far as I could and still be able to walk back home again without too much discomfort. That way, I could have the best of both worlds. So I made up a lunch and put it, a jacket, put some books in my backpack, filled my canteen, put on jeans, shirt and boots, and left for the fields, feeling on top of the world.

The walk outward was lovely. I passed a red foxkit on my way past the school-yard; he darted over a nearby hillock, then crept back up to watch me from behind its cover, where I could barely see him out of my peripheral vision. And when I hit the bike-trail over just beyond the freeway, I was oddly thrilled when I heard the muted *bzzzzz* of a rattler – I hadn't seen one since I was a kid, at the Los Angeles Griffith Park Zoo, where I had seen one in a glassed-in habitat in the Reptile House there, and I'd never encountered a wild one. Since I was wearing good hiking-boots, and, from the sound of its rattled warning, was nowhere near the snake's probable position, I had no fear of being bitten by it. After all, this was very early July, not August or September, when the heat of late summer socked in hard and the snake would be shedding its skin, a time when rattlers, normally quite shy of human beings, become blind, maniacally bad-tempered, and belligerent to the point of suicide. The animal that I had just heard was no danger to me. And to find so archetypally wild a creature right inside the city limits of a modern Southern California city, with all its automobile traffic and other hazards against which the legless, temperature-dependent animals have no

defenses whatsoever save luck, seemed a good omen.

Later on, when I came across a picnic bench at the edge of the cliff, over near the ocean, I was not so pleased when, stooping down to peer up at the underside of the benches and table to see whom I'd be sharing my lunch-table with, I found two big, fat black widow spiders, one at each end of the bench upon which I'd planned to sit. Irrationally I shuddered. Fragments of Robert Frost's poem "Design" momentarily breached into the light of my conscious mind, then once again plunged back to the whatever depths of the Unconscious they had come from.

Unhappily, I found a stick and knocked the spiders off the bench. I didn't want to risk upsetting one of them by my intrusion into her territory, and just possibly getting bitten by her, if I sat on top of the bench under which she denned. On the other hand, I don't like killing anything, even for food, or in self-defense, and I wasn't sure this even qualified for the latter category. But the ground was far too hillocky and burr-strewn to sit on, not to mention the presence of a regular Shriner's Convention of ants close by, and I very badly needed to sit down and rest at that point, anyway.

Finally, I settled on a compromise: I found a stick with leaves at one end, and used it to brush the animals out onto the ground rather than squashing them, and hoped I hadn't injured them in the process. After all, black widows do trap and kill many, many times their weight in various kinds of flies and other vermin during their lives. So many spiders are becoming scarce because they're being killed off by the insecticides and various other artificial poisons with which human beings are so liberally seasoning their prey, not to mention the rest of the environment; the toxins became highly concentrated as they were passed up the food-chain via predation until, finally, the prey of many spiders and other animals becomes absolutely deadly to anything that eats it. I didn't have the heart to add two more of the useful little horrors to the casualty list. So I met the problem halfway and did what I could to spare them as well as making sure they wouldn't return the favor by giving me a nasty bite.

The rest of my hike out and most of the way back was uneventful. Bird-song cheered me, and the warmth of the Sun comforted me, and I made a long day of it, to get as much good out of the day as I could. It was not far from sunset when finally, returning home, I passed the fields west of town and came down along the path that led by Fairchild Elementary's school-yard on my way home.

The day was coming to a close. Already, a firestorm of light filled the West, all flame-reds, chrome-greens, aqua-blues, and brilliant incandescent washes of orange and yellow. In the distance I could hear a woman calling, "*Deh-bee! Oh, Deh-beee!*" It sounded like Mrs. Rotberg, her voice sharp-edged with alarm. I wondered if I would encounter her daughter somewhere on my way home, playing in the warm summer evening. I devoutly hoped not; it had taken me more than a day to shake off the leaden, razor-taloned depression which the first chance meeting with her had brought on. The note of concern in Mrs. Rotberg's voice didn't strike any echoes from me; Debby was probably just playing somewhere and had forgotten the time. Her mother was sure to find her soon.

Here was the school-yard yew tree, and the oleanders, coming up on my left.

I happened to glance to the side, where there was a gap between the bushes –

It took me a few moments to realize that the racketing scream that seemed to come at me from everywhere at a deafening volume was coming from my own throat. Stunned to the bones of my soul by what lay there, I stood by the oleanders and stared down at a scene out of some million-dollar splatter-film, one that might have been directed by Hieronymus Bosch and produced by Dante Alighieri, a banquet of horror spread out lavishly before me in the corner of the school-yard, nicely framed by the bushes. The corpse of a woman lay sprawled on the ground next to one of the oleanders. A great, gaping tear had opened her throat, and her life's blood was puddled copiously on the ground underneath and around her body, and dripping from the leaves of near-by bushes. From the way she lay, and the disarray of her limbs, it looked as if her death had been a hideously hard one. The fact that there was blood on more than one of the bushes testified that she'd thrashed about wildly in the short time it had taken for her to lose enough blood to pass out and fall to the ground.

In addition to the blood from her throat that covered her lower jaws, throat and upper body, there was a gigantic splash of blood reaching from her lower abdomen, across her crotch, to the middle of her thighs. It had come from a tremendous, ragged hole in her lower abdomen, slashed right through the fabric of the violet, white-striped jogging-shorts she wore. Like her lilac tank-top, her shorts were so soaked with blood in most places that it was hard to see what color they had originally been.

The dead woman had been youngish, probably in her thirties, judging from her build. She had been slender, with good tennis muscles. There was no telling if she had been pretty or not; something had carved away her left eye, her nose and her lips, and slashed huge chunks out of the rest of her face. There was still one large, hoopy earring in her left earlobe, but judging from the nasty tear in the other, whose edges, like the left side of her jaw, next to it, were covered with gore, something or someone had ripped away the earring on the right without bothering to unfasten it first. In addition, the ring finger of her left hand had been chopped off at the first joint; if it had borne any rings, they were gone now.

The corpse's modishly cut hair was filled with blood; in the dying sunset light it was impossible to tell what its actual color was underneath the blood with which it was soaked through. The L.A. Gear jogging-shoes she'd been wearing were the only articles of clothing she'd had on which weren't soaked with blood. Between the blood on her body and the blood on the ground and the leaves of the bushes, I could hardly believe it had all come out of just this one, medium-sized woman, who couldn't have weighed more than 130 pounds or so, and who must have been an inch or two shorter than my own 5'5". It looked as if someone had slaughtered a herd of elephants in there, not just one, relatively small human being.

That was bad enough. What nearly destroyed my tottering sanity was the sight of little Debby Rotberg, dressed like any normal little girl in a Southern California summer in a white T-shirt sporting a picture of the crew of the Star Trek *Enterprise* and a pair of red shorts, lying sprawled out on the ground beside the corpse, happily nuzzling first at the horrible wound in the dead woman's throat, then at the blood that had puddled in the one in the woman's lower belly, then back at her throat again. All the while she was drinking from the clotting fountain of what had been the woman's life, she scrabbled with her right hand either at the corpse's crotch or her own. Suddenly the child, who was sitting on the ground next to the corpse, sat up, raised her arms skyward and, casting her head far back with her eyes closed, screamed, "*Bidge! Fuck! Hooore!*" in a voice like a crazy crow the size of a warehouse.

I gagged, almost strangling. Debby heard me. Instantly she came out of her trance. Her head whipped around, and I found myself staring into eyes like holes into a blast-furnace. Blood covered her face and throat from the neckline of her T-shirt nearly to her eyes. Lazily, she licked at the blood around her mouth. "*Fuck-ee,*" she said conversationally, grinning at me ferally as she finished slurping up the blood.

It was too much for me. My nerve broke. I turned and bolted away from there, toward the city and the houses lying just east of the school. As I ran, I heard shouts and pounding footsteps coming toward me. *Oh, God, help me – help me!" I screamed as I ran on and on, fleeing from daymare.

Chapter 4: Fetters for the Mind

*Love to faults is always blind,
Always is to joy inclin'd,
Lawless, wing'd, and unconfin'd,
And breaks all chains from every mind.*

*Deceit to secrecy confin'd,
Lawful, cautious, and refin'd;
To every thing but interest blind,
And forges fetters for the mind.*

Blake, from "Poems from the MSS"

"Debby?" came an answering voice, still half a block or more away.

A voice much closer to me, possibly the owner of the feet that were now pounding toward me, cried, "Who is it? What's wrong? Is the little girl there?"

"Oh, God – come quick! There's been – a woman's dead here!" I screamed.

Several people were coming toward me. The one in the lead was a young, male police officer, followed by Mrs. Rotberg and two other men. It was the police officer who'd called out to me, his cry like a bullet out of an M-16.

"Where?" yelled the policeman.

"Back this way – hurry!" I shouted at him, coming to an abrupt halt on the path and pointing back toward where I'd discovered Debby and the corpse.

"Where, lady? Show me!" He'd caught up with me now.

"Come on – this way!" I turned and ran back to where the corpse lay sprawled in the dirt beneath the oleander. He, Mrs. Rotberg and the others followed at a dead run.

When we reached the place where Debby and the corpse were, something had changed, but at first I couldn't tell what it was. Then I realized that Debby was no longer battenning on the corpse. Indeed, she was lying on the ground some distance away from it, crying wildly. Most of the blood was gone from her face and neck, and had been replaced by a great deal of dirt. The bottom of her T-shirt, however, was stiff with bloody mud. As we drew near to her, Debby began to scream. "Mommy! Mommy!" she shrieked. "Oh, Mommy, where are you?" She seemed terrified out of her mind. "Don't let them get me – *Mommy!*" Her screams became inarticulate, ear-splitting cries straight out of the Pit.

"Debby – oh, darling, what happened?" Her mother had finally caught up with me and the officer. Horror-stricken at what she found there, beside the oleanders, she ran to Debby's side, kneeling down beside her daughter. "Oh, darling –are you all right!" Debby's answer was more wild, panic screaming.

"Poor little girl," muttered the cop, shaking his head. "God -- what sort of monster could have done *this?*"

"Did you find the little girl?" asked one of the other two men, who'd finally caught up with the rest of us. A tallish, pleasant man with curly, graying hair, close to me in age, he was dressed in a kelly-green-and-white checked sports-shirt and lime-green chinos.

"Is Debby all right?" panted his companion, a balding, slightly paunchy older man dressed in tailored, light-weight gray slacks and a short-sleeved white shirt. Both his slacks and his shirt, which had been designed with the boardroom in mind, not a desperate run along streets and fields in hot Southern California summer weather, were heavily wrinkled, and decorated here and there with foxtails. Huge sweat-rings darkened his shirt under the arms. The tail of a crumpled red-and-gray striped power-tie dangled forlornly from one of the front pockets of his trousers, a casualty of the war between fashion and necessity.

Mrs. Rotberg moaned loudly, caught in an ecstasy of horror, clutching her screaming daughter tightly to her chest. Clearly she hadn't yet realized that the blood splattered everywhere wasn't Debby's. Rocking her daughter back and forth in her arms, she began to wail, a forlorn sound out of the remotest beginnings of humanity that sent icy lightning along my spine.

The policeman, who had quickly determined that the woman on the ground was now beyond all hope, turned to the woman and child. "Hey, is the little girl all right?"

Mrs. Rotberg, Debby coughing and sobbing helplessly in her arms, grief molding her face into a hag-mask, turned to the policeman. His eyes narrowed. "Uh . . . I don't think your kid's been hurt, ma'am," he said, at once understanding what was passing through Mrs. Rotberg's mind. "Put her down, let's take a look – I think she's all right."

Her face softening with unexpected hope, Mrs. Rotberg dumbly did as he asked. She and the officer checked the girl over. It wasn't long before they had determined that Debby hadn't been physically hurt at all, and that the blood that covered her wasn't her own. Solicitously, the policeman told Mrs. Rotberg, "She's got something on her face, I think, besides the mud – here, there's something on her mouth, let me clean it up . . ." Taking a spanking-clean linen handkerchief from a back pocket, carefully he wiped whatever it was from the girl's mouth. Briefly he looked at his handkerchief, then carefully folded it over on itself and tucked it into his shirt pocket. "There, I think that did it. – Okay, honey, you're going to be all right . . . there, that's a girl . . ."

The man wearing the sports-shirt asked, "Sarah, is Debby – is she --"

Mrs. Rotberg turned to him, tears filling her eyes and spilling down her cheeks. "Oh, my God, she's all right, my baby's all right . . ." Then she began weeping in relief, her sobs loud in the twilight, her tears spilling down her cheeks in a small river onto her daughter.

"Hadn't we better get her home?" he asked her.

“Sarah, what’s happened here? Will somebody please tell me what the hell’s going on here?” the balding man demanded, concerned and frustrated.

“Somebody’s been killed,” snapped the cop. “Debby’s here – she seems to be all right. Look, I’ve got to go radio for help – we’ve got a murder here, a really nasty one. Let’s get the kid back to your house, Mrs. Rotberg, and I’ll call the station and ask them to send somebody out here from the Special Investigations unit.”

“I -- oh, God, my baby’s all right!” wailed Mrs. Rotberg. Her relief at finding that her daughter was safe had momentarily all but paralyzed her.

“Uh -- Sarah, let me take Debby,” said the man with the sport shirt. “Let’s get her home and get her cleaned up.” Gently he patted Mrs. Rotberg’s back, making soothing noises. The balding man joined them, and the two men talked quietly for a few minutes with Mrs. Rotberg and each other. Then the first man took the child up in his arms and began walking back toward the housing tract. The shorter, balding one followed, his arm around the stumbling Mrs. Rotberg, telling her, “It’s all right, Sarah – Debby’s safe, and that’s all that matters, isn’t it? Let’s get back home and clean her up and put her to bed, and it’ll be all right, it’s all right . . .”

In the meantime, as Mrs. Rotberg and the two men that had come with her were gathering Debby up and preparing to head for the house, the officer wandered back toward the body and the nearby oleanders. He looked about for a moment, at first almost perfunctorily. Suddenly he paused, having spotted something. He knelt down by one of the oleander bushes, apparently to get a better look at whatever it was that had caught his eye. Then he cast about for a moment or two, as if looking for something he’d forgotten. Finally, taking his note-pad from his breast pocket, he tore off a sheet of paper and used it to pick up the something, a slender darkness against greater dark. He held onto whatever he had just found tightly, his knuckles white, his hands trembling a little with the intensity of his grip on it. Rising to his feet again, he stared after the others, who were far enough away by now that they were almost indistinguishable from their surroundings in the rapidly fading twilight. Shaking his head as if in pity, he turned to me.

“You a witness, lady?” the badly shaken young cop asked me.

“I -- yes. No. I mean, I found the body – I didn’t see how the . . . she’d been dead for a while, I think. I just found her with – with the, the girl . . .” I began to choke.

“Hey,” he said, concerned. “It’s all right. Come on – looks like you need to sit down and rest for a minute. Come on back with the rest of us – I’m going to have to ask you some questions, anyway, after I contact Homicide. We’ll go back to Mrs. Rotberg’s place, and you can probably get a drink of water there. – Or something stronger, if you need it.” Patting me on the back, he urged me gently along in the wake of the others.

The Rotberg’s did have “something stronger,” and I needed it. The man wearing the sport-shirt, it turned out, was Rabbi Benjamin Geller from Beth Miqlam Synagogue over at Main and Muir, where the Rotbergs went on Sabbath. An old friend of the Rotberg’s, he was very familiar with their house; it was he who sympathetically scared up a bourbon-and-water for me at the officer’s suggestion and my own, wiped-out nod of confirmation – Mrs. Rotberg herself was too busy cleaning up the still-screaming Debby and getting her ready for bed to do so herself.

The other man, the balding one in slacks and white shirt, was Bob Corning, the Rotbergs’ attorney, who, as it happened, had just dropped by to discuss something or other with Sarah Rotberg. Debby had been out playing somewhere when he’d arrived; as it got later and later and Debby still hadn’t come home, he’d offered to help Mrs. Rotberg look for her. As they were setting out to do just that, they’d met Rabbi Geller, out for a stroll – he lived only a couple of blocks away from the Rotbergs. He, too, had offered to help find Debby. After about an hour of searching, when it was getting close to sunset, and Mrs. Rotberg realized that her daughter had now been missing for almost eight hours, the three of them became alarmed and had called the police to ask for help looking for Debby. The Santa Reál City Police Department had sent out one officer, not thinking it was too serious a matter. When the officer arrived, he, Sarah, Rabbi Geller, and Bob Corning began searching together, now quite concerned. They were just coming toward the school-yard to search there when they heard my screams and came running to see what had happened.

Mr. Rotberg, whose first name was Bartholomew – everyone called him “Barry” – wasn’t home; he was in Seattle, on a business trip. Mrs. Rotberg hadn’t yet called him to let him know what had happened. It was probably just as well. There was little or nothing he could do from Seattle to help, anyway, and he’d have remain there until his current job as an engineering consultant to Boeing, working on plans for a new

space shuttle, was over, which wouldn't be for another week yet. It was probably better to wait at least until he was about ready to come home to tell him what had happened to his daughter. By then, the news couldn't interfere with his work, and Debby would probably be quite all right, anyway. So they had decided to wait to call him at least until the police had come and gone and everyone had had a good night's sleep. There was nothing he could do tonight, anyway, and by the time morning came, they'd all have a much better idea of what was going on, whether Debby was doing to be all right, and what she and her mother might need in the days to come.

The doorbell rang. It was the first of the detectives from the Special Investigations unit. Rabbi Geller let them in, and "our" officer went to greet them and acquaint them with the details of the case. As he did, he took out the handkerchief he'd used to wipe Debby's mouth with from his breast-pocket and handed it over to one of the newcomers, along with the paper-wrapped object he'd picked up in the school-yard and had held onto as if his life had depended upon it ever since. In low tones, he spoke with the other officer for a minute or so, the two of them withdrawing into a corner of the room to avoid being overheard.

Soon the house was filled with detectives from Special Investigations together with several paramedics, most of whom soon were on their way over to the school-yard to gather up the poor, torn body of the dead woman and investigate the site. Tom McKnight, the young officer who had been the first one after me to arrive at the scene, accompanied the investigative team that went out to gather evidence concerning the dead woman's murder, which had clearly been the cause of her death. In the meantime, two detectives who remained behind for that purpose began to question all us civilians about whatever knowledge we might have about the crime.

Because I had apparently been the first one at the scene, the detectives remaining behind at the house questioned me rather sharply, more so than anyone else. But there was no blood to be seen anywhere on me, not even the small traces and smears that would have been left by a quick attempt on my part to clean up before anyone could see me, had I been the one who had killed the dead woman. Moreover, a point that became important later, when the forensic investigation team that had gone out to investigate the murder-site returned with photographs of the area taken with a polaroid camera, I was wearing boots – whereas the prints surrounding the woman's body were clearly those of a pair of woman's sandals, the kind that aren't made for anything but city sidewalks, the work-place, or the beach, as opposed to the big, heavy clod-hoppers I had been wearing for my hike. Those two pieces of evidence alone made it virtually certain that I couldn't possibly have been the murderer, or even an accomplice to the woman's death.

Once they'd ascertained that, the detectives were much kinder to me. After taking my name, address, phone-number, and driver's-license number, and cautioning me that I would at least have to make a statement at some point and should let the police know if I had to leave town before all this was settled, they smiled a little and told me to relax and not to worry. Then they went on to question the others.

By that point, McKnight had come back to the house. Seeing me slumped exhausted in an easy-chair, he came over and looked down at me with concern. "Are you all right, Ms. Cutter?"

"I, uh, I guess so."

"Can I offer you a ride home?"

"Sure -- God, I just want to get home and go to sleep! -- Uh, sorry," I added with an embarrassed grin, after yawning hugely.

"Don't worry about it. Frankly, I just want to go home and get stoned out of my fucking *mind!*" Tom said, looking haggard.

My grin much broader than before, I told him, "Hey -- I won't tell anybody if you won't. -- Man, it must have been *bad* back there!"

"You oughtta know -- you found her first."

"My, so I did. A dubious distinction . . . Oh, well, never mind me. I'm -- a little out of it right now."

"Join the club, lady. Anyway, you want that ride?"

"Yeah, I could sure as hell use it about now. I am just all beat to sh-- er, wiped out."

"Okay. -- look, I'll go ask the lieutenant if they need anything else, then we'll go. How's that sound?"

"That sounds fine. Thanks -- I can't wait to get the hell out of here!"

"Don't worry about it." He went over to one of the detectives, who wore a suit and tie and looked very, very tired and very, very angry. They spoke together for a few minutes. Then the lieutenant nodded. Tom came back. "Sure. He says it's fine."

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