

Fex breaks the spell ...

No one spoke.

Beyond the muted whoosh of traffic outside, the only sounds in the room came from donuts sizzling in hot oil, metal trays sliding into cooling racks, hot coffee filling disposable cups.

Jasmine seemed dazed. She stared at the notebook and cleared her throat. Owl Man eyed her pensively, even tenderly. Heron Man waited. He wondered who would be first to break the silence, and he didn't have to wait long.

“Sounds like a friggin’ fortune cookie, ‘f ya ask me.”

This could only be Fex.

“Or did you get that off your Ouija board, Owl Man?”

Heron Man turned to find Fex standing right behind him, literally breathing down his neck. A wave of tropical fragrances washed over Heron. Fex’s Pompadour, as usual, was laden with pomades and gels, and his ruddy cheeks had been splashed with aftershave lotion.

“Hello, Fex,” said Heron Man. “Nice to smell you again. And I see you haven’t lost your touch.” Heron Man had taken up the challenge of Fex’s sarcasm.

“Whatdya mean my ‘touch’?”

“I mean your incredibly stupid tendency to trash every delicate moment with an irrelevant insult, always dumbing things down to your moronic level.”

“Hey, you piece of bird shit, nobody talks to Fex like that.”

Fex tried to work himself into a lather, for the benefit of the “bird brains” and the donut crowd, but Heron Man just laughed it off.

Whereupon Fex pulled his shoulders back and swung his immense belly toward Heron Man like a bulldozer attacking a pile of dirt. But Heron Man stepped aside, reached with his toe and tapped Fex behind the knee. This caused Fex’s knee to buckle and he nearly lost his balance, teetering on one foot, arms wind-milling.

Heron Man was on the balls of his feet, expecting a counter-punch from Fex, but Fex surprised everyone. After regaining his balance, instead of swinging at Heron Man he suddenly began a quick tap-dance routine, complete with mimed hat

and cane.

“I coulda been in vaudeville,” he crowed. Fex was in good form—arrogant, mischievous, outrageous.

“Fex, how old are you, anyway?” Heron Man began razzing Fex. “You’re in a donut shop, doing a tap dance in a purple body stocking wearing an Ascot. Did you miss your audition for the Kiddy Parade?”

“First of all, it ain’t a body stocking, idiot man, it’s a custom-fit jump-suit. Second, it ain’t purple, it’s lavender. And yeah, it’s an Ascot. So what? And where’s this parade you’re talkin’ about?”

Heron Man ignored the question.

“Fex, we’re in the middle of some important business here, and unfortunately you’re getting in the way.”

“Yeah? Too bad. Why don’t you tell me what’s goin’ on with all the woo-woo bullshit? From what I heard it sounds like it’s my business too.”

Jasmine and Owl Man looked up at Fex. They did not seem surprised by his unannounced appearance, his belligerence or even his tap dance. They were more amused than anything.

Owl Man slipped the Agatha Christie into the inside breast pocket of his tweed sport coat, then he took the notebook and put it in the side pocket. He gave Jasmine a meaningful glance as he did.

Fex glared at Owl Man.

“Hey, Owl, what’s with the hat?” Fex pointed at the Harris tweed cap that Owl Man, in a fit of fashion consciousness, had chosen to wear—though he still wore the sweatshirt with the parliament of owls, underneath the sport coat.

“Just thought I’d give you a run for your fashion money, Fex,” replied Owl. “Bang for the buck, as they say. I love your purple body stocking, by the way, and your new Ascot.”

Fex did not expect this retort from Owl Man.

Jasmine smiled at Owl Man, arching her eyebrows. Oddly enough, Fex’s rude, boisterous intrusion had restored her sense of humor, after her initial shock at reading aloud what she—or rather, the Agatha Christie—had written on the notepad.

She still had no idea how it had happened, or what the cryptic message referred to, but she suspected that Owl Man and Heron Man already understood, or at least sensed, the implications of what it said.

“Well, Fex, since you’re undeniably here—in the flesh, and all your glory—you might as well pull up a chair,” Owl Man offered.

“Thought you’d never ask.” Fex dragged a chair across the floor, as was his habit. He liked seeing people flinch at the grating sound. “By the way, who’s gonna buy me a donut?”

Heron Man, having regained *his* sense of humor, sauntered over to the counter, whispered to the clerk and pointed back at Fex. In short order, two glazed donuts and a cup of coffee were sitting in front of Fex.

“Now,” said Fex, between bites and sips. “What the hell’s goin’ on?”

Owl Man waited while Fex wolfed down the donuts, then brought him up to speed.

“Fex, we’ve just learned that my dear Miss Jasmine here is going to be part of the plan.”

“Hey, I never said nothin’ about lettin’ her in on it!”

A few errant crumbs had dropped onto Fex’s belly. He picked them up delicately and popped them into his mouth.

“That’s true, Fex, you never did.”

“So who’s runnin’ this show anyway? You or me?”

“Well, you should know by now, Fex, that Heron Man and I are running the show. Oh, you’re a principal character, of course. You’re indispensable, crucial. We couldn’t write this without you. Your name will be on marquees and billboards across the country. Just imagine, ‘Fex & Coo,’ in bright lights.”

“Yeah, yeah, I like that. But what does this here Jasmine got to do with it?”

“We’re not exactly sure yet, but we just found out that she is definitely going to collaborate with us on the plan. Maybe more.”

“So where did you get all this new information from?”

“Well, you’d never believe it if I told you, Fex. Let’s just say ‘a little bird’ told us. What I mean is that we have a *private, confidential source* that we draw on

from time to time. That's all you need to know."

"Source, huh?" said Fex. "A snitch, more likely."

"No, not a snitch at all, Fex. Our source is all discretion. You yourself should be so discrete."

Fex shrugged skeptically.

"But who knows?" continued Owl Man. "With Jasmine on our 'team' she may just end up getting credit as one of the co-authors of our book. That hasn't been decided yet. But there's no doubt you'll still be the star, Fex."

"Yeah, well, maybe it's OK then."

Having smoothed Fex's ruffled feathers, Owl turned to Heron, who by now had also taken a seat. The two men put their heads together with Jasmine, bringing *her* up to speed, while Fex listened in. And for at least the second time in his life, Fex showed remarkable self-restraint, managing to keep his mouth shut, with the exception of a couple of derisive snorts.

It was only after Owl and Heron had convinced Jasmine that the heist was a fiction, and that at least a portion of it would be taking place in something like *dreamtime*—only then did she assent to the plan, after initial resistance to the criminal aspect of it. There still remained, however, the question of the *writing* and the *dreaming* that the Agatha Christie had insisted Jasmine must do.

Jasmine looked at the clock.

"Oh, my God! I've got to go. My shift starts in ten minutes."

After a final flurry of comments, the meeting began to break up.

The four of them drifted outside the donut shop and chatted on the sidewalk. Even Fex had mellowed. Owl Man and Jasmine set a time to meet at her apartment—the next evening at 7:00 PM, as before. Their intention was to discuss Jasmine's part in the writing and dreaming process, as well as her role in the plan.

"But don't forget, Jasmine, my dear," Owl Man reminded her portentously. "Far more important than the plan itself, is our dreaming, and yours most of all."

She stood on her toes, kissed Owl on the cheek and said, "I'll have dinner ready for us."

Fex took note of the exchange between Owl and Jasmine, and he nudged

Heron Man in the ribs, whispering, “Hey, Heron, get a load of that!”

At last the conspirators separated, walking in four different directions.

That night, Jasmine wrote an entry in her journal:

Today my dear Owl told me—that is, his magic pen told me—that I must write and dream. For now, I want to prepare myself to receive whatever dream message, or messenger, comes to me during the night. Am I ready for this?

Do not listen to your voices of propriety, civility, or manners ...

“Lassie, lassie, lassie. Ya know I gotta say no. Sick is the only excuse, and lookin’ on your cheeks, girl, you’re lit up like you got krieg-lights close up and snug.” Tully’s hands seemed to be searching out the most effective place to land on his broad hips to strike the bossiest pose.

“But—” Jasmine began, when Tully cut her off.

“No buts, Jasmine. No day off. That’s the end of it. Now get your butt to work.” As Jasmine, turned and set off toward the kitchen door, Tully took advantage of the view of Jasmine’s swaying backside, and said, “Now there’s a good girl, yes, very good indeed.”

Jasmine’s thoughts were all broken up in a swirled mixture of yearning to set pen to paper, and fury with Tully’s bull-headed refusal to let her go home. She *should* have followed her initial impulse and just called in sick, but after the dream she could not do that. She had to face Tully directly—and now what? She’d written it down, surprising herself, even, with the prompt from the *Agatha Christie*. Ah! Another detail.

Reaching into her apron’s pocket she pulled out her pen and order-form and tore off a sheet, turning it over and scribbling quickly: *do not listen to your voices of propriety, civility, or manners*. Yes, she was sure that was what the voice said at the end of the dream.

She recalled how the dream, a voice only, had started with her name: *Jasmine ... it begins. It begins in truth. It begins in telling the truth only, telling the truth at every turn, at every twist, at every opportunity no matter the consequences to you or any other.*

She slept fitfully, and her head ached as if too full, as if some airy pressure kept filling her head with, with ... Well, with what?

What the hell had she gotten herself into?

“Hey, missy,” Tully’s voice boomed through the air. “What’s taken so long girl? It’s not like you’re dressin’ for no date, now is it? Come on, get your sweet buns out here!”

“I’m writing down a dream. Tully.” Jasmine yelled this out for all to hear. If she had to tell the truth she was going to make sure everyone in the damn shop heard it. What the hell could Tully do about it anyway?

“Not part of your job, young lady. You’re docked an hour for that!” Tully shot back as he crashed through the kitchen doors. “What do ya think of them apples, missy?”

Jasmine, taking her time, folded the dream-filled order sheet and placed it in her apron pocket. She held her pen out in front of her, and up at Tully’s eye-level, and clicked it—the defiant gesture not lost on Tully. His face reddened up and he was about to explode at her when she let forth.

“Your apples, Tully, are rotten to the core. You’re an asshole. That’s God’s damn truth, Tully, you’re an asshole. No more missy, and girlie, and lassie and all that crap. You hear me?” She didn’t wait for Tully’s answer, if there was to be one, as she brushed by him and went through the doors.

Tully's sad Scottish heart...

Big and bombastic as he was, Tully actually flinched at Jasmine's angry exit. It seems he was not such a lord of the manor as he liked to think, when it came to his "bonnie wee Jasmine." He began to scold himself.

"Och, what have ye done, me Tully, ye old fool? Now ye've run her off like a cushie dov' intae the heather, when ye almost had her in yer haun!"

With that, Tully slouched back into his cramped office like a half-drowned silkie slinking into his dripping cave.

Closing and locking the door behind him, he opened the side drawer of his desk, reached toward the back and fished out the bottle of golden Lagavulin Owl Man had given him on his last birthday. He held the bottle up to the light, as though to appraise the color, but mainly to make sure there would be enough of this medicinal astringent for a proper cleansing of his wounds.

"Och, Tully, me Tully," he muttered to himself, as he splashed three fingers into the heavy lead-crystal glass—another gift from Owl. "When will ye learn, lad, tae keep yer big Scottish gob closed good an' proper?"

When there was yet a finger left in the glass Tully splashed some more Lagavulin—two more fingers—into the "doctor's cup," as he called it. Soon he was leaning back in his swivel chair, feet on the desk, singing a jumbled medley of old songs.

"Now if yer tired and weary, feelin' sad and blue," Tully sang, then took a sip and resumed in a deeper register. "Don't let yer care upset ye, 'al tell ye what tae do . . ." Tully was forgetting the lyrics, so he hummed his way to the last line, "Go doon intae the wee room underneath the stair."

He stopped abruptly and stood up. The swivel chair rolled back against the wall with a thump. Drawing himself up to full height, Tully held one arm forward and began to sing the same song again, this time at full volume, changing the lyrics a bit.

"Now if yer tired and if yer weary, and if yer sad and feelin' blue—" His voice trailed off into a thin, reedy, nasal *melisma*, as if he were playing a sad solo on

the pipes, the melody drifting into a different song. Tully stood in his tiny office, singing his heart out. In his mind's eye he could see the kilted lads standin' on the brae, sword in hand, a tear in each eye, a catch in each throat, as they stopped the battle long enough to listen to the Tully of old—enchanter, bard and warrior. Then suddenly Tully bellowed, "Now on with ye, lads, give 'em the battle they came for! They'll ne'er take us alive!"

Tully could hear the clanging of swords, the crunching of bones, the sworn oaths rising to the grey skies over the field of battle, the agonized cries of the soon-to-be slain . . .

"Tully!" a voice called out. Then again, "Tully!"

"Huh? What the—?"

Owl Man was pounding on the office door. "Tully, open the door, for Robert Burn's sake!"

Tully jerked around, almost tripping over the swivel chair as he reached for the doorknob and the sliding bolt.

"Owl, me brave laddie! Come on in! I been waitin' for ye! The battle's just endin'."

"Tully, what in the name of Saint Andrew have ye done? Poor Jasmine's stormin' around the coffee shop like a she-devil in distress! Says yer an asshole, Tully, says ye won't let the girl take the day off when she needs tae write!"

"Och, Owl, I didn't mean nothin' by it. Just ticklin' the wee thing."

"Well, take my advice, Tull. If ye don't stop ticklin' her, and don't start given' her the time she needs, yer gonna lose her sure, and ye'll deserve it. She's half yer business, man!"

And so Owl Man cajoled Tully out of the office. The Lagavulin, combined with the singing, had changed Tully's mood anyway, so by the time he and Owl came face to face with scowling Jasmine, Tully was all over her with apologies and benedictions.

Jasmine left the coffee shop like someone just released from the Tower of London. Owl and Tully watched her hustle down the street, though the reduction of their viewing pleasure was directly proportional to the insulation value of her pleated

coat.

After a block, Jasmine slowed down. The cool Seattle air had dampened her temper somewhat, and she took a deep breath. She could hear a ferry sounding its horn, the low-pitched *vooom* just audible below the rumble of traffic.

The dreams, Jasmine kept saying to herself, the dreams said . . . I must tell the truth . . . I must dream . . . and I must write.

As soon as she reached her apartment she tore off her coat and raced to turn on her computer. She fumbled in the coat pocket for the crumpled order slip and opened it up to read the scribbled dream fragment, the one she had almost forgotten.

She sat at her desk and furiously began writing her dream recollections, pounding on the keyboard as fast as she could. Suddenly she stopped typing and held her breath, listening.

Someone was knocking at the door.

Owl Man delivers the Agatha Christie to Jasmine ...

The knocking stopped as Jasmine approached the door. She looked through the peephole, but did not see anyone. She listened but heard only the sound of her own breathing. Poe's *Raven* began to fill her mind. She brought her fingers to her lips to keep from saying the well-remembered rhymes aloud. She peered again but there was no one there. She pulled the door ajar, keeping the chain in place. No one. As she closed the door she looked down and there espied a little rectangular box. She fully opened the door, looked up and down the hall, bent down, and picked up a handsome wooden box, inlaid, with a most artful pattern.

Jasmine locked the door and brought the box to her writing table. Her mind offered up only one possibility of its contents. She raised the top, so precisely fitted it took only one hand, and yes, there it was.

The Agatha Christie.

She understood Owl Man's curious delivery. She must write with this pen; *this* pen, not the computer. And he left so she could commence at once without interruption.

And so she would.

And so she did.

Owl Man and Heron Man have provided this pen for you because they would not go against what the pen itself has written in your hand. While each has used the pen many times, they are not accustomed to providing the pen to a character in what they themselves are writing. This is a first. It is because of the dreams, of course, and your own deep desire, which has not gone unnoticed. Your first task, Jasmine, is to essay how the admonition of your dream to "tell the truth" can be used to good effect in bringing about the success of the plan that has been so far developed. Be assured, Jasmine, that doing so will bring you rewards you cannot yet imagine. But before you begin, it will be necessary for you to dream again, so lay your head upon your pillow and let yourself fall into sleep.

Jasmine was blinking, as if trying to remove dust from her eyes. But there was nothing in her eyes. Yet, as she blinked, her foggy vision cleared and she looked at the blue lines on the page and the pen in her hand, jolting then fully awake.

She read what was before her. She could claim no authorship, yet realized it was she that had written out the words even if they were dictates of some mysterious writer using her hand, using Owl Man's special pen. She took what she read as instruction, and though by nature rebellious, she felt now only the pull of sleep. She set the pen back into its boxy home, and went straight for her pillow.

Jasmine remembers her dream ...

Perhaps it was because she spent too much time brushing her teeth before bed. Perhaps it was *the Agatha Christie* and its unnerving effect on her. Or was it Owl Man's ghostly presence outside her door that evening? It may even have been, we must admit, the after-image *within her own body* of Edgar Allen Poe's haunting poem, of its having "come to mind" in such a physical way, up through the pipes and membranes of her body, into consciousness.

Most likely it was a combination of these things.

In any event, "it" was the difficulty Jasmine had getting to sleep once her head hit the pillow. "It" was also the strangely turbulent night's dreaming she underwent—on this night, of all nights. Never had Jasmine been so primed, so ready, so eager to dream. And never had dreams seemed so elusive, slippery, beyond reach.

The next day she could scarcely say she had dreamed at all, in the usual sense of the word—visual stories with a dramatic structure. No. Throughout all those hours of fitful slumber she lay as if tantalized by vaporous images—as one pursued by smoke in a wind.

Faces would drift past, pulsating into and out of being. Owl Man certainly. Yet his was not so much a face as a presence, throughout the night. Tully appeared as well. Also, she caught the flash of a black-crowned night heron, if she remembered correctly. The Agatha Christie even made an appearance, in all its taunting glory—she saw it briefly, scribbling on its own, in mid-air, attached to no hand at all but driven by some invisible force. Once she could almost discern some of the words streaming from its nib, something about . . . *fluid* . . . *torment* . . . *the shape of an egg* . . . ah! She couldn't catch it.

At five-thirty in the morning she gave up trying to sleep. She pulled herself out of bed and shuffled into the bathroom, turning on the dimmer switch at a low setting. She wanted to avoid bright light so soon after waking.

What a night! She looked at herself in the mirror, glumly, as if she herself were responsible for the lack of clear dreams. She was wondering if she had failed Owl Man and Heron Man, the Agatha Christie, even in some bizarre way, Fex and

Coo.

Finally resigned to her empty dream-net, she began to brush her teeth. Bubbles of foam were beginning to dribble down her chin when it hit her.

“Oh, my God!” she spurted aloud. “The dream! Now I remember!”

Quickly she rinsed her mouth, dried her chin and went to her writing desk. Pausing momentarily, she wondered, *What now?* Should she grab a pencil, start her computer or take out the daunting Agatha Christie? She opted for the pencil. The magic fountain pen was too much for her just now. For the moment she only needed to catch this image, before losing it to daylight’s wakeful chores.

She sat down, reached for a pad and pencil and began writing as fast as she could, scarcely looking at the paper. Whereas the Mont Blanc had produced ceremonial, almost hieratic, calligraphy, at this moment her workaday No. 2 pencil was just skipping helter-skelter across the pad:

Snake ... big ... not poison... bank... Ling ... Jolene ... little snakes all over ... bucket of water... spilled... jingling... donuts... Hare Krishna... end.

She dated it and gave it a name: “Ling-snake dream.”

Jasmine stopped writing. When she closed her eyes she could still see the snake, or its after-impression. But it was not crawling, it was swirling, breaking up into pieces, coalescing, looking her in the eye, disappearing into the distance. Opening her eyes again, Jasmine felt like she had been peering into a living kaleidoscope.

She shivered, having forgotten to put on her robe. She got up, pulled on the terrycloth garment and set a cup of strong espresso to brewing—double. She held her hands over the small, steaming machine as it exuded the dark potent liquid.

Once back at her desk, Jasmine opened up the elegant rectangular box, with some trepidation. She removed the lid, and looked inside. There it lay: the Agatha Christie. For a moment she had a strange fantasy. She recalled the old vampire movies, where the vampire, dressed in a tuxedo, manages to slip back into the coffin just before the rays of the rising sun strike the elegant but dusty wooden box.

Curious that such a fantasy should come to her, she thought. After all, the Agatha Christie was not a vampire, it was a fountain pen. Still, it did have the serpentine clip on its cap, with a red ruby for an eye. And she had thought of blood when she first saw the brown ink flowing from it. And the pen definitely had a dream-life of its own, springing out of the darkness, working its magic, then going back to lie in its little wooden coffin.

She shook her head and picked up the pen. Vampires or not, she was determined to use the Agatha Christie to transcribe her dream notes into her journal. As she opened the journal she made a mental note to look for a better notebook, something with more elegant paper, bound in leather, perhaps.

Finally, after what she knew was deliberate waffling and delay, she began to write:

I am standing outside Ling Bank. It is daytime. I see an enormous, iridescent snake crawling along the sidewalk and into the bank. The snake has geometrical markings on its back, as if drawn there. I can't believe how long it is. Thirty feet? Forty? It disappears inside the building.

Jasmine paused to recall the next image, then continued writing.

Next, I am inside the building with the snake. People are staring at it, as if frozen. Jolene is talking in slow motion, but no words come out. A guard grabs a bucket of water (who knows where the water came from?) and empties it on the snake. It's as if he's trying to scare, dissolve or drive away the snake.

But the water has a strange effect. Once it touches the big snake, the water turns into many little snakes, which start crawling all over the building.

Surprisingly, I am not frightened. I pick up one of the little snakes. Then Owl Man is standing next to me. I hand him the baby snake. He smiles at me, then at the snake. The baby snake whispers something to Owl Man. I can't make out what it is, but I think the baby snake is speaking English. Then Owl Man laughs.

At this point I hear a jingling sound and some Hare Krishnas come in the

lobby. One of them is carrying a large box of donuts. [End of dream.]

The dream was longer than Jasmine had remembered, additional details coming to her as she wrote. She read over the dream transcript and mused for a few moments. Then she carefully cleaned the nib and shaft of the Mont Blanc, and placed it back in its inlaid box. She noticed her heartbeat had slowed considerably, as if she had been meditating.

Jasmine wondered what to do next. Suddenly she picked up the phone and dialed Owl Man's number. She looked at the clock: 7:05 AM. Was it too early to call? Too bad. She heard the burbling dial tone and a click. Owl Man's voice came on the line. He obviously had not been asleep.

"Hello, Owl," she said softly. "How did you sleep last night?"

"Good morning, Jasmine, I've been waiting for your call. Well, I hardly slept at all. How about you?"

"Same here. Did you dream?"

"Not much. I was thinking about you all night. I did have one dream though, about a snake."

"Hmmm" was all Jasmine could think of to say.

Owl Man was quiet for a moment.

"Jasmine?" he asked.

"Yes?"

"Did *you* dream?"

"Yes," Jasmine replied. "I did."

Jasmine follows her dream—to Ling Bank ...

Jasmine's dream took her to Ling Bank. She'd never been there before, preferring Key Bank, catty-corner to where she now found herself. But, she'd promised to follow the dream, so here she was. She looked down at the sidewalk, half-expecting to see the snake. She knew it would not be there of course, but she also knew, as Owl Man had clued her, that it was her task to imagine the snake's presence and its slithering through the door she was now holding ajar. She stepped inside, turned about and held the door open, as the imagined snake in the dream was quite long.

Joe Dupuis, the guard on duty, watched the woman at the door holding it open, but no one came through. Finally, she turned and stepped in a few paces and stopped. Her behavior struck Joe as a bit odd, so he'd keep an eye on her. He imagined himself fully responsible for the safe-keeping of the bank's treasures and had performed heroically in doing so, even though he'd never been called upon to do anything but watch. But he had an active fantasy life and his exploits catalogued there would fill volumes. Fortunately, there were no actual volumes filled. Still, as he eyed the charming woman approaching the first customer kiosk, his mind began racing, and his arms unfolded and he stood ready to act, his arms slowly falling to his side as he made preparations for any eventuality.

Meanwhile, Jasmine had noticed his upping and downing her, feeling a bit of disgust at yet another male's penchant for the old up-and-down and in-and-out as the limit of their interest in whatever female was in view. She could tell at once that this guard was an ass-man, not a leg-guy, or a breast-pup. This observation caused her only to sway herself a bit more than usual as she made her way into the depths of the bank, not quite knowing what to do, but certain that something would present itself.

Jasmine looked at the teller's windows. She saw Sal, and Sal looked away at once. Her gaze turned to the woman in the window next to him. She stepped up.

"Are you Jolene?" Jasmine's question prompted that sort of toothy smile that is reflexive and meaningless. Jasmine focused on the bright and perfect teeth, and recalled the image in her dream. The mouth began to move but no words escaped,

and the woman seemed unfazed. Jasmine turned away and walked toward the guard. She closed her eyes for a moment and when she opened them she saw the guard emptying a pail of water on the snake that had come to a stop along the bank of teller's windows. As in the dream she saw the little ones emerge and scurry in all directions. Sal continued his fumbling with papers; Jolene continued her toothy silent pronouncements.

As Jasmine bent down to pick up one of the baby snakes, one with pink and yellow stripes alternating with wider stripes of green, she saw Owl Man's distinctive white tennis shoes next to her. As in the dream, she gave him the baby snake. He smiled at her as he put the little snake to his ear.

The Hare Krishnas' came in with tambourines and finger-cymbals, breaking the silence, which was no surprise to Jasmine. Nor was she surprised by the wide smile the lead devotee seemed to be giving Sal, who had turned to watch. In fact, little was surprising her these days. Not that she understood what was happening or how what she was doing here had anything to do with the planned heist. Owl Man's laughter caught her ear and as she turned to look at him, he gave her that owly grin, making her giggle like a twittering school-girl eyeing the latest jock.

Jasmine became aware of an idea forming in her mind, inchoate still, as if something were creeping out of a fog. Gradually it took shape and it prompted her to return to Jolene's window. Jolene was still smiling and talking without sound. In front of Jolene was a stack of bills she had been banding.

"Thank you Jolene, I greatly appreciate this." She reached for the bills and with a flourish opened her handbag and dropped them inside. Jolene's head bobbed up and down as if saying, "My pleasure."

Jasmine turned and took Owl Man's arm, and with a bow to the Hare Krishnas, the couple took their leave of Ling Bank, holding the door open for a rather long while, for which Joe Dupuis, the security guard, had no explanation. He could only give a blank stare to Jolene's sudden return of voice—a scream.

"What the hell? Where did it go? Sal, did you take—?" She stopped in mid-sentence, rubbing her fingers across her brow as if a headache had sailed in without warning.

Jasmine finds some extra cash ...

Sal was trying to calm down Jolene, who was nearly hysterical and flapping her arms about. But Jasmine and Owl Man were already crossing the street, half-skipping through a gap in the traffic, and were approaching the Tully's entrance.

Heron Man sat at a corner table in the back, half-hidden by a bold new floral display Tully had brought in to celebrate Gwennie McTavish's birthday.

"Well, how did it go?" Heron Man was eager to hear Jasmine's breathless frontline report, followed by Owl Man's wrap-up commentary and overview. They were like a popular news-anchor couple, the gorgeous young beauty with oodles of body, brains and energy teamed up with the elderly, statesmanlike veteran who had seen it all. *She* was always described as "vibrant and dynamic," whereas *he* was always "avuncular," like an affectionate uncle.

"I can't believe what just happened, I mean, I don't *know* what just happened, but it was ... fantastic." Jasmine was flustered. She was even blushing, which was rare for her. She continued searching for the right word. "It was ... phantasmagorical ... like a flying carpet ... a joyride." And in a flight of poetic license she finished by saying, "It was *enchantabulistic*."

"Nice word, Jasmine. Did you just make that up?"

"Well, you try it, Heron. Haven't you ever tried to describe a dream but there were no words for the experience?"

"Of course I have, Jasmine. I'm getting the picture. Sounds like a weird experience."

"Oh, it was indeed. Somehow it reminds me of *Le bateau ivre*."

"Rimbaud? So it was a Rimbaud-esque experience, as if you were on a drunken boat?"

"Yes, Heron, precisely. Now will you stop teasing me?"

Heron Man was glad to be with only Jasmine and Owl Man, glad that Fex was not here today—knock on wood!—because without a doubt Fex would have dismissed this entire exchange as "bullshit." Or he would have ranted on about the "Ouija board." Or he would have tried to take credit for the whole thing and run the

whole show, ruining it in the process.

Heron man leaned closer. He didn't want the entire Tully's crowd listening in, not that anything was audible above the clatter of coffee cups, hissing steam nozzles and Jimmy's constant slamming of the espresso filter against the rubber-rimmed opening in the counter.

"So, you think your dream is connected to what happened in there?"

"Definitely, Heron. I don't know how, but it was as if I was *still dreaming*. Yet there's no doubt it was really happening."

"What's your read on it, Owl Man?" Heron Man turned his attention to Owl, who had been momentarily distracted by some wisps of hair trailing across Jasmine's cheek. He lightly blew them aside, then cleared his throat.

"Yes, I agree with Jasmine. There was definitely a dream-like quality in the bank just now. You know, like those dreams so many people have, the ones where they're trying to run but their feet just won't move?"

"Sure, lots of people have dreams like that."

"Well, that's what it was like, for Jolene, at least. She was talking—I mean her mouth was moving—but no words were coming out. And when she dropped the bundles of cash into Jasmine's purse, it seemed like an *exterior catalyzation phenomenon!*"

Heron Man nodded. He'd read about that catalytic phenomenon somewhere, though he wasn't really sure what it meant. So he followed a different tack.

"Cash? Jolene *gave* Jasmine some cash?"

"Well, yes and no. She gave the cash, without really giving it. It's a paradox. That was when the dream-state seemed to culminate in a climax of dramatic tension, as it were. She dropped the cash into Jasmine's bag and we walked out like Sunday strollers in the park."

"How much is there?" Heron Man asked.

"I really don't know. Jasmine, dear, would you care to hazard a guess?"

Jasmine picked up her bag, hefted it a couple of times and said, "Well, it feels about two pounds heavier than when we walked in. And I'm pretty sure those were bundles of hundred dollar bills she was wrapping up."

“Hmmm.” Owl Man was calculating. “If one bill weighs one gram, and there are 454 grams to the pound, and let’s say there were two pounds of bills, that would be 908 bills times \$100 each. So we’re talking around \$90,000 dollars, give or take.

Heron Man was stunned.

“This sounds like real money. Or is it Monopoly money? What the hell is it? And how in the world do we calculate this? Have we just robbed a bank, or have we just dreamed something?”

The questions hovered in the air like hawks riding thermals. At first, no one said anything. Then Owl Man spoke up.

“Well, the first thing to keep in mind is that, yes, it is *dream money*.”

“OK. I get that, Owl. But it is also real?”

Owl Man paused, took a breath, then intoned solemnly, “Yes, it is also *real money*.”

Jasmine stood up suddenly. She wrapped her arms around herself tightly and was shaking. Finally she whispered, “God, I can’t believe this is happening.”

Jolene misses the cash ...

“Sal, where’s the money? The bills I was banding ... they’re gone. Do you hear me? Gone!”

“Last I saw, you were counting the money, Jolene. How can it just be gone?” Sal shrugged his shoulders and upturned his palms as if to show he didn’t have the missing money.

Joe, did anyone just leave? ”

“No, Jolene. I don’t think so.” Joe was rubbing his forehead.

“You don’t *think* so? Joe, we pay you to *guard* this place. Damn it, did you see someone or not?”

“Feels like I blanked out or something, but I’m not sure. My head feels funny. You must have seen something.” Joe threw the statement back at her.

“I didn’t see anything at all. But the money’s gone. How the hell are we going to explain this?” Jolene was in full froth.

“*We?*” Sal’s question hung in the air. “You mean “you,” don’t you? How are *you* going to explain this? Right? I didn’t have my mitts on the money, Jolene, you did. I didn’t see Joe counting even a nickel. It’s you, Jolene, you’ve got to explain it.”

“Joe, call it in. We’ve been robbed.”

“Isn’t going to be very convincing, Jolene. We got nothing to report. No witnesses. We didn’t see anyone. We didn’t hear anything. How can we be robbed if we didn’t see anything?”

“Jolene, have you looked in your purse?” Sal’s question was put softly and without a hint of accusation.

“What the hell are you implying, Sal? You think I’m a thief? Right here in

front of you guys? You can't be serious, Sal."

"They are going to search us, Jolene. Best we do it ourselves."

Jolene picked up her outsized alligator-skin purse, flipped it open and thrust it in Sal's direction. Sal leaned over and looked into the capacious bag.

"Jolene, I think you have some explaining to do."

Owl Man explains transportal repositioning ...

“It’s called transportal repositioning, my dear. We even have an acronym for it. TPR.” Owl Man was not whispering; but he was so close to Jasmine’s ear that she jerked away at the sudden loudness emanating from him.

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean, Owlie? First, the money’s in my bag and then it isn’t. Where’d it go?”

“I should think at the moment that Jolene’s preoccupied, trying to explain a sudden influx of cash. Think of it as a heist in reverse, a kind of psychological preparation for inexplicable events at a noble institution where such events are intolerable. It shall serve our purpose.” Owl Man stroked his beard, repositioned his cap, and adjusted his glasses as if getting ready to launch into further explanation.

Heron Man nodded his head in agreement with Owl Man’s oration, interrupted by Jasmine’s voice now taking on a shrillness that prompted him to shift his gaze from Owl Man to the lady in question.

“You sure you didn’t take the money, Heron?” Jasmine’s hands-on-hips posture and her chinning into Heron’s face right up to his nose startled him. Heron Man mumbled something that was lost in the din of the Tully’s afternoon crowd.

“I can’t believe what’s going on here. I want it back, Owl. Screw Jolene! You hear me? No money. Well, hmm, then, you know, no ... no ... whatever!” Jasmine’s outburst and her sudden upending her purse, its contents spilling across the table, brought everyone’s attention to bear on her. The sudden silence was breathtaking; everyone stopped breathing, half-sentences hanging in the air. Jasmine was not a woman to ignore at any time, but when she got her steam up, even the espresso machines were no match.

Owl Man crossed his arms, tilted his head, a broadening smile spreading across his face as his “broad” went into full freak-out.

Jasmine’s scream into the hush-up brought people to their feet, cups

upended, and Tully from the kitchen, lurching into the pandemonium, lacking only a whip to complete the general impression of a circus ringmaster gone mad.

“Jasmine! Jasmine, my pretty, what’s....”

“Pretty, my ass, Tully. I’m outta here!” Jasmine raked the contents of her purse back home, slung the old leather bag over her shoulder, and stomped toward the door.

“Wait, Jasmine, I ain’t got no girls, you can’t leave now.” Tully’s bellow turned her back around.

“You ain’t got a lot of things, Tully, and this is no time for a list. But you ain’t got me no more and that goes for you too, Owl Bird.” Jasmine’s gesture left little doubt of her opinion of Owl Man as she swept out the door.

Owl Man leaned over to Heron. “I must say, I find this pecuniary side of my fair lady rather delicious. What do you think, Heron?” *Scene Owl Man’s animal response to Jasmine’s departure ...*

At first Heron Man did not reply. Instead, he glanced in the direction Jasmine had fled, the way a sailor in the rigging regards a passing storm. Then he turned to face Owl Man, who had a strange look on his face. It was that uncanny “animal thing” that Heron Man had witnessed many times, where Owl’s eyebrows seemed to extend upward, not as in arching but as if the individual hairs were growing, taking on the appearance of feathers. And the skin on his nose took on the hard sheen and sharpness of an owl’s beak, fit for tearing tender flesh. Though still undeniably human, Owl Man nevertheless exuded a fierce animal quality, which seemed composed of two equal parts: utter mercilessness balanced with total equanimity.

“Here’s your beloved Jasmine, then, run off like the wind,” Heron Man finally said, “and you sit there like a Celtic lord, waiting for the tankard and the harp. What’s got into you, man?”

Owl Man, unperturbed, clucked under his breath.

“Oh, don’t you be worryin’ now, my fine-feathered friend.” Owl had slipped into his brogue. “She’s gone, I’ll grant ye that. But what you’re forgettin’ at the moment is how sweet our peace-makin’ is gonna be.”

A semblance of normality was returning to the coffee shop. Tully had returned to his office and the usual clamor was rising. Stunned into silence only a few moments ago, the crowd was covering the breach caused by Jasmine’s dramatic exit, the way the sea closes over the path of a diving whale. Customers squawked and circled like sea birds. Jimmy slammed the filter cup like a harpooner. After nearly floundering, the good ship *Tully* had righted herself.

Yet something was different.

“Do you mark the atmosphere in here, Owl Man? It’s the same, but it’s also different, somehow. Is this another side-effect of ‘trans-portal repositioning’? Like Jasmine’s furious departure?”

“That’s exactly what it is, Heron. Yes, I’ve seen these effects many times, and frankly, the day couldn’t have gone better.”

“You’re calling it a success, then, but I’m thinking it’s a disturbance!”

“Oh yes, a disturbed atmosphere it is indeed! That’s the whole point. When you are drawn through a trans-portal repositioning event, everything is, well, *shifted*, shall we say? And naturally, when things resume their so-called ‘normal’ state, there’s much that’s bound to be different. Emotions, memories, feelings, things like that.”

“It even *smells* different in here!”

“Yes. The olfactory centers are particularly affected by what we call the “subluxation effect.” It’s a kind of structural displacement phenomenon, similar in a way to a chiropractic condition, hence the name.”

“A kind of ‘Humpty-Dumpty’ effect?”

“Exactly. Things never go back precisely the same way they were pre-TPR.

“I suppose that’s the risk with any creative change, then. You can’t really predict every outcome.”

“Oh, Heavens, no! That’s why it’s so delightful, and, I admit, a bit risky. Creativity is definitely not for the risk-averse.”

“So, if I understand what you’re saying, your present hypothesis is that this TPR effect will be sufficiently powerful to provide the cover we need to pull off the heist.”

“Precisely.” Owl Man was in a precise mood today.

“OK,” said Heron Man. “Very good. Then perhaps you can answer this question: What in Hell’s name, precisely, are we are going to do about the heist?”

Jasmine's diary entry ...

The “peacemaking” Owl Man had referred to was just as delicious as he had predicted, and in no time the lovers were back to their routines.

When Jasmine’s next day-off came around, and the day’s chores were done, she couldn’t wait to open her diary. Owlie had gone to the library to pick up some books, and she relished her time alone. *Jaz-Time*, she called it, and she intended to write in her diary. Any kind of writing was a reflective process for her, but there was something about the diary—the patient journal entry—that freed and relaxed her in ways that even the Agatha Christie did not.

She had briefly considered using the Agatha Christie but decided against it. The spooky Mont Blanc left her agitated whenever she used it, her heart sometimes pounding, her mind strangely activated. No, no magic pen tonight.

After a hot shower, she slipped into her thick terrycloth robe, wrapped a towel around her head and sat down at her computer desk with a cup of nighttime tea.

She took a sip, then began to write.

Dear Diary, or Whoever the Hell You Are ...

What a day! It started quietly enough. Owlie was soundly sleeping next to me as I rose early for the morning shift. Traffic was light, the weather slightly overcast, a normal day, or so it seemed.

But when I got to the coffee shop, Tully was in a royally foul mood, like a Scottish lord with gout. His face looked like the sky before a tornado, turbulent and opaque. Garish yellows and greens played across his forehead and his eyebrows danced like bolts of lightning. Then his whole countenance darkened and he began ... spinning ... faster and faster, sucking into his moody vortex everything that wasn’t nailed or bolted fast.

Such an uproar! And over what? Cups? Coffee cups? The man was flat-out crazy!

For a while I thought of calling the cops, but that would have made things

worse.

Then my darling Owl Man came to the rescue. He and Heron Man galloped into the shop on their white horses and Owlie, bless his heart, walked straight into the lion's den and tamed the unruly beast. And with what, pray tell, did he tame him? With that silly brogue he puts on. It's such an obvious affectation, as when an English actor plays an American and you know their tongue is twisting into knots. Yet somehow it works. No sooner does Tully hear the archaic, stilted tones and cadences of the Highland dialect, than he's ready to don his kilt, inflate the pipes and pop the stopper on a cask of Lagavulin!

But that wasn't enough excitement for the morning. Who walks into the shop but Fex, the big bumbling blowhard himself? He's as crazy as Tully is, with his ascot tie and that ridiculous jumpsuit he wears. He would look like Jack LaLanne except for the outsized kettle-drum of a belly.

Speaking of Jack LaLanne, he finally died, poor dear ... but at the age of 96! When he was 80 he pulled a string of seventeen rowboats through the water with a rope in his teeth—while swimming in a canal! I guess there's something to be said for that kind of craziness.

But Fex! What was his problem? He almost scared me more than Tully. Tully's just a volatile Scot, but Fex is a fruitcake! Maybe Owlie should certify him, because he's certainly certifiable!

And what was the big brouhaha this time? Fexie's afraid Heron is going to write him out of the script! Poor darling!

And here, I realize, we come to my big beef of the day.

This damned heist, as they keep calling it. What's wrong with "bank robbery"? Or even "bank job"? I would even go for "knocking off a bank." Is that too plain? Or how about "felony" or "armed robbery"? After all, Foxy keeps bragging about her stupid "Tommy gun," as if she even knew where the trigger was. Mr. Moto has to load it for her.

But it always has to be a "heist." That's Owl Man's literary conceit, the darling. Fex, of course, would call it a "friggin' heist." That's Fex's idea of vocabulary.

And they keep telling me, “Relax, Jasmine, it’s just fiction.” But I’m not so sure. When the big bad wolf imagined he was going to eat the three little pigs, in the children’s book, he could see one of the pigs roasting on a spit, and he drooled and licked his chops. Then he saw the roasted pig laid out on a platter with an apple in its mouth. Finally it was just a pile of bones on the platter and he was cleaning his teeth, his belly bulging and full.

Well? Didn’t that satisfy a kind of hunger? Was his imagination so negligible that the wolf derived no satisfaction at all from his feast? Does the mind never feed the body? Are we really only blood and guts?

I know I’m young, and I don’t know as much as I’d like, but these are things I wonder about.

Anyhow, this “heist,” or bank robbery, still bothers me.

When Owlie comes home from the library tonight, I’m going to talk to him about it again. Hmmm. I notice I said “comes home.” Is this Owlie’s home? Is this where he belongs? Is this his nest? He’s so damned independent. But then, I am too. Strange, I’m missing him already.

The truth is, Diary or Whoever You Are, I don’t know what’s real any more. I used to think I knew, but now I’m not sure of anything. Feels like I’ve said this before. Is it becoming my “mantra”? Maybe if I chant it ...

Jasmine broke off her writing at the sound of a key in the door. Owl Man was “home” from the library. Quickly she saved the document and put the computer to sleep. She didn’t want him reading her diary. God forbid!

She got up and tiptoed to the door just in time to embrace Owl Man as he walked in with an armload of books.

“Owl! You’re home! I’m so glad to see you!” And she threw her arms around him.

“Jasmine, my love!” Owl reciprocated her hug with a warm kiss, but at the cost of his armload of books, which tumbled to the floor at their feet.

His arms were still around Jasmine, who by this time was starting to make her cooing sounds. Owl looked down at the heap of books, since it was his habit to pay attention to random occurrences, chance configurations and “accidents.”

One heavy tome had landed on its back, open to a page with a medieval woodcut. It depicted a “king” and a “queen” in a hexagonal bath of hot water. Above them, and descending, appeared a dove with an olive branch in its beak.

Owl Man gazed at the illustration for a moment, then resumed his hugging. As he began hooting softly into her ear—this was their private form of love-play—he murmured, “Looks like we’re in the hot bath, my love.”

Shortly thereafter the King and the Queen retired to their bedchamber.

Later, after the bedsprings had quieted down, a strange humming sound emanated from the ornate box in which the Agatha Christie lay sleeping—at least one would assume it was sleeping. But the eerie sound suggested something else ... a wakefulness, perhaps, a stirring, something alive.

Whatever that something was, its activity was lost on the two lovers, who had both plunged into an unusually vivid series of dreams that kept them busy until morning light.

Agent Pederson grills Jolene ...

Jolene's high wattage display was a non-event for Agent Pederson.

"Madam," he said, "before you get all uppity on me, please bear in mind that our office is quite aware of and has successfully prosecuted a number of high level, as well as low level—well, all levels to be frank—crimes, yes, crimes resulting from what you people call *creative* accounting, yes, creative accounting. So, best you just keep quiet now except for simple answers, yes, simple answers to my simple questions."

Pederson gestured for Jolene to take a seat at the table in the staff room. He set Jolene's purse between them as he sat opposite her and began his inquiry.

"Now then, how much cash is there in this purse of yours?"

"Ninety thousand dollars." Jolene reached for her purse as if by reflex but was stopped by Pederson's palm up.

"And how do you know this?"

"Well, it would seem to be the same stack of bills I had counted out just before the ..." Jolene fell into stuttering and stammering as if her brain had suddenly gone off the tracks and was doing the herky-jerky off-rail.

"Before *what* ma'am?"

Pederson's focus brought Jolene back on track and she chugged ahead. "I don't properly know what to call it. It was like everything stopped, like, you know, when you pause a video you are watching, when you put it on hold. And then when you come back, it's all normal, as if nothing had happened, except it's like a scene had gone missing. Or something like that. I don't remember, and I don't have any idea how the money got into my purse. But the bizarre thing is that the books are balanced. That cash should *not* be in my purse—or anywhere for that matter. Nothing is missing but there is this *extra* ninety-thousand."

“Extra?”

“Yes,” Jolene said. “There is no missing ninety-thousand. There is an *extra* ninety, and I can assure you there is no creative accounting tricks used at Ling Bank. We pride ourselves on the Three Ts.”

“The three Ts?”

“Yes: Truth. Trust. Transparency. That’s Ling Bank. That’s our way.”

“I see. Have you ever experienced this kind of blank-out before? Or perhaps a fainting? A swoon by chance?”

“A swoon? Whatever do you mean?”

“Well, were you aware of any strong emotional state before the pause button was pushed?”

“Mr. Pederson, we are not given to emotional outbursts at Ling Bank. No swoons, fits, or any other such thing. We are Calm. Capable. Caring. The Three Cs we call it.”

“I see. So, in this regard, what is your relationship with Sal?”

“Inspector Pederson, I must object to what I sense are implications ... ”

“Agent. Agent Pederson. We will get on better *Miss* Baker-Tomlins if you answer the question, and not come back at me with a question or veer off into directions of your choosing.”

“Mr. Pederson—”

“Agent Pederson, please.”

“Agent Pederson, then. I am Sal’s supervisor, that is, his boss. He reports to me.”

“And yours?”

“My what?”

“Your boss. Who is *your* boss?”

“Well that would be Mr. Ian Hamilton. He is a Vice-President of Ling Bank. My favorite, actually.”

“And have you notified Mr. Ian Hamilton of the peculiar circumstances here?”

“Well, no. I have not. I have not seen the need, as nothing is missing; the books are balanced as always, all regulations have been met. There is nothing—”

“Yes, well, that is what *you* say, but this is a matter now of bringing in our specialists to determine what is what. In the meantime, I must impound your purse, and I must ask you to stay until I have questioned the others about these Three E’s.

“Three E’s?”

“Yes, we seem to have a case of *easy, extra, earnings*. Suspicious at the very least wouldn’t you say.”

“Am I under arrest then?”

“No, I would not say that. I would say you are voluntarily agreeing to cooperate with the initial phases of our investigation.”

“Yes, yes, of course. May I get some things from my purse—you know, to freshen up? This has been quite an ordeal.” Jolene reached for her bag, only to be stopped by another of Pederson’s palm-up gestures.

“I’ll open your bag if you please and then I must make an inventory of any items you remove. One never knows what has been involved. The criminal mind can be so clever, if you catch my drift.”

As Agent Pederson stood up, he brought out a second note pad and laid it beside the one he’d been writing in. He placed his pen next to it, aligning it just so. He then reached for the bag and pulled it close, undoing the strap, opening it wide.

He stared in silence, bent down and looked more closely, his head nearly in the purse.

“Miss Baker-Tomlins. You may be in more trouble here than you realize.”

“Whatever can you mean by that?” Jolene stood, leaned over and looked in her bag, emitting a loud shriek.

The stack of cash was gone.

Sal buttonholes Owl Man ...

Heron Man and Owl Man stepped out of the thick coffee atmosphere of Tully's, into the chill Seattle breeze. Though not far from Elliott Bay, with its salty tang of fish and barnacles, the two writers were mostly greeted by the fumes of truck exhaust and rubber that held sway over the city.

Heron Man went his separate way and Owl Man was turning to leave, when a stealthy figure standing in a doorway whispered to him.

"Pssst! Hey! Over here!"

When he heard the whisper, Owl Man, who was carrying his horn-handled Scottish walking stick, hefted the gnarled shaft to get a stronger grip. No stranger himself to waterfront brawls, from his earlier days, he reflexively raised it like a weapon until he saw who was whispering to him. It was Sal. Owl Man lowered the stick and relaxed his grip.

"Hey, Owl Man! You got a minute? Come down to Dunkin' Donuts with me."

"What's wrong with Tully's, Sal?"

"No, no, not Tully's. Not right now anyways. I don't want 'em to see me talkin' to anybody. Let's go down there!"

Sal resembled a *film noir* gangster, wearing a dark wool overcoat, a scarf and a grey felt fedora. He cast nervous glances up and down the street, adding to the James Cagney effect.

Once inside the donut shop, Sal didn't waste any time.

"I don't get it, Owl Man. I seen the cash myself. It was in Jolene's bag. Ninety grand. Now it's gone. But the weird thing is that *I was standin' next to her the whole time*. Unless the bag's got a false bottom or somethin' like that, I can't figure out what happened. It don't make sense."

"Where's Jolene now?"

"They got her down at the clink somewhere—'headquarters,' they call it, like in the movies. Could be McNeil Island, for all I know. Said they wanted her to take some 'personality tests' as part of their investigation. They better not hurt her!"

Sal was distraught, concerned for Jolene's welfare, even protective.

"And you say the money's gone?"

“Are you listenin’ to me, Owl Man? I already said—it ain’t there. It disappeared. Evaporated. Went bye-bye!”

“Yes, yes, Sal, I hear you. That must have been quite a shock, especially for poor Jolene.”

“Yeah, she’s really upset. I couldn’t stand it, but there was nothin’ I could do, what with the cops right there.”

“Well, this certainly adds to the excitement, doesn’t it, Sal?”

“Excitement? Are you kiddin’ me? They got Jolene down there, on the hot seat no less. No tellin’ what she’s gonna say.”

“What do you mean, ‘say,’ Sal?”

“I mean I don’t know if she’s gonna crack or not, ‘cause of that thing at the club.”

“Club?”

“C’mon, Owl Man, wake up! The club. I told you about it already. The gambling joint. Where she lost big time and couldn’t pay and they beat her up. I had to cover for her that day, remember? I don’t know if this missing dough thing is connected or not. But there’s no tellin’ what she’ll say if they really put the heat on her.”

“Yes, that could be problematic, but it’s not exactly clear at the moment for whom it would be. Meanwhile, we have another mystery to clear up. I’d better call Jasmine. Will you excuse me, Sal?”

“What? Yeah, sure, go ahead, Owl.”

Owl Man walked to a corner of the donut shop and called Jasmine on his cell phone. He looked at Sal periodically as he talked, nodding and shaking his head. He finished the call and returned to sit across from Sal.

“Just as I thought,” Owl Man whispered to Sal. “She’s got it!”

“She’s got what?”

“She’s got the money. There’s \$180,000 cash in her purse.”

“Owl Man, look at me. This is me, Sal, your friend. Is it coming back to you yet? Do I look like a rube? Don’t try to pull a fast one on me, Owl Man. Now, what in the name of Jack Daniels is going on???”

Owl Man, distracted and amused by Sal's unexpected turn of phrase, nevertheless began to tell Sal the story of the recent experiments at Ling Bank with *transportal re-positioning*. He explained his hypothesis regarding the comings, goings and doublings of the mysterious \$90,000—probably due, he said, to what were called “transpersonal transportal multipliers” or TTMs.

“A hyper-time-space TTM would account—elegantly, I might add—for the doubling of the sums and the movements of cash between Jolene's and Jasmine's purses,” Owl Man intoned. “So, you see, the effects of subatomic space-time turbulence, also known as *quantum foam*, can be quite dramatic, if properly energized and directed—”

Owl Man had not gotten far into his tutorial on quantum physics, before Sal began drumming his fingers on the tabletop. Astuteness with math and numbers apparently correlated neither with patience nor with a love of scientific theory.

“I can't believe you go for that crap, Owl Man. Fex was right—you're full of shit. I had you figured for bein' smarter than that. Guess I was wrong. Maybe I'll go down to the dive around the corner and get me a beer with a head of *quantum foam* on it.”

“Mock me if you must, Sal, but the quantum foam you're so quick to deride just made a “deposit” of \$180,000 into Jasmine's handbag. And if you'd pay a little closer attention it might just result in a handsome payoff for you as well.”

“I don't know how I got mixed up in all this, Owl Man. It was bad enough when Fex and Coo and me had that little deal goin' and they decided ending it was key. Then you and Heron Man came onto the scene.”

Owl Man was undeterred by Sal's skepticism, and he finished his lecture on quantum physics with a flourish of enthusiasm, a virtual cheerleader for physics. But Sal was more confused, or more discouraged, than ever. Without a word, he stood up and slouched out of the donut shop. On the sidewalk he pulled the collar of his overcoat up, pulled the brim of his fedora down, and slipped away like a ghost ship beating into the wind.

Owl Man watched him disappear into traffic, then got up to inspect the donuts on display. He selected a variety of his favorites and left the shop, swinging his

walking stick in one hand and the white Dunkin' Donuts bag in the other. To top it off, he was whistling.

After a quick stop at his favorite antiquarian bookstore, he drove straight to Jasmine's apartment. Like a conquering hero bringing home the bacon—to mix metaphors a bit—Owl Man presented Jasmine with a 1904 first-edition, gilt-lettered copy of *Dumbarton Castle: A Poem*, by Angus Stewart MacDuff, along with a sparkling white paper bag of donuts.

Jasmine laughed when she saw Owl Man's offerings.

"What are we celebrating?" she said, as she pulled him toward her.

In Jasmine's apartment, celebrating quantum foam ...

“Not just yet, my dear.” Owl Man took hold of the book he'd brought for Jasmine and opened it with care. “A few lines first from old MacDuff's word hoard will set the tone for the serious discussion we must have.”

“Owl—”

“Shhh, my sweet. Just listen.” Owl Man was in the center of the room. He did a slow turn and when he came round and faced Jasmine, he began; his stentorian chant reverberated around the room like a big-winged bird flapping its wings in slow motion.

*The great stones set upon one another
Hide the threads of connection, those strands of mystery
That time has wrought forever outside man's intentions
That time itself dare not reveal but to those minds
Likewise wrought in the piecing together of soul stones
Beyond, beyond the piping sounds calling kin to task*

“He knew, Jasmine. He knew. The stones of Dumbarton told him.” Owl Man came close to Jasmine and embraced her.

“You lost me, Owl. What did he know?” Jasmine's eyes were full of puzzlement as her lips quivered, looking into Owl Man's gaze.

“He's talking about what's happening with the money.” Owl Man's certainty did nothing to answer Jasmine's pleading eyes.

“Explain, big bird. It's just not obvious.”

Jasmine's perfume was beginning to turn Owl Man's mind to other things, but he got hold of himself and set himself to the task at hand.

“Jasmine, it's like this. Certain places at certain times spontaneously create portals where the underneath of things comes to the surface so to speak. People who have developed certain capacities can then be “visited” by these “forms.” And, to

some degree such people can interact with them to change the order of things in time, or in space, or in space-time. This is what happened when we were in Ling Bank. Time stopped for the others, but not for us. But then, as MacDuff knew, these things of the underneath can have their own intentionality—hence the doubling of the money in your purse now. We did not have anything to do with that; nor did either of us, or Heron Man, write it. It was written ‘underneath’ as it were. This can happen to writers, artists, dreamers.”

“I’m not sure, Owl Man. I do know that some funny things have happened when I write—particularly with that damned pen of yours. So I guess I sort of get it.”

“What we need to decide, and I think there is some urgency about it, is what to do next. I think we must meet with Heron at once. I’m not sure where this sense of urgency is coming from, but I trust it. It is perilous for us to ignore this. Tomorrow is an important day. I know it. Now please, give Heron a call and ask him to meet us at Tully’s as soon as he can get there. I need to write something in my computer. “Now, Jasmine. Now.”

A plan is hatched at Captain Jack's ...

Jasmine insisted that they hold the meeting with Heron Man in her favorite booth at Owl Man's favorite seafood restaurant—Captain Jack's Table, on the Seattle waterfront.

"Not Tully's," she said emphatically, "not tonight. Let's go to Captain Jack's. I'll call and reserve our booth." And she did.

When they arrived, Charmayne, the hostess, was ready for them with a cheerful greeting. As she showed the trio to the booth, she playfully nudged Jasmine in the ribs and gave her a knowing wink.

"What's this, Jasmine?" she said with broad sarcasm, "no seahawks tonight? Are these two landlubbers the only birds you could find?"

"Well, Mr. Heron does occasionally wade on the shore," Jasmine slyly replied, "but I'm afraid Mr. Owl here prefers his tree."

"Yes," rebutted Owl Man, "but he does occasionally dine on fish—though only the most succulent!" And with that, Owl too nudged Jasmine in the ribs, to which she responded with a mock tussle.

A festive mood prevailed, then, as Jasmine, the Heron and the Owl settled into the cozy, private booth. Charmayne took the orders, returned in a flash with drinks, and was gone. But the mood soon shifted as the purpose of the meeting rose to the surface, crowding out the jollity.

"Well, then," began Heron Man. "Why are we here?"

Owl Man cleared his throat, and Jasmine sat quietly. She had no intention of conducting this meeting about a phenomenon she couldn't remotely claim to understand.

"We're here, Heron," began Owl Man, "because something has come clear to me, and with a force that I am not inclined to override. It began on my way to Jasmine's this afternoon, when I stopped at my antiquarian bookstore to select a gift for this dear lady." Owl Man turned and looked at Jasmine with liquid warmth swimming in his eyes. He continued.

"The book is an antique Scottish tome that, on the surface, consists only of

standard, nineteenth-century poetry. But, as with so many esoteric volumes, there is a layer of quite *energetic* meaning that lies *underneath the words*, so to speak. At the same time, the meaning is inherent *in* them, and visible to all.”

“Must be quite a book,” noted Heron Man.

“Oh, yes, definitely.”

“What about this *energetic* meaning?”

“Well, I see you noticed that I too emphasized the word ‘energetic.’”

“Hmmm.”

“It’s something that resonates with those old alchemical formulas referring to the Philosopher’s Stone. You know—‘tis a cheap and comely thing; the more it is despised by fools, the more it is prized by the wise—that sort of thing.”

“I see. So, now we’re into alchemy. But this *is* about the heist, isn’t it?” Heron Man observed. He was naturally curious, but so far was withholding judgment. For her part, Jasmine sat rapt, but that was only partially due to Owl Man’s words. Other facets of his presence also engaged her attention—*sub-tabula*, as it were.

“Well, yes and no. Alchemists, of course, were derided as cheap magicians by later ages, and there certainly were some who resorted to tricks. What I saw, or felt, today could be dismissed as cheap magic, but I believe it has to do with something else. It’s more like the uncovering of a deeper layer of reality, a realm, as it were, where things are in creative flux.”

“Sounds like you’re talking about the *quantum foam* phenomenon again, where things come into and out of being.”

“Well, in fact it’s similar, yes, very similar. They may be related, for all I know. It will remain for scientists and scholars of the future to determine the exact parallels. But parallels they are, of that I am sure.”

“So, what you’re saying, Mr. Owlie,” Jasmine interjected, “is that this weird thing that happened with the money in my purse is similar to those weird experiments the physicists are doing?” She stated this in a declarative way, but her rising intonation left no doubt she was asking a question.

“In a word, yes. But there’s more.”

“Go on.” Jasmine and Heron Man uttered these exact words simultaneously,

as if their brain wave patterns had *synched* while they were “tuning in” to what Owl Man was saying. In fact, it was as if all *three* of their brains, or minds, or souls, were converging on the same pattern at the same point in time.

“I’ve been getting a very strong signal—a kind of subliminal prompt that comes to me like a ‘voice.’ Now I know that sounds crazy. For example, Fex’s mother, Foxy, also hears voices. But I don’t think she makes much of an effort to differentiate between the voices. She takes them all at face value, literally, so it often results in what sounds like ‘word salad,’ as the shrinks say. She’s at the mercy of her voices.”

“But you’re saying this is different,” said the Heron.

“Oh, definitely,” replied the Owl. “I’ve differentiated this voice from out of the standard background “noise” that plagues every modern psyche. This is an old voice, a deep voice. It is ancient, yet altogether of the present moment. I have even concluded that this voice has access to the future. It’s really a very remarkable experience.”

“Sounds like a muse or something,” offered Jasmine, “or a *daemon*.”

“Yes, yes, either one—or both. But it’s not the sort of thing I want to define too narrowly. I don’t think it cares much about our categories. It comes and goes as it pleases, like Lorca’s *duende*.”

At the mention of Lorca and the *duende*, Jasmine shivered, and her eyes brightened.

“But I’ve learned over the years to listen very carefully whenever it decides to appear. And today it showed up in a big way, speaking to me from within, or rather beneath, the words of MacDuff’s poem, *Dumbarton Castle*.”

Owl Man paused dramatically and sat wide-eyed, staring strangely at both Jasmine and Heron Man.

“No, this was nothing to dismiss,” he said with finality.

For a moment everyone was quiet, until Jasmine shook her hair suddenly, as if clearing her thoughts—hair and mind being somehow interwoven.

“Owlie, you said that tomorrow is ‘the day.’ What does that mean?”

“It means that tomorrow we must mobilize this energy, but this time for the

heist, in much the same way the ancients timed their actions by the phases of the moon, planting when the moon was new, and so forth.”

“It almost sounds like the money *wants* to be stolen, the way the seed *wants* insemination to take place,” Heron Man speculated.

“Very close, Heron Man, very close. But there’s a fine distinction here.”

“What is it, Owl?” Jasmine pressed her thigh against Owl Man’s.

“That’s a good way to put it: The money *wants* to be stolen. Or better yet: *desires*. The difference is that, in this case, the money doesn’t want to be *stolen*—it *desires to be harvested!*”

“Mr. Owl,” said Jasmine. “Do you realize what you’re saying? You’re saying that, while we’re sitting here at Captain Jack’s having this meeting, the money is sitting there at Ling Bank, and it’s, it’s—*growing!* Furthermore, you’re saying the money *desires that we should have it!*”

“Heh, heh, heh,” Owl Man chuckled. “Yet another reason I love you, my dear. You’re astute, so very astute!” And he lightly brushed her cheek with the back of his finger.

At that point the meeting was put on hold, since a large tray of food had arrived—great piles of King crab legs, baked potatoes, salads and so forth. Paper bibs were dispensed and the three hungry conspirators tucked into their feast.

“*Buon appetito!*” said Jasmine, in perfect Italian.

But the meal was only half-consumed when a commotion broke out across the room. Three figures were advancing toward the booth, and from the lead figure came a booming voice.

“Hey, save some of them crab legs for me!”

It was Fex, accompanied by Sal and Co.

“Man, did I have to track you guys down. Took a long time too—I finally called Charmayne. She said you was here. Heather had a hunch you birds was up to somethin’ fishy and I should call. Looks like she was right.”

Fex dragged a chair up to the booth and sat down ponderously, while Sal and Co. stood awkwardly to the side.

“Now, bird brains,” Fex proclaimed, “what gives?”