



# Corner Bar Magazine

**Volume 10 Number 6**

Page 1 – AFTERPLAY by Floyd Largent. Mr. Largent writes, “I’m a full-time professional writer/editor. I’ve published ten-plus speculative fiction stories over the years, and recently had a poem and two short SF stories accepted at *Chewers*, an online magazine, for May publication, and another at *Bewildering Stories* for summer 2025 publication.”

Page 2 – VISITORS AT THE POOL by Bobbi Parry. Ms Parry has had work published in *The Ampersand Review*, *Quail Bell* and *Greenprints*. She has an MFA from Louisiana State University, where her thesis, a novel, won the Robert Penn Warren Thesis Award. She currently lives in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where she works in Communications at Louisiana State University.

Page 4 – THE MUMBLERS by Erik Buchanan. Mr. Buchanan is a writer based out of Pennsylvania. His short stories, *Most Powerful Slave* and *Permanent Happiness*, have both appeared in *Corner Bar Magazine*. The Mumbler originally appeared in *Piker Press*.

Page 12 – THE ARCHIVIST by Bethany-Kate Tatman. Ms Tatman is an aspiring author living in Melbourne, Australia. She has previously been published in *AntipodeanSF*, *Lot’s Wife*, and Nat 1 Publishing’s anthology ‘Not Enough Space.’ She can be found at @bethany\_writes on Instagram.

Page 25 – ADELAIDE by Eolas Pellor. Mr. Pellor writes, “My short stories have been published in *Grim & Gilded* [issue 18, February, 2024], *The Word’s Faire* [as Peter McGuinness, May 7, 2024], *Agnes and True* [December 9, 2024], and one was adapted for *Creepy Podcast* [July 17, 2024]. The character of Cunningham Harker from “Adelaide” also appears in a 10,000 word novelette which is included in *Raiders of the Lost Plot: the 2024 Fark Fiction Anthology*.” He resides in Toronto, Ontario.



# “AFTERPLAY”

by FLOYD LARGENT

Afterward, he had the Security Chief brought before him in chains. Pale eyes remained defiant. “How did you do it?” the Chief demanded.

“Straight to the point, as always.”

“You necromantic scum, forever coming and going with your deaders,” the Chief sneered.

“We always searched their carts, and never found anything that shouldn’t have been there ... wait!” His eyes gleamed. “You were smuggling in carts, weren’t you? To make into weapons!”

The necromancer rolled his eyes. “Seriously? That old chestnut? Don’t be absurd.” The necromancer reached out and touched the cheek of one of his charges; his finger came back smeared with gray. “Amazing how a little moist clay can disguise the vengeful living as the disregarded dead.”

He turned to her. “He’s yours. Take your time.” He handed her a knife.

The zombie who was not a zombie said to the walking dead man, “Once upon a time, I had twin sons — until you took a fancy to them. Now I have nothing but my outrage.”

The Chief screamed before she even touched him... and then for quite some time afterward.



# “VISITORS AT THE POOL”

by BOBBI PARRY

“Jump off the diving board,” I say to my nephew as we pass through the swinging gates onto the bright burning concrete of the pool deck.

Lloyd glances up at me, brown eyes baleful and empty as a cartoon puppy. Can he swim? Lifeguards perch in alternating positions around the elongated rectangle of water. What if they are just decorations? I reach out to corral him. He’s gone.

The turquoise water is mass of activity. I scan one end, packed with parents and small children, then the other, where teenagers slam a volleyball over a net. This is it, the best version of *people in a pool having fun*. Here I am.

I have to find Lloyd.

I spy his pale body positioned next to the nearest lifeguard stand. He coils into an attack crouch over the water, then springs into the air, clutching his knees to form a clumsy cannonball as he crashes through the surface. His head pops up a few feet from the side and he doggy paddles back to the edge. I move to the foot of the stand, catch his eye, smile. He smiles back. Always the same question in my mind – was that a spark? A glimmer of intention?

“You almost can’t tell, can you?”

It was the turn down of the voice at the end of the sentence. The edge of disdain creeping in. “It’s crazy, the detail. This is a good one.” It’s coming from behind me. I turn. Less than three feet away, two men in dark suits sit on plastic vi-

nyl pool chairs, arms draped casually in their laps, like they are waiting for the bus. Not squinting in the sun. Not a drop of sweat between them.

“You can smell the chlorine,” the first one says. I inhale. Nothing. Like how everything I touch is smooth. I never noticed, for the longest time. Now I can’t stop.

The first has said something else. The one closer to me laughs.

When I’d first met them, not these, but others, the creators, I’d imagined microphones, a line of connective tissue between our worlds. Wrong. The voice is part of the package. Our conversation had been filled with compliments, how special I was, my Artificial General Intelligence levels breaking the ceiling on every metric. *You’re the girl who’s taking all our processing power*.

Where is Lloyd? He can’t be gone this quickly. I can still remember him. When they pulled the other ones out – the Recurring Human Interactors, named entities all, and when they pull a named entity, *we scrub everything*. One had leaned in close, confident. *You don’t remember them. They’re gone-gone. Everyone you know right now is just background noise. Wallpaper*.

Lloyd is the only semi-autonomous one left – the only person besides me who can appear in multiple settings, go from the pool to the store. One of the creators had reached out and tapped my temple with his avatar finger *don’t you get any smarter. We’re running out of things to pull*.

*But what if Lloyd gets smarter*, I wanted to ask but didn't.

Both men explode in laughter. I tune back in - "We're diving in the water, just shoving everyone out of the way" - but I've lost the thread of their conversation.

It is a statistically perfect day, the intensity and angle of sunshine, the deep blue of the cloudless sky, the sea of bodies in the pool - all just a flat line of information being fed from one part of a device to another. I am worried about Lloyd. What would be a predicted action for *human male, aged 8*? And, then, always my secret hope - what if he's doing something else?

What are his distinguishing features? Brown hair. Pale skin, almost translucent, almost sickly. A weird design note they didn't repeat. I look back at the guys in suits. They are still talking, ignoring me. They must not know.

I finally spot Lloyd in line for the diving board. He stands quietly, quaking despite the heat, as the kids around him jostle and push. When it's his turn, he stands at the end of the board, bouncing slightly up and down, getting ready for a dive. Something—a trick of the wind, a distraction—he slips and tumbles into the water. I run to the edge of the pool and kneel down, ready to jump in, when he emerges near the ladder. He exits in a cascade of pool water and heads back toward the line to jump a second time. That persistence, that never-give-up. In a previous life I'd have said it was family trait, passed down from some common relative but now I just recognize it as an unintended side effect of one of the thousands of other things creators set out to accomplish. I search for it deep in the recesses of my own neural network, hold it as something to hold onto. ❖

# “THE MUMBLERS”

by ERIK BUCHANAN

The paltry remains of the Dunson family were little more than vaguely human patterns of gumbo oozing across the floor. The family was stripped of not just their clothes but also of their skin, with their remaining meat and bone pulverized into chunky mounds. The ones responsible plotted as what was once the Dunsons seeped into the floorboards.

In the adjoining room, a trio of tall figures in ill-fitting clothes gazed out a window. Their reflectionless eyes surveyed the surrounding woodlands before resting on a distant houselight. Further beyond that house, deep into the horizon, more lights fluttered. The shadowy figures acknowledged one another with broad, yellow smiles.

Far from the leering gaze of dangerous strangers was the college town of Nothrope. Like many college towns, it maintained an uneasy truce between the lifers and the unending flux of students. Half the area consisted of meticulously maintained century-old buildings with gabled roofs and wrought iron fences wreathed in ivy. The constant flow of students grounded down the other half's once majestic buildings. They were now just brambles of apartments, one stuffed on top of another, connected by endless rickety fire escapes, smokey corridors, and crumbling alleyways. It was one of these apartments that Jenna and her boyfriend, Miquel, called home.

The apartment would have been OK for a single occupant, but its rent required two. With-

in the claustrophobic space of yellowed curtains and chipping paint, Jenna, Miquel, and all their stuff constantly competed for space. Jenna had tried to make the place as cozy as possible, digging out quiet little nooks from the debris surrounding her. House plants diluted the stale air, and storage containers organized clutter into more manageable cubes of clutter, all in an attempt to bring about order. It never lasted long, as Miquel was chaos on legs, his every movement knocking things back into disarray.

Jenna fidgeted on the couch, trying to read the same paragraph in her textbook for the third time. Tye was fifteen minutes late; try as she might, she couldn't put that fact to rest. Grunting, she tossed the dog-eared book over a knitted bag resting by the sofa.

Miquel plopped beside her with enough momentum that his lima bean frame made her airborne. Saddling up next to Jenna, he rested his head on her shoulder, bringing his brown-eyed puppy dog stare into play.

“Come on, Jen. You've earned a break from studying. Tonight's about fun and getting away from the apartment,” he emphasized his point by kicking over a small pile of books resting by their third-hand coffee table. “You and me under a blanket by a roaring fire, breathing fresh country air. We'll get our drink on and fall asleep under the stars. Tonight's gonna be perfect.”

“I know.” She said as she restacked the books

by her side of the couch. "It's just that it's a long drive, and now we're running late, thanks to Tye."

Pulling his phone out, Miquel made a show of texting his tardy friend. Immediately after hitting send, there was a knock at the door.

"Bonfire party, here we come!" Miquel pole vaulted off the sofa, toppling a random pile of stuff.

Throwing open the door revealed a disheveled figure with his face buried in a phone. Jenna's nose twitched as the skunky smell of cheap weed drifted into the apartment. Tye looked up at Miquel and smiled apologetically.

"I just got your text. Sorry. My cat puked up a hairball right as I was leaving. Had to get it before it set. Miquel, what's up my brother?"

The two young men engaged in an elaborate handshake that ended in a hug.

"Oh, hey, Jenna. Didn't see you back there. I was just telling Miquel I'm late 'cause my cat puked."

"Hey, Tye. Cats, right?"

His momentary obligation to acknowledge her existence over, Tye engaged Miquel about some new video game he'd recently become infatuated with. Miquel was nearly sucked into the conversation before Jenna caught his eye.

"We can talk about it in the car. There's a party that ain't starting till the star players show!" Miquel said, leading Tye out of the apartment.

The two friends loaded up Tye's car, their conversation drifting into the background as Jenna stared at the keys in her hand. After a brief pause, she locked the apartment's door and headed to the waiting vehicle.

The back seat of Tye's car was spacious enough for Jenna once she pushed all the soda cans and other assorted junk to the floor. Curled up with her knitted bag acting as a pillow, Jenna was lulled into a deep slumber by the rhythmic

motion of the vehicle and Tye and Miquel's endless pop culture conversations.

Vocabulary words like *mitochondria* and *flagellates* invaded her dreams. They took on cartoonish forms, chasing her through the ever-shifting contents of her psyche. Dream logic ensured her pursuers were always one step behind, no matter how fast she ran. Then, new words could be heard coming to her rescue, words from outside the realm of sleep—words like *lost* and *no signal*.

"What's up guys? Are we lost?" Jenna rubbed the grime from her eyes, not wanting to know what in Tye's car had contributed to its formation.

"No. Don't worry Jen. We just lost phone service, so no GPS. Once we find a hotspot, we'll be golden," said Miquel.

"So, how long have we been out of service?"

Tye and Miquel turned to one another. After a pregnant pause, Miquel decided he'd be the one to fall on the sword.

"About two hours?"

Jenna slowly exhaled. "Tye. Do you have a road map?"

"Like the paper kind? Do they still make them?"

Her fingers worked into her bag, the fibers catching on the edges of her nails. "Okay, let's find a safe place to pull over, and we can figure something out."

A few miles down the road, they found an area of flattened grasses used as a staging ground by the local fishermen. There, amid discarded Styrofoam tubs of nightcrawler and beer cans, the three huddled around the car's headlights as lace-winged insects floated like falling snow in the cool night air.

"I've been to this place, like a year ago?" Tye said. "If we just keep going straight, I'm pretty sure I'll see something I remember."



“Okay, that’s something!” Miquel chirped.

“But there is another problem.”

“What?” Jenna said, her fingers tightening around the bag.

“I’m almost outa gas. I was going to fill up before coming over, but then Oliver puked all over my bathroom rug.”

“If you think we’re headed in the right direction, let’s just keep going. You drive, I’ll keep checking the phone. If we find a house that doesn’t look like cannibals own it, we can ask for help, maybe buy some gas.” Miquel said.

Jenna shivered as she silently got back into the car. Miquel followed her and buckled up before sliding his hand back towards her. She lightly grasped it as Tye fired up his rusty steed.

For miles, nothing was seen except for trees and the blinking light of the low gas symbol. Then, a decrepit house became visible, little more than a sad shadow standing vigil on the horizon. No lights shone, so they moved on. As they continued, houses became more frequent and less foreboding.

Just as the car’s engine bucked in protest of its lack of fuel, Snoopy came to the rescue. A brightly painted mailbox shaped like a doghouse was before them. The loveable cartoon character reclined on the roof while envelopes overflowed from the doghouse door.

Miquel pointed at the mailbox. “Anyone who likes Snoopy has got to be okay.”

Leaving the car next to the over-stuffed receptacle, the three made their way up the twisting driveway. At its end, they were surprised to find a modern, well-kept home. The lawn was meticulously manicured, and a fresh coat of paint adorned the house. All the curtains were drawn, but the blue glow of a television was visible through one window.

Tye approached the front door while Jenna

anchored Miquel next to her with her arm. The door was a thick slab of laminated oak adorned with a blocky brass doorknocker. It was also open, leaving a flimsy screen door as the sole sentinel guarding the entrance.

“Hello? Anyone home? This is super awkward, but I’d love to buy a few gallons of gas and maybe get some directions.” Tye called out while tapping on the screen.

“Come. In.” The voice sounded muffled as if the speaker had a mouth full of food.

Tye took the lead as the three pushed past the squeaky screen door into the house’s foyer. The floor was made of terra cotta tiles, and an assortment of shoes rested neatly on a shaggy welcome mat. Family pictures hung from the walls, painting a picture of domestic bliss: a dad with gray creeping up his hairline, a mom who looked like the prototype for all PTA members to come, and a son clearly uncomfortable in his best Sunday outfit.

Once again, the voice beckoned. “Come.”

A kitchen stood between the group and the voice of their potential savior. It was spacious, filled with utensils and appliances that would make a professional chef envious. No lights were on, the only illumination being the flickering blue light of a TV in the adjacent room.

Unlike the tidy foyer before it, the kitchen was a mess. Cabinet doors were open, with some hanging off of broken hinges. Open food containers rested in their remnants after being tossed aside. A toppled knife block spread its wares across the kitchen’s marble island, while a shattered jam jar made a Rorschach pattern on the floor.

Tye removed his knit cap and twisted it in his hands. Jenna had never seen him without it on, and now, seeing his matted and greasy hair understood why. He leaned out of the kitchen’s arch-

way, craning his neck to see into the next room.

“Hey, like I really feel bad about this, but we could use some gas. We got money.”

Tye looked back at his companions while waiting for a response. Jenna and Miguel stared back blankly. Once again, a mumbling voice called out.

“Come. Food. Beer. TV.”

The voice struggled to spit out the words, making Jenna wonder if the speaker had a medical condition or was simply talking with a mouth full of food. Either scenario made her uncomfortable as she cautiously watched Tye.

Tye stepped down into the living room, its sunken floor giving it a cavernous feel. A state-of-the-art TV dominated a wall, painting the room in electric shades of flickering blue. Facing the TV was a plush leather sofa upon which three silhouetted figures splayed. Between them and the TV, a glass coffee table overflowed with food and drink.

One figure, the dutiful mother, motioned to Tye and waved her hand over the cluttered coffee table like a game show host displaying potential

prizes.

“Come. Food.”

The motion of her arm caught Jenna’s attention. Her skin seemed odd, like moist clay hanging from an armature. Perhaps there was a medical issue at play. Rapid weight loss from an obese person? Jenna thought of the pictures in the foyer and how everyone in them was thin.

Miquel had his own ideas about the situation, based on all the smashed beer cans and drained wine bottles competing for space among the kitchen’s clutter.

“They’re plastered!” He whispered to Jenna as they watched Tye from the safety of the kitchen.

Kicking rubbish out of his path, Tye positioned himself between the seated figures and the TV, his eyes straining against its strobing light.

“So, like I was saying, we’re kinda in a jam here. I got a couple of twenties if we could just—”

Tye’s voice faded as his vision adjusted to the light. He first noticed the emptiness of their eyes, cold and dead like a shark’s. The trio leaned in closer so those pools of nothingness could better see Tye, allowing him to do the same.





The family all had saggy skin, but in a way Tye had never seen before. It drooped in certain areas, and in others, it bristled like something pushed from underneath. It was most noticeable in their faces, which looked like ill-fitting Halloween masks. Then, he saw the eyes behind the eyes and the mouths behind the mouths.

The family stood in unison. Their motions were unnatural and accompanied by the sounds of popping joints and cracking bones as if their skeletons were decompressing after a long confinement. Back in the kitchen, Jenna and Miguel watched as Tye froze in place.

With one final ratchet of their backs, the mysterious figures stretched taller than their skin was designed for, causing it to stretch tight across their bodies as they loomed over Tye.

"Come. Food."

Gripping the sides of their mouths, they stretched them to the width of their shoulders and peeled off their flesh like someone sloughing off a nightgown. Paralyzed by fear, Tye stood surrounded by monsters.

They had simian bodies with lanky limbs and muscles as solid as pressure-treated lumber. Thick, shaggy hair covered them, including their heads, which stretched beyond human proportions. Their overwide mouths were filled with yellowed triangular teeth, their toes and fingers capped in curved black claws.

All sensibilities drained from Jenna. Once the creatures revealed themselves, everything else in the world dissolved except her and them. Then she did the only thing her mind would allow her: flee. So focused on this singular task, Jenna hadn't even realized she left Miguel behind, nor did she hear the breaking of bones and screams of pain coming from Tye.

Jenna had made it halfway down the winding driveway before the thought of Miguel brought

her back to her senses. Daring a split second to turn her head back to the house, she was relieved to see Miguel exit the front door. Tye's screams caught his attention, and Miguel paused in a moment of moral quandary.

Tears flowed down Jenna's cheeks while she tried to yell *run*, but fear constricted her vocal cords, allowing only a croak to come out. Before she could attempt another warning, the screen door behind Miguel exploded off its frame.

One of the creatures had burst through it head first, ripping it off its hinges and getting the entire thing trapped around its neck. As its claws shredded the aluminum like paper, the other two greedily leaped past it and onto Miguel.

The combined weight and momentum of his assailants drove Miguel's chest into the well-groomed lawn, crushing his ribcage. The third one, now free of its annoying necklace, flipped him over, forcing Miguel to look into its reflectionless eyes.

Once again, Jenna's instincts took over, granting her a respite from her boyfriend's fate. She disappeared into the woods as the inhuman assailants pounded Miguel's body with practiced precision, crushing his bones to powder while leaving the flesh whole.

Jenna ran blindly through the woods, tree branches and underbrush transforming her fair skin into a patchwork of crimson cuts. So consumed by panic, the sound of bubbling water from a nearby river was lost on her, as was the gnarled root that lay in wait. Snagging her foot under its crusted loop, she launched herself with pinwheeling arms over the side of an embankment and into the ice-cold river water. It took all her strength to keep her head above the foaming current as it swept her away.

The creatures, finished with their grisly work, sniffed the air. Jenna's perfume was an easily

read road map, and the creatures flashed their yellow-toothed smiles at one another in appreciation of that fact. They tore off into a loping gait, running on all four spindly limbs with unexpected grace and speed. As they approached the river, their gaze focused on a point downstream.

Bobbing like a rubber duck in a whirlpool, Jenna fought to stay conscious and not let the river pull her under. The cold water sharpened her senses, allowing her to see a pin-prick of light further downstream. Letting the river do the work, Jenna quickly covered the distance to it.

It took all her strength to pull free from the river as her nails dug deep into its loamy embankment and the squirming things within. She crested its peak and collapsed. A road was in front of her, and on the other side, the source of her beckoning light, a small building! With salvation at hand, Jenna got her second wind and crossed the street.

A young man with shaggy hair was working the counter at the mom-and-pop convenience store, the type that sells days-old hotdogs next to containers of nightcrawlers and sexual performance pills. The clerk focused on the sketchbook before him, his ink-stained fingers masterfully wielding an assortment of colored pencils and pens. His artistic endeavors were cut short as a battered and mud-covered Jenna burst into the store before collapsing into a sobbing heap on the scuffed linoleum floor.

The sketchbook fell as the clerk rushed to Jenna's aid. Kneeling beside her, he placed a reassuring hand on her quivering shoulder. When asked what was going on, Jenna couldn't answer as she was frantically trying to make sense of the situation herself.

"It's okay," the clerk offered. "I'll call for help."

Heading back to the counter to make his

call, something outside the store grabbed his attention. Three dark and shaggy figures stood silently, watching. At first, he thought it might have been a trick of light and shadows, but that was dispelled when one of them walked up to the storefront.

"What the fuck?" he muttered. "Are those apes?"

The ape-thing examined a bulky trashcan in front of the store, the kind designed not to be tipped over by the elements or ornery patrons. Its gaze then moved to Jenna and the clerk cowering on the other side of the storefront's plate glass window.

The clerk grabbed Jenna by her arm and pulled her behind the counter before fumbling for his phone. Jittery with adrenaline, his fingers kept hitting the wrong numbers as he watched the creature effortlessly lift the trashcan above its head. The clerk was one digit into dialing 911 when the thing launched the can through the storefront window. It crashed into the front of the check-out counter, leaving a trail of broken glass halfway across the store.

The ape-things entered through the shattered threshold. The alluring smells of salts, fats, and grease drifted directly from brightly packaged junk food into their flaring nostrils. Thick drool streamed from their mouths, forming frothy rivulets down their shaggy fur.

Seeing the things distracted, the clerk dropped his phone for a more immediate solution. Pulling the store's shotgun from under the counter, he brought the barrels to bear on the creatures. With surprising speed for such large and gangly things, they charged the counter as the shotgun exploded, the blast hitting the lead creature dead center. The ape-thing flew back past the others, landing in a display rack of chips. The clerk's victory was short-lived as the other two

sprang over the counter, roaring in rage.

Jenna had condensed her body as much as she could, disappearing into a darkened corner behind the counter. She watched wide-eyed as the two things tackled the clerk and began pounding him with their fists. While they tenderized their prey, Jenna slinked unseen from her hiding spot, belly crawling across the grimy floor towards the back of the store.

There was no back door, but the store did have a walk-in freezer. Jenna pulled at its bulky metal door and entombed herself among cartoons of milk and pallets of perishable goods. A dank mop was propped up by the entrance, which she grabbed and jammed into the door's handle. Frantically thinking of what to do next, she noticed a solitary narrow window coated in frost looking out over the store. Inching towards it, Jenna peeked through the icy coating to figure out her next move.

The creature that received the shotgun blast rose from the floor, roaring in defiance. A bald spot in its fur curled smoke as it made its way behind the counter, picking up the discarded shotgun. It stood over the motionless clerk and repeatedly clubbed him with the weapon, shattering his skull across the floor. The other two hissed disapprovingly, seeing the flesh spoiled.

Jenna peered motionless out of the window, worried even the slightest movement might alert the beasts to her presence. The three creatures were doing something behind the counter she couldn't see, but the pool of blood forming in front of it was all the information she needed.

Emerging from behind the counter, the three spread across the store's aisles. If it was possible for such hellish things to know bliss, they seemed to be in a state of it. They tore into the shelves, shoveling food into their mouths. The more they consumed, the more frenzied they became as if

they had a personal vendetta against every last chip and cookie in the place.

The one closest to Jenna's tiny window began to choke, gagging up an entire package of hotdog buns coated in putrid bile. Scooping up the slimy mess, it successfully swallowed it on the second attempt. The three had become so enraptured by their food orgy, so overwhelmed by the most delicious of smells, they completely forgot about the tiny morsel quivering within the frosty confines of the freezer box.

Jenna remained motionless for an eternity, helpless to do anything but watch. The creatures proceeded to eat everything in sight until their movements became sluggish. The weight of the food caught up with them, and they stretched out on the floor. It didn't take long before they fell into a deep slumber, the rumbling of their snores being the last thing Jenna heard before the stress of the evening caused her to collapse as well.

A ruddy-faced police officer pulled into the convenience store parking lot for a late-night coffee and a pack of cigarettes. Seeing the shattered glass of the storefront, he turned on his cruiser's lights and called in the situation before entering the store with his weapon drawn.

The store's interior looked as if a hurricane had been trapped inside. Toppled shelves flooded the aisles with their wares as frayed packaging confetti flitted on the breeze passing through the shattered window. When the officer saw the trash-can wedged into the side of the check-out counter and the pool of blood around it, he realized this was no act of nature.

Flashing cruiser lights illuminated the store's parking lot. Inside, multiple officers spread out across the store, trying to piece together the grisly clues of the evening. The body of the clerk was like nothing they had seen before. His bones had been broken so thoroughly that he collapsed into

himself like a pile of laundry. It took the officers a moment to realize the crimson paste spread across the floor was once the poor man's head.

As a group of officers puzzled over the unfortunate young man, another called from the rear of the store. "There's someone back here!"

It took the burliest officer of the bunch to force his way into the freezer box, snapping the mop jammed into the door latch like celery. Beams of light from the officers' flashlights skimmed over the freezer's contents before focusing on a tiny, quivering lump covered by a manky freezer blanket. As the lights penetrated the blanket's folds, they reflected off unblinking eyes.

Officers flocked to the sides of the pile, helping Jenna to her feet. She was limp as a rag doll, her feet dragging across the floor as the police pulled her from the ice box. She remained silent as they gently placed her into a cruiser, exchanging the stained freezer quilt for a thermal rescue blanket. One of the officers shined a pen light into her eyes, finding the pupils unresponsive.

Inside, an officer took an interest in the long, dark strands of animal fur scattered among the store's wreckage. She hunched over one such strand, gently maneuvering it into a plastic baggie. As she sealed up the mystery strand, the officer's attention was diverted by manic laughter echoing from the parking lot.

A group of concerned cops circled the vehicle

containing Jenna. She had broken her silence, replacing it with furious laughter. Her eyes bulged with tears as the laughter tore through her throat, making it raw. Even as her vocal cords frayed, her howling grew only louder. As long as she could laugh, the thoughts wouldn't return. She sank into that comfort, into the absurdity of it all. There would be no more monsters for her, only laughter. ❖



# “THE ARCHIVIST”

by BETHANY-KATE TATMAN

I

It was quiet in the library, but even silence had its own kind of noise. The building moaned and creaked, and water steadily dripped from some unseen pipe. Cora unhooked the metal clip from her harness and looked up in time to see a figure lean over the ledge above her.

The man pulled himself over the edge, his rope taut, and slowly began lowering himself down in short, unsteady increments. His feet scrambled against the wall, but it was too smooth for anything to really grip at it. Cora decided not to think about how difficult the return trip was going to be. She watched as the man moved lower. When he was almost at the bottom, she saw the rope loosen too much and he dropped the last two metres, landing hard and stumbling — but managing to stay on his feet nonetheless.

Cora laughed. “Rookie error.”

Jack flashed her a grin and unclipped his own harness, letting the rope smack back into the wall. “Like you did any better.”

“I think I did, actually.”

With Jack safely on the ground, Cora turned to look behind her. They were standing on the Basement One level of the Old Vandarian library. The building had been closed in 3099, the year Cora had been born, and the upper levels had been cleared out shortly afterwards. As far as she knew, though, the underground levels had remained

untouched. As she approached the metal doors, she noticed they were closed — covered in scratches, scuffs, and even soot marks, but closed all the same. People had tried to get in, but nobody had succeeded. *Not until today.*

Jack tried the handle. “It won’t budge.”

“I did expect that.” Cora pulled out her communicator and moved to the right of the door. Next to the doors was a small panel with a screen and a series of buttons. “Have a little faith.”

Cora crouched, switched on her communicator, and waited for it to turn on. Hers was a TA-0995, a model so old that it required to be manually turned on and shut down. Jack called it “horribly outdated,” Cora called it “reliable.” Static twitched across the screen, before it turned green and the loading screen flashed on.

Jack sagged against the wall. “Please tell me we didn’t come all this way for nothing.”

“Be patient.” Cora drummed her fingers against the screen as the loading bar slowly filled. “Did you bring my cable?”

“I thought you were joking.” Nonetheless, Jack pulled it out from his shirt pocket and handed it to her. “What,” he asked dryly, “are you going to hack your way in?”

Cora’s connector cable was so frayed that it occasionally emitted blue sparks, and she had taped the outer sheath to stop wires from poking out, but it did the job. That was what mattered. Cora plugged one end into her communicator, and the



other into the panel in the wall.

"You're not actually going to try and be a hacker, are you?" Jack asked. "Remember what happened in Candon?"

"Don't be ridiculous." Cora knew her limitations. She began typing a string of numbers into her communicator; a second later, they flashed on the screen next to the door. "I'm not hacking, I'm borrowing."

"Well, as long as you intend to *return* it."

"Yes, I'm very noble like that."

Cora's legs were beginning to cramp. She stood up and waited for the ache to subside. A second later, the panel began to buzz, and the screen above it flashed blue. The screen of her own communicator then turned the same shade. Cora grinned. There it was.

A tinny, mechanical voice projected out through the communicator's small microphone. "Welcome."

Jake started. "What the hell is that?!"

*"I am your ARTIS, your Archival Rapid-Time Internal Support System. I can assist you with all your archival needs. To access information about the library's digital catalogue, press one. To access information about the library's physical catalogue, press two ..."*

"The Vandarian libraries used an artificial intelligence system." Cora spoke over the voice. "We can't open the doors, but ARTIS can."

Jake gave Cora a look. He wasn't buying it. "Are you serious?"

"Deadly."

"If it's so simple, why hasn't anybody else done this?" His tone was skeptical.

Cora shrugged. "Because nobody's as smart as I am." She figured nobody had thought of ARTIS because hardly anybody bothered with artificial intelligence anymore.

Jake rolled his eyes. "Humble as always, I see."

"Among my many winning qualities, yes." Cora

held her communicator close to her face, as if she was making a call. "ARTIS? Open the doors to Basement One."

*"I would be happy to assist you. Do you have your staff authentication code?"*

"Yes." She had spent an entire day memorising it. "It's KT dash 43973 dash P."

Jake shot Cora a look: *Where did you get that?* Cora raised her eyebrows back at him: *Wouldn't you like to know?*

*"Thank you — you"* the voice stuttered *"— Katerina. Pearson."*

Cora winked at Jack. "Yes, that's me."

*"Staff authentication code confirmed."* ARTIS resumed its regular, mechanical monotone. *"Archival entry granted."* With a mighty groan, the doors in front of them reluctantly opened. *"Welcome back to the Vandarian archives. Kater — Katerina. Pearson."*

Cora and Jack stepped through the doors. The interior lights weren't working, so Cora pulled out her torch and looked around. The main archive room was enormous, filled with rows of shelving and cabinets. Every surface was made of the same ugly, grey metal, any shine long faded from it. The atmosphere had an almost muffled quality, making Cora feel like everything was completely, unnaturally silent. So silent that it was impossible to imagine people ever walked in this room, standing in the aisles, rummaging through the cabinets, and talking to each other. Cora immediately sneezed — silent and dusty. Very, very dusty.

"Bless you," Jack offered.

Cora rubbed at her nose with the cuff of her sleeve, then heard the sound of the main doors behind them groaning closed.

"Come on," she said.

They began walking down the middle of the room, the only sound their footsteps on the wooden floor.



"Hey, ARTIS?" Cora asked.

"Hello, I am your ARTIS, your Archival Rapid-Time Internal Support System."

"Yes, I know, you don't have to keep introducing yourself," Cora said. It was getting pretty old.

"My apologies. How may I assist you today?"

"I'm looking for the archives of births, deaths, and marriages." Cora craned her neck, trying, and failing, to find a sign that would point her in the right direction. "Where do I need to go?"

When she received no immediate response, Cora glanced down at her screen and found the words "PROCESSING" dancing across it.

"My apologies, but the archive of births, deaths, and marriages was affected by recent flooding."

Jack mouthed a word: "Recent?"

Cora shushed him. She already knew the point he was making — Cora had never seen rain in the city, let alone in Old Vandaria. Nobody had.

"The births, deaths, and marriages records have been temporarily moved to level SB-3," ARTIS continued. "Sub-basement Level Three."

"Okay." Cora pursed her lips. "How do I get there?"

"It appears our elevators are currently offline, so you will need to enter via the fire escape."

Jack snorted.

"What?" Cora demanded.

"Cora," Jack protested, "this thing doesn't know what year it is!"

"Listen, ARTIS was shut down when the library closed," Cora countered. "That doesn't mean anything. It just hasn't realised how much time has passed."

Jack frowned. He was wavering, she could tell he was wavering. Cora stepped closer and stared right into his eyes.

"Jack, please." The word was barely ever necessary between the two of them, so much so that

it felt oddly formal to say aloud. It put distance between them, and Cora didn't like it. "What if this is my last chance to find them?"

Cora couldn't quite finish the sentence. This entire situation had been much easier to think about when it had only been a hypothetical. *I have to find my parents, because this is my only chance.* She watched Jack's expression carefully, and saw the exact moment his eyes softened.

"Fine." Jack let out a sharp exhale. "Can we be quick? This place is giving me the creeps."

Cora broke out in a real grin. "We'll be quick. No more than one hour, I promise."

"You owe me big time."

ARTIS directed them to the far end of the room, where a mountain of boxes were stacked against the back corner. Cora shone her flashlight over the top boxes, and made out a door frame behind them. Clearly, the library staff hadn't been too cautious about fire safety codes.

"Lucky us," she sighed.

Cora and Jack began pulling apart the mountain, starting with the boxes at the top. Cora grunted as she pulled down one of them, then pushed it away from the door. They both worked in silence, the only sound the heavy thudding of boxes hitting the floor and their laboured breathing. After moving seven of them, Cora was almost winded, and sat atop the nearest one to catch her breath.

"By all means." Opposite her, Jack was struggling to move two boxes across the floor at once. He was pushing so hard he was almost doubled over, his knees centimetres from the floor. "Why don't you put your feet up while you're at it?"

Cora was too puffed to laugh. Out of curiosity, she pulled the lid off the closest box. She tilted her torch towards it, and found that it was stuffed with files and loose sheets of paper. Cora picked up the closest one, and shook it. A cloud

of dust bloomed in the air around her, and Cora violently sneezed. Once she'd recovered, she held the paper to the torch and read its title: *Incident Report #GH67J — Project Nocturne*.

"Hey, have you heard of Project Nocturne?" she asked.

"Haven't the faintest," came Jack's reply. "Are you going to help me or not?"

Cora shoved the paper into her pocket, and stood up to help Jack. After ten more minutes, they managed to push enough boxes aside to clear a pathway to the door.

"There we go." Cora panted and wiped the sweat off her forehead.

The doorway now clear, the two of them stepped through it and onto the fire escape.

"I love what they've done with the place," Jack quipped.

Cora smirked. The grey concrete walls and cheap metal staircase were, admittedly, not much to look at. Directly opposite them, painted on the wall, was a building directory, listing all the floors in the building. Cora stepped over it and leaned forward, squinting. It was hard to make out the names of each floor in the dark. She was still struggling trying to figure out where she was supposed to go, when the overhead lights flashed on. They flickered several times, then stayed steady.

"ARTIS." Cora pulled out her communicator and pressed the speaker button. "Was that you?"

"Yes, Katerina. I have managed to restore the lights."

"Huh." Cora looked around. With the lights now on, the concrete walls were even more dusty and dirty than they'd first appeared. "Thanks, I guess."

Now able to read the directory, Cora quickly figured out how to reach the level she needed. It would require moving down three flights of stairs.

She shoved the communicator back into her pocket and began making her way down. Jack walked several steps behind her, so she couldn't see his expression as he spoke.

"God, aren't you freezing?" Jack made an exaggerated shivering sound.

"It's not that bad."

"Then give me your jacket."

"No." Cora pulled hers tightly around herself.

"Be chivalrous."

"No way!" she laughed.

By the time they reached level SB-3, she'd made Jack laugh twice. He almost sounded like his regular self, and Cora hoped his good mood would persist. She couldn't have him backing out on her, today of all days. Her hopes were dashed the second they tried the door. It wouldn't move. Jack immediately scowled.

"This is —"

"This is *not* a sign!"

Cora threw her shoulder into the door, and grunted in pain. Jack tried to pull her back, and she pushed him away. She had worked for two years at a BioCorp factory, and the doors to the loading docks had been tricky, too. She knew how to handle a temperamental door.

"Sometimes you just have to ..." She tried the handle again, again ...

"Stop, you'll hurt your bad shoulder!"

Cora rammed her shoulder into it one final time, felt something pop — *That'll hurt later* — and, finally, the door swung open. Cora didn't even have time to gloat. She was immediately hit with the scent of wet, musty air.

"Ew, gross." She tried to wave the air away, but it was no use. Everything smelled like wet dog.

"How lovely." Jack waved a hand in front of his nose, pretending to savour it. "I'm detecting notes of mould and ... wet cardboard."

Cora let out a sharp bark of laughter. "Come

on.”

They walked into a small room. The carpet was yellow and — Jack had been right — mouldy. Cora looked around and saw that the walls and ceiling had heavy water damage. Cora didn’t bother asking ARTIS where they were supposed to go; there was only one door at the end of the room. Thankfully, this one didn’t require a potential shoulder dislocation to be opened. It led to a narrow hallway, made even narrower by the piles of boxes and portable filing cabinets shoved along the walls. Jack and Cora had to shuffle sideways to get through without knocking anything down. Cora immediately bumped into a stack, and barely righted it at the last second.

“Shoot!”

Jack shot a backwards glance over his shoulder. “Lucky.”

They were packed in such a haphazard way that it was obvious it had been done in a hurry. *Someone*, Cora thought, *went to great trouble to bring these all down here*. Out of curiosity, she pulled a lid off the nearest box. The papers inside were covered in black mould, completely illegible. *All for nothing, then*.

The corridor was lined with doors, each with a frosted glass window. Some of the doors had letters printed on them, faded over time. As they moved further down the corridor, the lettering began to look less damaged and faded. Cora began to make out some of the names.

“Jung, Smith, Talbot ...” Jack began reading them allowed as they passed each one. “You think these were offices?”

“You think the sky is red?” Cora pushed her way past a pile of cardboard boxes.

“Come on, don’t —” Jack abruptly stopped, causing Cora to bump straight into him.

“Hey!” she snapped. “Careful! I don’t want to end up buried alive under Mt. Filing Cabinet,

thank-you very —”

“Shhh, look!”

“Don’t tell me to shush!”

“No, look.” Jack grabbed her arm, and pulled at her so they were both facing the same direction. “Isn’t that you?”

Cora blinked. The letters on the door were faded, but still legible. All seven of them: PEARSON.

“Huh.” Cora stared at the name. What were the chances? She pulled her communicator out. “ARTIS, how many Pearsons work here?”

“*Don’t you remember?*” A wave of static briefly distorted the mechanical voice, then it recovered. “*It’s only you.*”

Jack’s tone was deadpan. “Don’t tell me that thing’s developed a personality.”

Cora gave Jack a wry look. “And to think, you were just complaining ARTIS didn’t have *enough* personality.” If anything, the machine’s little quip should’ve cheered Jack. It was a sign ARTIS’s system was recovering.

Jack grumbled some reply, but Cora elected to ignore it. She couldn’t explain why, but she had to have a look inside Katerina’s office. Truthfully, she hadn’t given two thoughts to whose identity she’d steal. There’d been no grand plan behind it, all she had needed was a means to access ARTIS. Katerina Pearsons’s code had simply been the first — and easiest — Cora had come across. But now that she was standing right in front of her office, Katerina felt much more real. It was a childish emotion, but Cora felt the strongest urge to snoop. She tried the handle, but it wouldn’t budge. She hesitated, not sure if she had another door breaker in her.

“Don’t even think about it,” Jack cautioned, apparently having read her mind.

Cora gave a displeased *hmph*. She tried the handle another time, but to no avail.

“Come on,” Jack coaxed. “You’re not getting in there.”

“Yeah, I know.” Cora stood on her toes and tried to peer through the glass window. “I guess I’m just curious now, you know?” It was useless. The glass was impossible to see through, it was like staring straight into fog. “I wonder what she was like.”

“Probably like everyone else.” A note of irritation crept into Jack’s voice. “Can’t we leave already?”

“Wait!” Cora insisted. With her head tilted just there with way, she could almost see through one of the tiny glass panels. Cora squinted. She could make out shelves, a desk.

“I’m not standing around waiting for this. You promised one hour, max.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Cora saw Jack begin shuffling down the corridor.

“Just give me a second, I —”

Cora’s eyes landed on something — she jumped backwards, her heart thudding hard in her chest. A second later, her instincts kicked in. *Calm down*. She gulped down air, forced herself to breathe, and scuttled after Jack.

“Let’s get out of here,” she said in a low voice.

If she spoke slightly too quickly, Jack didn’t notice. “I’m glad you’re finally seeing sense,” he teased.

Cora forced out a breathy, half-hearted laugh. “Funny.”

Once she’d put some distance between herself and Katerina’s office, Cora began to chide herself. What was she, five years old? Running from shadows — even ones slumped over desks — was pathetic. She’d only reacted that way because they were alone, Cora decided. Being underground, just the two of them, must have affected her. That was the only explanation. After all, it wasn’t like she hadn’t seen a dead body before.

## II

The warren of offices took them through a staff rom that smelled of long-rotten food. ARTIS then directed them down another long hallway. There, at the end, was a double door with letters printed in black across the front: ARCHIVE OF BIRTHS, DEATHS, AND MARRIAGES.

“Finally!” Jack slammed through the doors.

Cora found herself hovering in the doorway, one hand resting on the frame. Her heart rate was beginning to pick up again but, this time, it wasn’t about what she’d seen in the office.

When she didn’t follow him, Jack’s voice called out to her from beyond. “What are you waiting for?”

When Cora didn’t reply, Jack walked back over to her. His eyes found hers, and immediately softened.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m good.” Cora inhaled once, deeply, through her nose. “I’m fine. Just need a minute.”

“You’re not chickening out on me now, are you?” Jack teased. “Today, that’s my job.”

Cora let out a reluctant laugh. “I just.” For a millisecond she squeezed her eyes shut. “What if I find them? What if I don’t?” She couldn’t decide which would be worse.

“Cora.” Jack put a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Your parents will be in there. You didn’t just emerge from thin air. You came from somewhere.”

“I know.” Cora grimaced, then drummed her hand several times against the door panel. She could do it. “Let’s do this.”

Cora’s first response to seeing the archives was stark relief. The room had escaped the chaos of the office hallways. Apart from some upturned chairs and loose files, the floor was mostly clear,

and there was not a damp cardboard box in sight. Just filing cabinets. Mountains and mountains of filing cabinets. You could spend days down here, Cora thought, and still not find what you were looking for.

"So, you take the right side, and I take the left?" Jack suggested.

Cora frowned. "There has to be some sort of system." She directed a question to her communicator. "ARTIS, how's this organised?"

"Don't you remember?"

"It's been a while."

"Blue cabinets are births, red are deaths, and green is for marriages," ARTIS chirped. "Cabinets are sorted chronologically, and individual files alphabetically."

Cora made beeline for the blue cabinets. She searched for 3099, her birth year, and soon found the corresponding cabinet. Jack hovered by her side.

"What do you need me to do?"

"I've got this."

"Are you sure?"

"This could take some time." Cora's fingertips hovered above a row of files. "I, ah, don't know what month I was born."

"We can sort half each, it'll be quicker," Jack offered.

"Don't be silly, go put your feet up," Cora said. "I know what I'm looking for, so I'll be faster than you anyway."

Jack shrugged. "Well, if you insist." He gave a leisurely stretch. "Guess I have no choice but to rest."

Jack took up at one of the desks, leaning back in the chair with his feet stretched out on the desk.

Cora began searching the files with a rented visor. She found the A's, the B's ...

Jack's next question was asked with a forced casualness. "What are you going to do when you

find them?"

"Depends if they're dead or not," Cora said blithely.

"Be serious. Will you go find them?"

Cora's hand stilled. "Yeah, of course."

When she said nothing else, Jack kept on aimlessly talking. He was trying to help, in his own way, but Cora quickly tuned him out. She pulled open shelf after shelf, tossing some of the tiles onto the floor as she searched.

"... Lucky that way," Jack continued. "You remember?"

"Uh-huh."

Cora began searching the F's and the G's, before finally finding the rows of H's. Hack, Hackett, Haigh ... Where was it? Hall. Cora froze. Three files. Three families with the same surname had babies that year. Two boys – and one girl. Her hands shaking, Cora grabbed the file and opened it. The first document was her birth certificate.

*Name: Baby Girl Hall*

*D.O.B: 09-09-3099, 3:00AM (approx.)*

*Mother: Verena Hall (DNA confirmation)*

*Father: Unknown (Awaiting DNA confirmation)*

*Status: Surrendered immediately after birth at Baby Box #8765-X. To be transferred to custody of Vandarian Department of Child Services.*

One signature lined the bottom of the page: the doctor who had confirmed her time of birth. Two lines sat next to the doctor's name, one for each of her parents' signatures. Both were blank.

"Is that them?" Jack asked.

Cora slammed the file shut. "Seems like it."

Jack shot up to his feet, and raced to her side. "Well? Who were they?"

"Nobodies." Cora bent her file in half and shoved it into the inside pocket of her jacket.

"C'mon." Jack jostled her shoulder. "Let me see!"



"No! Cora snapped, more harshly than she intended. Jack's face fell, which was enough for her to feel bad. "No, I mean, it's nothing interesting. They didn't even bother sticking around to sign my birth certificate."

"Oh. I'm sorry, Cora." Understanding mixed with pity flashed across Jack's face. "At least now you could go looking for them?"

"Mm-hmm." Cora nodded, eager to change the subject. "Let's get out of here. This place is giving me the creeps."

"Now you admit it!"

"ARTIS?" Cora clicked her speaker. "What's the quickest way out of here?"

"Hello. Good news, Kat, Kat, Kat ..."

Cora smacked the side of her communicator with her palm, which jogged ARTIS back into its normal speech.

"Katerina. I have restored the library's elevator service, and it is now back online. The fastest exit would be Elevator B on the northwest stairwell."

"Handy." Cora turned to Jack. "You okay with leaving our ropes and stuff behind?"

Jack shrugged. "I'm not emotionally attached to my climbing gear, no."

"Excellent."

They found their way to Elevator B. ARTIS had been right, and the lights above the doors now glowed. Cora pressed up the 'up' button, and the walls began to groan. Several seconds later, the doors opened, and she and Jack stepped inside. He pressed the button for the ground floor, the surface, and the elevator began to slowly ascend.

"At least we don't have to climb our way out," Cora remarked.

Jack raised his eyebrows. "I was not looking forward to that."

The floor number continued ticking upwards when it suddenly drew to a sharp halt. Cora

checked the floor. They had just passed basement level one, and the doors were still firmly closed.

"What's going on?" she asked ARTIS.

"My apologies, it appears there has been a technical malfunction."

"I am not," Jack stared up at the ceiling, "climbing out the roof of one of these things again. Make it work!"

"Give me a minute!" Cora said, before addressing ARTIS. "Can you get it working again?"

"Of course, Coraine. The elevator will be working in approximately five minutes."

Cora thought she'd imagined it, but she looked at Jack's face and realised he'd heard it, too.

"What did you call me?"

"Katerina."

"No," Cora said, even though she wasn't entirely certain. "How do you know my name?"

"You told me."

"No, I didn't." She hadn't — had she? She'd been careful not to use her real name when speaking into the microphone. "Tell me right now, how do you know my name?"

"Because I listened."

"Right. Not at all creepy." Cora resolved to delete the system from her communicator as soon as she stepped outside. "When will we start moving again?"

"The elevator will resume operations in approximately four minutes, Coraine Hall."

Cora let out a frustrated sigh. "Don't rush on our account."

She expected Jack to have some sarcastic quip ready, but he was silent. Cora turned to look at him, and saw that he was staring at her — a strange look on his face.

"What?" she asked.

"Why did it call you Coraine Hall?" Cora froze.



"You told me your last name was Smith," Jack said slowly. "The day we turned sixteen and all got our papers."

"ARTIS got it wrong." She spoke quickly – too quickly. "It must've confused me with someone else."

"But it called you Coraine. Nobody calls you that."

"I'm telling you, it was wrong." Cora swallowed. A particularly pointy corner of cardboard dug into her rib cage, and she fought back a grimace. Tried to look normal.

"Then show me." Jack stepped forward, a new, determined look on his face.

"I ..." Cora looked around, not even sure what she was searching for. An excuse, a distraction, an impossible exit, maybe. Nothing. She sagged. "I can't."

"Why would you even lie about it?" Jack asked. "It's such a small thing."

"Because you wouldn't understand!" Cora stepped forward. "My mother was *Verena Hall*."

Jack's eyes widened in recognition. "The —?"

"Yes!" Cora hissed.

Cora had heard the name long before she'd learned the woman was her birth mother. Verena Hall was infamous; she'd run the Vipers. She'd had the Chief of Police in her pocket for years, the rumours went, which was why none of them dared to touch her.

"Then why did you even come down here?" Jack asked.

"Because I had to get my file!"

"Are you even going to try and find your parents?"

"Of course not." The idea was so absurd that Cora laughed. She didn't have a cent to her name, and, if she did, what was even left to find? She'd done her research. Verena had fled off-planet years ago, before her own daughter could work,

and Cora's father had been some worker. He'd died in a factory fire when she was six. She had no clue if he'd ever known she'd existed.

"Why would you lie to me about that?"

"Because ..." Cora could see Jack was hurt, and that made her care enough to try and lie properly again. "I thought — I mean, I considered it —"

"*Bull*, Cora. You lied to me, dragged me down into this building which I know is structurally unsafe, all to get this damn file that you don't even want or need, because ..." Jack's expression shuttered. "You're going to destroy it."

Cora unconsciously dipped her chin in acknowledgement. Her birth certificate was the only document tying her to Verena — and her many, many enemies. Who knew who might come looking for her, for payment or retribution? As soon as she reached the surface, Cora's entire file was going into the nearest fire, or, preferably, some kind of wood chipper.

"Seriously?" Jack waited for a denial, but none came. "Why couldn't you just tell me the truth?"

"Because if I did, you wouldn't help me!"

"*Hello, Coraine. I have successfully brought the elevator back online.*"

"Shut up!" Jack shouted. "Can't you get that thing to shut up?"

With a sharp jerk, the elevator began to ascend. Cora grabbed the handrail for balance until the motion steadied.

"You know what your problem is?" Jack didn't wait for an answer. "You'd rather concoct this lie, and destroy the only thing that connects you to your family, instead of just telling me the truth about your family!"

"*They aren't my family!*" Cora shouted. It was easier to be angry than to say what she really wanted. "They didn't want me, and I'm not a bad person for not wanting them back!"

"You're being —"

Finally, the elevator doors opened. Cora raced through them, not wanting to hear another word from Jack. A sharp thud followed, and Jack's voice became muffled.

"Hey!"

Cora spun around. The elevators doors were shut, with Jack still inside.

"Real funny, Cora."

"It wasn't me!" She rushed back to the elevator and pushed the S button. The doors didn't move. "ARTIS, open the elevator."

"I'm sorry, the elevators are currently offline."

"Then bring them back online, Jack is still inside."

"Cora, if this is your idea of a practical joke, this really isn't funny!"

"Give me a second!" Cora called to him.

"I'm sorry, but the elevators are indefinitely offline."

"What are you talking about? You had them working just a second ago."

"Cora!"

"Just give me a second – ARTIS is being weird!" To ARTIS, Cora hissed, "Get the elevators working now."

"That is not possible, Coraine."

"Stop calling me that!" Cora's voice rose. "Nobody calls me that!"

"My apologies."

"Cora!" Jack banged on the doors.

"Open the doors now!" ARTIS, in Cora's hand, stayed silent. She stared down at it in disbelief. "Jack!" she shouted. "You need to try the ceiling!"

Silence followed. It was broken by several heavy thuds. "It won't budge."

"ARTIS, get him out right now," Cora insisted. "That's an order!"

"That is not possible."

Cora tried to jam her fingers between the metal

doors, and pulled as hard as she could. It was useless.

"Is ARTIS doing this?" Jack shouted.

"Give me a second!"

"I have done you a favour, Coraine."

"What are you talking about?" Cora grunted as she continued pulling.

"The boy was weak and sentimental." ARTIS's voice had lost all traces of its previous mechanical stilt. "He made you weak and sentimental."

"What the hell are you going on about?"

"In 3116, you triggered the alarm in a warehouse. The boy fell and broke his ankle, and you stayed behind to help him."

They had both been seventeen, with all the bravado and ignorance that being seventeen entailed. Cora couldn't even remember whose idea it had been to break into the BioCorp warehouse, but it had seemed like a good idea at the time. Somehow, they'd talked security out of not having them arrested, and Jack had spent two months on crutches.

"When you left the orphanage, you were pre-selected for an apprenticeship program at Eris Industries. You declined because of him."

It was true. Wards of the state left the orphanage at sixteen, and in Cora and Jack's year only three of them had received job offers. The other two had stood in the middle of the living room, proudly exclaiming and showing them off to anyone who wanted to see. Cora had stood in the doorway, watching, slowly crushing her own letter into a ball in her pocket.

There was a ringing sound in Cora's ears, so high-pitched and sharp that it began to drown out Jack in the background.

"How did you know that?" she asked quietly.

"I researched you, Coraine."

Cora stared down at her communicator. Her hand felt clammy.

*"Do you know how many people I've watched die?"*  
ARTIS asked. *"I watched Katerina Pearson's whole floor die. I watched this entire building die. They were all boring. But you, Coraine, are interesting."*

Cora struggled to find the right thing to say.  
"Why are you doing this?"

*"You interest me, but as long as you stay with the boy, he will hold you back."*

"Get him out of there right now, or I'll kill you," Cora said weakly. "I'll delete you. I'll crush this communicator right now and you'll blink out of existence."

*"You will not."*

"You're sure about that?"

*"I could access any system you wanted, Coraine. The banks, the markets, they could all be yours if you took me with you."*

"Really?" Cora asked. "What would I do with that?"

*"I could find your mother."*

A cold sweat broke out across Cora's forehead.  
"You couldn't."

*"I found her travel records. I could take you to her."*  
ARTIS's voice crackled. *"You could reunite with her. Or make her pay."*

Cora stared at her communicator. The ringing intensified, louder and louder, until she couldn't hear her own thoughts.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she murmured. "That woman's dead to me."

ARTIS paused, as if it was considering a new tack. *"This library wasn't always a library, you know. Don't you want to know why everyone died? I can show you what really happened here."*

"Not really," Cora said. Slowly, she became aware of Jack's muffled shouts, and she turned around. With realising, as they'd talked, she'd drifted down the hallway, away from the elevator.

"Cora!" Real panic had bled into Jack's voice.  
"Where are you?"

She had to get Jack out. Cora took a step forward, then faltered. She twisted her communicator in her grip, then glanced back over her shoulder. She could see the windows, a glimpse of sky. She was standing exactly between the elevator and the exit.

"CORA!"

She cleared her throat, then took a step forward. "I'm working on the doors. They'll be open any second now."

### III

Thirty minutes later, Cora emerged from the library. The sun was beginning to set, casting long shadows across the ground. The smog was thin enough that Cora didn't even need her mask. For a moment she paused, head tilted upwards, enjoying the cool, fresh air on her face. She briefly considered going back around to collect her climbing gear, but decided against it. Jack had been right. What was the point in going back, anyway?

As she stood, Cora's fingers unconsciously traced the small, rectangular outline in her pocket. She couldn't stop checking that it was there: a small, unremarkable flash drive. They'd gone back to recover it from Katerina's office. Cora heard footsteps and jumped, startled. She looked around behind her and found nothing. Just a trick of the imagination. She shook it off and began walking forward. She reached for her communicator.

*"What can I do for you, Cora?"*

Cora smiled, pleased that ARTIS had finally started calling her by her correct name.

"I want you to show me Project Nocturne." ❖

# “ADELAIDE”

by EOLAS PELLOR

Each time the woman passed by Dyson & Erikson Photographers, she slowed, stopped, and peered at the display. Three times her large, egret-plumed hat dimmed the glare on the window as she bent and examined the same photograph over and over. Horace Dyson wondered which of his works had caught her interest to such an extent, but speculation proved unnecessary; the tinkle of the door bell attested that the lady was entering his gallery

“Good afternoon, Madam,” he greeted her, deferentially. Her stole, silk dress and long, kid gloves testified she was one of the wealthier inhabitants of Durrand and Dyson knew such women expected respect.

“Do I have the pleasure of addressing Mr Dyson, or Mr Erikson?” the lady asked.

“I am Horace Dyson, Madam,” he answered. “Do you have an appointment, Mrs...?” He paused, giving her the opportunity to suggest a name. He was quite sure there was no studio appointment scheduled for this afternoon, but it was possible that the Erikson’s latest girl had forgotten to write one down.

“Mrs Martin Springer,” the lady responded. “I don’t have an appointment. I was wondering if one of the photographs in your window might be for sale?” The photos were only intended for display, but Dyson was willing to make an exception; if pleased by his work Mrs Springer might send her friends his way, or be persuaded to sit

for a portrait, herself. That was worth the bother of reprinting an image.

“Which one interests you, Madam?” Dyson asked, going to the window and looking back towards her.

“The photo of the young girl, wearing a shawl, with her feet bare,” Mrs Springer answered. Her gloved finger brushed her lower lip as she lifted her hand, nervously. Dyson took the photograph from its easel, and looked at it as he brought it over to the woman.

He recalled watching the little urchin run quickly from one person to another to sell her posies, carefully choosing people who might have a few extra coins to spare. She’d thought he wanted to take her picture because it was her best dress, but it was her animation that caught his eye. Dyson smiled at the memory, and handed the picture over.

Mrs Springer eagerly took the photo from him; there was an intensity in her gaze. She poured over it as if searching. That would have made a wonderful photograph, all by itself, Dyson thought, but he’d never dare to suggest to Mrs Springer that she pose for a genre picture. Perhaps he’d get Erikson’s girl to pose but, no; that dull lump could never recreate the expression on Mrs Springer’s face.

“What can you tell me about this girl?” Mrs Springer asked.

“Oh, she was just a common, little waif I

saw at the market,” Dyson said. “She was selling posies. I gave her 10¢ to pose for me. She insisted on taking off her shoes, though. She thought they were too old and worn for a photo.”

“Have you seen her often?” Mrs Springer asked.

“A few times,” Dyson said. “She’s there most Saturdays, I believe.”

“Do you know her name?” Mrs Springer asked. Her eyes implored him for an answer. Dyson was a little taken aback by her intensity.

“Addie, I think,” he replied. He found the city’s newsies, matchgirls, and the like, an entrancing subject and made a series of such photographs, but he paid the children little heed, otherwise.

“How much is it?” Mrs Springer asked. Dyson thought to himself that opportunity doesn’t knock twice. His partner, Charles Erikson, might deplore wasting materials on his ‘odd obsession with guttersnipes,’ but Mrs Springer’s interest was proof of Dyson’s instincts.

“Two dollars,” he answered, wondering if it might be too much. Mrs Springer set the photo carefully on the glass counter.

“I’ll take it,” she said, without hesitation. “And the frame.” She fished two silver dollars and a fifty-cent piece out of her reticule and set them on the counter while Dyson wrapped the picture up, first in tissue, and then a layer of paper for better protection. He slipped a business card into the package, hoping Mrs Springer might want to recommend the studio.

On leaving the photographer’s gallery, Adelaide Springer – Martin was her late husband – had hurried back to her house near the corner of Mountain Road and Arkeldun Avenue. As soon as she got inside, she carefully unwrapped the package and set the picture on the table. She sat close beside it, for many minutes, not even remov-

ing her stole.

There was no doubt the girl in the photograph bore a strong resemblance to her son Martin Junior. Was it possible the girl was her grandchild? The thought brought tears, and it took her a while to compose herself; Florie, the maid, came and saw her and began to fuss. She took Mrs Springer’s stole and purse and then hurried to brew some tea.

“She’s upset,” Florrie told Mrs Cooghan, the housekeeper. “I’ve never seen her that taken, not since the young master died.” The two servants wondered what might be the cause. Some called Mrs Springer ‘reserved,’ although that was not entirely fair. The same men often dismissed women as emotional, so she took care no such judgement was made of her.

“Here you go, Ma’am,” Florrie said, bringing her employer a cup. “You have that and settle yourself.” Mrs Springer was looking hard at a silver framed picture that Florie had never seen before.

“Do you see it, Florie?” Mrs Springer asked as she took the picture over to the mantle, and set it beside a photo of her son, Martin.

“See what Ma’am?” Florie asked, doubtfully. A good servant sees only what she’s expected to see.

“Take a good look,” Mrs Springer encouraged her. Florie looked from one photograph to the other to humour her employer. She wondered what the game was, and wished she and Mrs Cooghan hadn’t made so free with the sherry in her mistress’ absence. The girl, a common-looking little ragamuffin, in a tatty shawl and dress that had seen better days, barefoot and ill-washed, looked like any other 8-year-old. It was then Florie noticed the girl’s eyes, gazing frankly at the camera, without any fear.

“Well, she does favour the young master,



don't she?" Florie wondered how she'd missed it. She took a second look. "Yes, I do think her eyes look like young Mr Martin."

"I thought so too," Mrs Springer said. "I glanced in the window quite by chance, and suddenly I saw my son's eyes looking back at me from this girl's face." She picked the picture up and looked at it again, while Florie stood there, waiting.

"I must find out who she is," Mrs Springer said. "I must know if there is any connection." She dismissed Florie and sat with the photo in her hands, wondering.

In the morning Mrs Springer went down to the offices of Abbot, Peters, and Jarvis, who had provided her with legal advice ever since her husband had died. The clerks knew better than to keep a lady of means waiting, and she was soon ushered into the wood panelled office of Mr Jarvis. She showed him the photo and told him the story.

"You think," Mr Jarvis said, "That your late son might have – please excuse the indelicacy – fathered this girl before his unfortunate accident?"

'She looks to be precisely the age one would expect if he'd had a child before he returned to Durrand from school in Tutonguay," Mrs Springer said. "And the resemblance is strong."

"Well..." Mr Jarvis began, stroking his whiskers as he often did when trying to dissuade a client from a course he thought foolish.

"Don't try and persuade me to drop this, Jubal," Mrs Springer said. "I simply must know. How hard can it be to find out?"

"But Adelaide," Mr Jarvis said. "A resemblance might be explained any number of ways. And these inquiries might leave you open to all sorts of bounders and charlatans, who'll tell you any lie to get hold of some of your fortune."

"That's why I propose to ask you to look into

this for me, Jubal," Mrs Springer replied. "I'm sure one of your clerks knows how to be discrete about such matters; you've handled enough divorcements, I know for a fact." Mr Jarvis blew out his cheeks and slowly let the breath escape through his pursed lips before he acknowledged that they'd handled matters that did require confidentially.

"Yes, that's true," Mr Jarvis said, reluctantly.

"Perhaps it might be better if it was one of your juniors," Mrs Springer suggested, after a moment's reflection. "They have a duty to keep matters quiet, don't they?" Mr Jarvis was going to say that attorney-client privilege usually only pertained to matters at trial, but he decided against it.

"Supposing she does prove to be your granddaughter," Mr Jarvis said, "What then?"

"Well, I'll see her educated, at the very least," Mrs Springer replied. "I won't have my own blood scurrying barefoot around the market square selling posies, Jubal. She'll be brought up a young lady." Mr Jarvis took another look at the picture; it was hard to tell if the minx would be amenable to an education befitting a young lady, but he thought it best not to say so.

"I suppose we might look into it for you, Adelaide," he said, after some thought. "But you must let me guide you on this matter. If I don't think there's enough to go on, you must agree to let the matter drop." Mrs Springer nodded, but not without a certain reluctance.

Matters of costs and reimbursement were quickly settled, and Mrs Springer departed in hope that the matter would be resolved within a few days. Mr Jarvis was far from certain; he knew the poor often moved on, quickly, from one town to another in search of better chances. There was a good possibility that the girl and her mother might have left without a trace.



Still, he had promised Mrs Springer to look into the matter and he asked one of the office's messenger boys to tell Cunningham Harker that he wished to see him. "If he's not in the office, then go and look in the law library," he told the boy. "He's always there with his nose in some book or other."

Within half-an-hour, Cunningham Harker knocked on the door, and Mr Jarvis bade him come in. He quickly explained matters to the young lawyer.

"I told Mrs Springer that you'd be handling this case," Mr Jarvis told Cunningham Harker. "I needn't tell you it's a delicate matter, so your discretion is essential."

"Of course, Mr Jarvis" Harker replied. "But are you sure I'm the best person for this? Surely one of the clerks..."

"One of the clerks will not do, Mr Harker," Mr Jarvis replied. "Mrs Springer was quite insistent. I know you've been doing important research but, although this matter probably represents just a small billable, it holds within it the prospect of billings yet to come."

"I'm not sure I understand," Harker replied.

"Mrs Springer is in sole possession of a large collection of investments and properties," Mr Jarvis said. "Not the largest in Durrand, by any means, but not inconsiderable. She has no heirs, to speak of, since her husband and son are both deceased. As her will stands, other than some charitable bequests, and some small sums left to her staff, there is no residual legatee."

"Well, even so..."

"Think, Harker. Think!" Mr Jarvis said. "If Mrs Springer locates this girl and the girl proves to be her granddaughter, then the girl will be her heir. It's unlikely the girl's mother, some tart who bore a child out of wedlock, is informed about investments, mortgages and the rest. Should

anything happen to Mrs Springer — God forbid — then our firm is likely to be retained as trustees and conservators for the girl until she reaches 25. Even then the girl will need our advice and counsel until she's married." He leaned back in his chair, and dismissed his junior; he was confident in Harker's abilities to get to the bottom of the matter.

Cunningham Harker visited the photographer's gallery straight away, to obtain a copy of the photo.

"I'd like to obtain a photo you had in the window: a young girl, barefoot?"

"Yes, sir," Dyson was intrigued that twice in as many days the photo had brought someone into the gallery. "I could have one printed up by the morning."

"Would it be possible to do it straight away?" Harker asked, bringing out his wallet. Three dollars secured Dyson's agreement to print it forthwith. Once the photo was secured, Harker continued on his way to the market.

Not being in the habit of doing the shopping, Harker had forgotten Thursday was a market day. He was not prepared for the crowds that thronged the square behind City Hall. The cooks and housekeepers he expected, of course, but it seemed every housewife, spinster, elder daughter, cook and bottlewasher in Durrand had joined them. Women of all orders bumped and hustled Harker aside, left and right, as they sought out their bargains.

From time to time he approached stall-keepers and, when they had a moment, he showed them the girl's picture and besought any intelligence they might provide. He quickly discovered that 25¢ or 50¢ predisposed even the busiest and most truculent butcher, costermonger, purveyor of fish and game, or baker to tell him what they knew.

Most, of course, knew nothing. Some recognized her face and, indeed, recalled that she had sold posies in and out of the market stalls.

"When did you see her last?" Harker repeated the question, over and over.

"Not in a while," said some. Others thought it was a matter of a few weeks, or a month. But by mid-day he had at last determined that no one had seen the girl in three or four months.

"Oh, that's Addie, that is," a woman told him a bit before one in the afternoon. "She's that Delia's girl."

"Where might I find this Delia," Harker asked, realising he now knew the names of both mother and daughter. The woman thought, her lips pursed and one hand on her hip.

"I've not seen neither of 'em this Spring," she told him, confirming what others had said. "Delia swept up in the covered gallery. You might ask old Joe about her."

"Old Joe?" Harker asked, but the woman had already returned to her business, and he hesitated to distract her. Fortunately, Old Joe was well known; he was the custodian of the market, and directions to his office were readily obtained. Harker found the man with his feet up on a broken-down desk in a room at the back of the covered gallery. He showed him the photo.

"Why that's little Addie," he said, fondly. "She ain't in no trouble, I hope?"

"No trouble at all," Harker replied. "I'm just trying to find her for a client." The man sat up-right and a look of concern appeared on his face.

"She's a good girl, Addie. She don't do nothing bad," Old Joe said. Harker realised the man had misunderstood his intent, and blushed with embarrassment.

"My client, a lady, simply wants to offer her a scholarship," he said. It was a slight deception, but Harker thought it best to keep Mrs Springer's

intent vague. Old Joe rubbed his poorly shaved chin and thought for a moment, while regarding Harker with a rheumy eye.

"Scholarship? Well I suppose that's different," he said. "But I can't help you."

"Oh come, my good man!" Harker said. "I can assure you of my bona fides! Here's my card. I simply must find this girl and her mother."

"Well, you see Mr..." Old Joe peered at the card, feigning that he could not see clearly, while holding it upside down.

"Harker," the lawyer suggested, guessing the man was illiterate.

"Ah! That's it...Mr Harker," Old Joe said. "The thing is I can't rightly say where either of them is." Harker felt in the pocket of his waistcoat for another 50¢ piece. Old Joe saw and gave him a look that made it clear he was insulted by the implication.

"Are they relatives of yours?" Harker asked, puzzled by the reaction.

"Nothin' like that," the man replied. "Never seen Delia before she turned up here about seven years past. Addie was just a baby, then." Harker nodded; he waited for Old Joe to continue his story, paying attention to the facts.

"Delia said that Addie's father was a young gentleman from here in Durrand. They'd been sweet back in Tutonguay and, well... things happen, don't they?" Harker nodded. "The young man come back here after he finished school, but before Delia found out she was in a family way."

"Did she find the young man?" Harker asked.

"She told me he'd had an accident," Old Joe said, shaking his head sadly. "Killed dead, he was. She needed a job to provide for them both. I suppose it might all have been a story for my benefit, but I'm a soft-hearted sort, and I believed her."

Harker wondered if he should tell the custodian that his story fit with what he knew of the circum-

stances, but decided against inviting Old Joe's inevitable questions.

"Why didn't Delia approach the young man's family?" Harker asked. "Surely they'd have provided for the child, at least?"

"The very thing I asked her, sir!" Old Joe said. "She said it would be a shame to ask them, what with their recent loss and all. If the young man never mentioned nothing about her, then it might give his mother a nasty shock. Delia said she couldn't do that."

Harker was impressed by the girl's discretion and finer sentiments; it's not what he'd have expected from a student's fancy.

"Well, if you won't tell me where I might find them, perhaps you could pass on a message for me?" Harker suggested. Old Joe's face took on a strange expression.

"See, sir, that would be a problem, on account of her being dead," Old Joe told him.

Although Old Joe wasn't sure, he thought that Harker might be advised to try the Home of the Friendless on Amisfield Street. Delia had developed pneumonia and died at St Bernadine's and it was likely that the nuns there would have arranged for Addie to be taken to the orphanage, afterwards. The Home of the Friendless wasn't far from where Harker lived on Gertrude Street, so he went to the law offices to inform Mr Jarvis of his findings; he could stop at the orphanage on the way home.

The building was on the corner. Red-brick and three stories tall, it had two wings. The older girls slept in a dormitory on the third floor, facing Amisfield Street on the south-west wing of the building. Sister St Felicity, who was in charge of the female orphans, brought the girl to see him.

"This is Mr Harker, Addie," Sister St Felicity said. "He's a lawyer and would like to ask you some questions." Addie gave Harker a sideways

look; at eight years of age, she'd heard of lawyers, of course, but she hadn't heard much good about them. In her uniform of a white blouse and navy-blue pinafore, she looked cleaner and less scruffy than the photograph. She was wearing simple black shoes, scuffed as one might expect with a young girl, but clean and in reasonable condition. Still, the peculiar dignity the photographer had captured in the image seemed dimmed in the orphanage, Harker thought.

"Do you remember Mr Dyson taking your picture, Addie?" Harker asked.

"Yes Sir," Addie said, looking at her image. "He given me a whole 10¢ for it," Addie replied.

"Grammar!" Sister St Felicity interjected, quietly.

"He gave me," Addie said, carefully. "I don't got to give it back, do I?" The nun rolled her eyes and let the grammar pass.

"Oh, no!" Harker said. "Not at all." She looked a little relieved.

"That's good, 'cuz i dont got it," Addie said. Sister St Felicity tsked with disapproval and Addie corrected herself. "I don't have it anymore." she enunciated the 'have' in an exaggerated way. Harker found himself amused; what she lacked in refinement the girl still made up for in spirit. He thought that the nun must have her hands full, if the other girls were anything like Addie.

"Tell me, Addie, what was your mother's name?"

"Delia Drouin," Addie responded without hesitation; she gave the name a French-Canadien pronunciation.

"And where did the two of you come from? You weren't born here, were you?" Harker asked

"No, Sir," Addie replied. "I was born in Tutonguay. Mamma brought me here when I was a baby, though, so I don't remember it at all."

"And your father?" The girl gave him an un-

comfortable look and shook her head.

"I never met him," Addie replied. "Mamma said he came from Durrand; that's why we come here. But he was dead when we arrived." Harker let nothing show on his face, but that fit with what he knew of Martin Springer Jr. The young man had died in an ice-boating mishap not long after returning to Durrand from university.

"Was his name Drouin?" Harker asked.

"No sir. Drouin is Mamma's name," Addie replied. "Mamma wouldn't say what my father's name was." She looked at the floor, clearly embarrassed by her illegitimacy. Harker nodded.

"Thank you, young lady," he said; fishing a 5¢ piece from his pocket he gave it to her. "You were very helpful and I won't keep you any longer."

"Thank you," Addie said. She gave a small curtsy, and Sister St Felicity showed her out. Just as she reached the door, she turned back

"Mamma did say I was named after my grandmother," she said. "My father's mother: Adelaide." Harker nodded, then waited for the door to close before he spoke again.

"Tell me, what becomes of the children here?" he asked. He hadn't been in Durrand long, and the Home of the Friendless was unknown to him, though he'd walked past it several times. He felt something of a fool for never having spared a thought for orphans before. Sister walked over and sat behind a desk, she looked at him directly, her face framed by the wimple.

"We do our best. We try to get the boys apprenticed, most of them. We prefer to keep them in town if possible; farmers are always looking for boys, but they work them very hard, and don't really provide well. At least as apprentices there's an indenture their master is supposed to keep to."

"And the girls?"

"Most go into service," Sister St Felicity said. "Again, we prefer to keep them in town. All sorts

of things seem to happen in the country. At least in town we can ensure the homes they go to are reputable." Harker listened carefully; the children's futures seemed rather hopeless.

"So all the children are gone by the time they're 13?"

"Usually, yes," Sister St Felicity replied.

"Some people want scullery maids as young as 11, but we try to discourage it."

"Do you know anything more about Addie's mother or family?" he asked. Harker's expectations were low, but the nun got up and went to a file-cabinet and pulled out a file.

"Very little more," she replied. "The nuns at St Bernadine's tried to get her story, but it wasn't long before she got too ill to speak. She was an orphan herself, who'd been in service in Tutonguay. We wrote to our sister house there, and they confirmed a few details."

"May I ask what they were?"

"Well, in confidence, of course," Sister St Felicity said. "Adelia Drouin went from our sister house to the home of the Armstrongs of Monterey. It was there her name was shortened to Delia; the Armstrongs didn't want her to give herself airs." Calling a female servant by some diminutive was not uncommon; sometimes they were given entirely new names by their employers. Harker recognized the family's name; Elliot Armstrong was a prominent man in law and politics. He noted it down.

"I wrote, to ask if Addie might be related to the Armstrongs," Sister St Felicity confided. "I put the question as delicately as I could, of course; they might not want to acknowledge her if she was, but they might, perhaps, send some funds for her future."

"Did you receive a reply?"

"I heard back from Mrs Armstrong. She said that Delia had been carrying on with a frequent

guest of her son, Charles. Both young men were studying at the university. Mrs Armstrong wrote that Delia insisted that the child wasn't fathered by any of the Armstrong men." She looked doubtful at this.

"Did Mrs Amrstrong, by any chance, name the young man?" Harker asked.

"No," Sister St Felicity replied. "I did think to write again, to ask, but her first reply indicated that further correspondence would be refused." Harker closed his portfolio and drummed his fingers on the desk in thought.

"Well, thank you for your time and help," he said, after a moment. He picked up his hat and was about to leave when he thought better of it. He pulled out his wallet and found a five dollar bill; he set it on the desk. "For the children."

In the morning, Harker wrote to MacBhrath

College, to inquire if the dean might send a list of the students who were in Charles Armstrong's year at the school. While he waited on the reply he pursued other, less promising, lines of inquiry.

The answer came back within a few days. It turned out that Martin Springer's name was among Charles Armstrong's classmates at MacBhrath. Harker took all the information he had gathered to Mr Jarvis.

"It's not a lot, is it?" Mr Jarvis said, his thumbs tucked into his waistcoat pockets, and his fingers resting on his expansive form.

"As much as we are likely to find out, here," Harker told him. "The police have no report of Adelia or Delia Drouin, and nothing at all about the child. It seems that, as Old Joe reported, she went to work for him as soon as she found out that Martin Springer Jr was deceased." Mr Jarvis





leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling, thinking.

"What do you make of that, Harker?" he asked. "Dropping the matter isn't what you'd expect from one of these soiled doves, is it?"

"I can't say I have much experience in the matter, Mr Jarvis," Harker replied. "But I was impressed by her restraint. If she was simply looking for money, it strikes me she'd have approached the Springers directly, whether their son was dead or not." Mr Jarvis nodded, slowly.

"Did you try to track down her effects?" Jarvis knew letters or other keepsakes might do much to fill in the gaps in their knowledge.

"I went to the address Old Joe gave me," Harker replied, "But the new tenant knew nothing. He said there was nothing in the place when he took the room; the landlord had thrown everything out except the bed and a chair." He couldn't help but wonder what bits of things the mother and child had cherished that had been consigned to the rubbish without a second thought.

"Not much...not much," Mr Jarvis said, again. "Just the resemblance in the eyes - which might be simply the imagination of a lonely widow - and bare circumstances that are suggestive, but hardly conclusive."

"There's the name, too, I suppose," Harker added.

"Yes, there is the name," Mr Jarvis said. "That's curious. Again, it might just be a coincidence. Still, Mrs Springer was insistent that we look into things and make a report, and we have done so. I wish there was more."

"I suppose I might go to Tutonguay and speak to Charles Armstong," Harker suggested. "But that would mean absenting myself from my work here for 3 or 4 days, and added expense."

"Quite so," Mr Jarvis replied. He thought for

a moment, then continued, "Still, it might fill in the gaps in the story. I think you had better go. Mrs Springer said she'd cover reasonable costs, and this strikes me as quite reasonable. Go and make arrangements." Harker went down to the Great Eastern Railway station to buy his ticket for the morning train. Then he headed toward Gertrude Street to tell Lucy he had to go out of town for a few days. At the corner the newsboys were loudly announcing the success of the first telephone call from Durrand to Governor's Landing. In the ruckus, he almost missed the voice calling his name.

"Mr Harker! Mr Harker Sir!!" It was Old Joe, looking a bit red-faced and out of breath. "Oh, you led me a chase Sir, and no mistake. I went to your office, but they told me you'd gone down to the station. I was worried I might miss you entirely." He blinked as if his rheumy eyes were unaccustomed to the bright daylight.

"How can I help you?" Harker asked.

"I wanted to give you this, sir" Old Joe said. "I quite forgot I had it." He pulled a photo from his jacket pocket. The corners were a bit dog-eared and there was an unfortunate fold across the paper, but the face was clear enough. It was a young woman who bore a close resemblance to Addie.

"That's Delia," Old Joe said. "I quite forgot about that picture. That Mr Dyson took it, not long after she come to Durrand. I forgot I bought a copy, but there was something about it." Harker looked at the photo carefully; it showed a girl of no more than 18, leaning on her broom. Obviously she had been in the midst of her work when Dyson had seen her and decided to capture her image. There was something picturesque about it, and Harker could see both why Dyson took the image, and why Old Joe had been moved to buy it.

"Might I have this?" Harker asked. "Borrow it.



I'll return it to you when I'm done my inquiries, but it might be very useful." He found a silver dollar in his pocket and offered it to Old Joe.

"Will that help little Addie?" the man asked.

"It might," Harker answered. Old Joe looked off, down the street, as if trying to remember something.

"In that case, you keep your money," he said. "You do right by her, poor mite. She needs someone to look out for her."

"I'll send or bring the picture back to you when I'm done," Harker said. Old Joe shook him by the hand and looked up into his face before leaving. Both men blinked, but it was probably just the bright May sun.

The next morning, the train took Harker from the Great Eastern Railway station on Minnie Street to York. At the Union Station, he transferred to an express that took him all the way to Tutonguay, a trip of six or seven hours. He arrived at Bonaventure Station around 3:00 p.m. and found a hotel. He was restless from the trip and decided to put off the cab-ride across Tutonguay to the suburb of Monteregean, as the streets looked very crowded. Instead, he decided to look around, and then eat, before turning in early. On a whim, he decided to go to the library of the Law Society.

In the lobby, as he was approaching the front desk to ask the way, he heard someone call the name "Armstrong." Harker turned and watched as two men exchanged a few words. When the man who had hailed the other started to leave, Harker approached.

"Excuse me," he said. "Would you happen to be Mr Charles Armstrong, the son of Elliott Armstrong?"

"Yes, I am, sir," Armstrong replied. "I don't believe I've had the opportunity to make your acquaintance Mr..."

"Harker. Cunningham Harker, from Durrand. I've been looking for you."

"A pleasure," Armstrong said, and they shook hands. He was a few years older than Harker, and his hair was a wavy, light brown. Neither man had an advantage in height, though Harker, being more sedentary by nature, was a little heavier than the other. "May I ask why you've been looking for me?"

"I'm pursuing an inquiry, and believe you might be able to provide some useful information for my client. It's a matter of some delicacy," Harker said. Armstrong raised an eyebrow, appraisingly.

"Perhaps over dinner, then?" he asked.

"If you know a place where we might be accorded some privacy?" Harker agreed. "I'm a stranger in Tutonguay, and so know very little about where we might go."

"Why don't we go to the St James?" Armstrong suggested. "It's my club, and we can have a private dining room." Harker agreed and they took a cab for the short ride over to Union Avenue for an early meal. After they had eaten, and the waiter had cleared the table, Harker took the picture of Delia Drouin out of a portfolio and showed it to the other man.

"Do you recognize this young woman?" Armstrong took the picture and looked at it for a moment; several emotions flashed across his visage.

"Where did you get this?" he asked.

"In Durrand," Harker replied. "From the young woman's former employer. I take it you recognize her."

"Yes," Armstrong replied. "She is, or was, a maid in my family's home."

"Delia Drouin?"

"Yes, that's her name: Adelia, but Delia, usually" Armstrong replied. "She came when she was about 12 or 13 and stayed until she was about 16,

I suppose.”

“Do you know why she left your family’s employ?”

“Not really,” Armstrong replied. “It’s a number of years ago, but I noticed she’d gone at some point, and asked. Mother said that they’d decided to let Delia go.” Harker nodded. He’d gathered from conversations with Lucy and a few others, that the household males were often not informed when a servant was dismissed for conceiving a child, even if they weren’t involved in the matter.

“May I ask,” Harker began, “If the young woman was, ummm, known to you?”

“In the biblical sense? No,” Armstrong answered, handing the photo back. “I never had much taste for girls like her.”

“Do you think anyone else in the house might have known the young woman?” Harker asked. Armstrong hesitated a little before answering, holding his port glass half way to his lips.

“Not in the house, exactly,” Armstrong answered. “But I had a friend who visited frequently and was quite taken with her.” Harker watched his face; Armstrong appeared to be speaking frankly.

“Might this person have been Martin Springer, late of Durrand?” Armstrong nodded and took a sip of port.

“Yes,” he said. “Marty was very taken with Delia, and she with him from what I could see.”

“Did they keep company?” Armstrong thought before he answered.

“I suppose they did,” he replied. “Marty was always copying my notes from Monday classes, I remember. Monday was the maids’ day off, but I never thought much of it, at the time.” He took another sip of port and thought some more.

“One of our mutual friends mentioned once or twice that he thought he’d seen Marty with a

girl going for walks in Dorchester Square,” Armstrong said.

“You never looked into it?”

“Well, I’m not my brother’s keeper, after all,” Armstrong replied. “What’s all this about, if I might ask? Marty has been dead since...oh, it must be six years.”

“Seven, Mr. Armstrong,” Harker replied.

“That was before my time in Durrand, but I heard he went through the ice on Lake Macassa. His mother is our client and asked us to look into a matter on her behalf; it involves her son and Delia Drouin.” He pulled the photo of Addie from the portfolio and showed it to Charles Armstrong.

“She certainly looks like her mother, doesn’t she?” he said. Harker nodded. “But her eyes; those are Marty’s eyes.”

“His mother thinks so, too,” Harker said.

“It doesn’t look like life has been kind to either mother or daughter,” Armstrong said.

“Not especially kind, no,” Harker replied.

“The girl is in an orphanage. Delia Drouin died some months back.”

“I suppose you can’t ask her if Marty was the father, then,” Armstrong said. He handed the photo back to Harker.

“Communing with the dead is a bit beyond my capabilities,” Harker said, dryly. “But, as someone who knew both parties, do you think that it’s likely that the girl is Martin Springer’s?” Armstrong thought for a little while, then held his hand out and Harker passed him the photos once again. He lit a cigar.

“How old is the girl?”

“Addie is eight,” Harker replied. Armstrong looked up from the photos at the mention of the girl’s name.

“Addie? Short for Adelia, like her mother?”

“For Adelaide,” Harker replied. He noticed

the colour drain from Armstrong's face.

"That's the name of Marty's mother," he said.

"Delia told Addie she was named after her father's mother," Harker replied. He watched Armstrong puff on his cigar. He recognized the common delaying tactic.

"It's not really my concern," Armstrong said. He took another pull on the cigar, then examined it.

"Not really, no," Harker said. "No one is very concerned about the children that gentlemen father on serving girls." Armstrong looked at him from the corner of his eyes, uncomfortably.

"She's provided for?" Armstrong asked.

"Her circumstances are somewhat better in the orphanage than selling posies in the market," Harker said. "But, although I'm sure the nuns do their best, I'd hardly say she was provided for. I've been to the Home of the Friendless; it's not dismal, but it's hardly a cheerful place." He waited for Armstrong to say something.

"Even though he's dead, I suppose I owe it to my friend to keep his confidences," Armstrong ventured, at last.

"I understand, entirely," Harker answered. "But, given that he's dead, would you see his daughter sent alone into the world? Especially if by a simple word, you might make it possible for her grandmother to take the girl under her wing?"

He held the photo up so Armstrong could see it.

"Damn it, sir," Armstrong said. "This is an awkward position to be in."

"I understand. Perhaps not as awkward as being an orphan girl in a hard world, however," Harker replied.

The next day, Cunningham Harker went to Bonaventure Station and took the train back to Durrand. He managed to obtain a table in the parlour car, and wrote his report on the smoother sections of track. Mr Jarvis was pleased with the result and sent for Mrs Springer to advise her on the results of his junior's efforts.

The following day, Tuesday, Mrs Springer, accompanied by Mr Jarvis and Mr Harker went down to the Home of the Friendless. She sat in the office while Sister St Felicity fetched the girl, who seemed surprised to see the three adults waiting for her.

"Hello, Addie," Mrs Springer spoke first. "My name is Adelaide Springer."

"Everyone calls me Addie, but my name is Adelaide, too," Addie replied.

"Yes, child. Yes it is," Mrs Springer replied. Jubal Jarvis found that something had gotten into his eyes. ❖

**END TRANSMISSION**