

NAMING NAMES

By Pat Cadigan

We all know the old saw about how “sticks and stones can break my bones, but *names* can never hurt me.” Untrue. Most untrue. As the scary, intricate, and passionate story that follows will demonstrate. . . .

Pat Cadigan was born in Schenectady, New York, and now lives in Overland Park, Kansas. She made her first professional sale in 1980, and has subsequently come to be regarded as one of the best new writers in SF. She was the coeditor, along with husband Arnie Fenner, of *Shayol*, perhaps the best of the semiprozines of the late 70s; it was honored with a World Fantasy Award in the “Special Achievement, Non-Professional” category in 1981. She has also served as Chairperson of the Nebula Award Jury and as a World Fantasy Award Judge. Her first novel, *Mindplayers*, was released in 1987 to excellent critical response, and her second novel, *Synners*, appeared in 1991 to even *better* response, as well as winning the prestigious Arthur C. Clarke Award. Her story “Pretty Boy Crossover” has recently appeared on several critics’ lists as among the best science fiction stories of the 1980s; her story “Angel” was a finalist for the Hugo Award, the Nebula Award, *and* the World Fantasy Award (one of the few stories ever to earn that rather unusual distinction): and her collection *Patterns* has been hailed as one of the landmark collections of the decade. Her stories have appeared in our First, Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, and Ninth Annual Collections. Her most recent book is a new novel, *Fools*, and a new story collection, *Dirty Work*, is coming up soon.

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It had been years since I’d had the dream. So many years that I thought I’d finally outgrown it, if there is such a thing as outgrowing a recurring dream. It was the only recurring dream I’d ever had, and when I stopped having it, I’d all but forgotten about it. As time goes on, little pieces of life drop away and are left behind, unmourned and unmissed. I always figured that coming across them again meant you were retraveling old territory, either because you’d missed something important the first time through, or you’d just gotten jammed up, stuck in a rut. I’d also always figured that it would happen to me, even more than once, but the dream took me by surprise anyway.

In the dream, I’m way out in an enormous area, a kind of ghost-field, and I’m standing partially below the ground. I used to think I was in a hole or a well, or maybe even just shrunk to the size of an apple, but it’s none of those things. I’m just lower than the surface, sunk into the ground deeply enough that the long, wild weeds tower over my head. It’s almost dark—the clear sky is the deep blue that comes in the last minutes of sunset. There’s a golden glow in the west; stars are beginning to

appear. I keep looking up, at the sky, at the glow, at the weeds leaning in the pre-night breeze, and in that suspended moment, my mother walks by.

It's more of a very slow stroll, a drift. She isn't here to find me. She isn't looking for anyone or anything, because, I realize, she knows where every-thing is, or where it ought to be.

And then somebody calls her name. The voice is distant yet very clear, like one of those stars overhead. But the name it calls is not my mother's name.

Except that somehow it is. I know that it is. Not because my mother turns toward the voice with a genuinely frightened expression that I have never seen on her face in real life—I know this is her name because it fits her, describes her, is her. It's the articulation of *her*, mentally, physically, spiritu-ally, any way at all, anything that is about her, in her, of her, what she has seen, what she's known. What she has told, what she will never tell.

My mother takes a step backward—I'm not sure whether it's to run, or to brace herself against some imminent attack, and I know that she isn't sure, either. I know everything about my mother now, I realize. But of course I do—it's all contained in that name, that Name, her Name.

And I think to myself, *I've got to remember this. I've got to remember everything I know about her now, everything I know about her and everything I know about our life together and her life before me and after I went out on my own. I've got to remember the way she thinks . . .*

That's as far as my thoughts go, however, because then she turns and sees me through the bending weeds. Her black hair flares with the movement, her face is tight, eyes wide, the cords in her neck stand out starkly. I understand two things: first, it's all my fault that this voice, wherever it comes from, whoever it belongs to, called her Name, and second, the voice is about to call another Name, and this one will be mine.

That was where I always woke up, and it was no different this time. For a long time, I lay staring at the distorted oblong of light thrown across the ceiling by the window. The bedroom of my current apartment had an eastern exposure and I always opened the curtains just before I went to sleep, so the sun could wake me in the morning. It wasn't that I was so crazy for getting up with the sun; I just liked lying there watching the morning come on before I had to join the rest of the world. My insistence on easing into a day and easing out of it was probably why I didn't have much in the way of those cultural trophies most people have by the time they're staring thirty in the face, but then, I wasn't working on an ulcer or a heart attack or a drinking problem, either. When you don't eat much, there isn't much that eats you.

Most mothers would have said that was no kind of attitude to have. Maybe

mine would have, but probably not out loud, or at least not to my face. All mother-daughter relationships have a certain amount of odd to them, but ours was odder than most. This was probably because it had always been just us. The focus becomes a lot tighter between a parent and child when there's no one else in the house—no distractions. I went from infant to very young roommate to accomplice, and I stayed an accomplice for a long, long time, until we both sensed there was a change coming, some fork in the road that meant she had to go her way and I had to go mine. It was that bloodless.

As I lay there, I tried to remember everything I'd known about her in the dream. I could still feel what it was like to know but, as always, it had all gone away when I'd woken up. Every bit, including that Name I'd heard. The only thing I knew without a doubt was that she was going to call me.

Where was she now, anyway? Seattle, still? The fogginess that dreams always leave behind hadn't cleared out of my head yet, I wasn't ready to connect with anything real. Except for that certainty that my mother was going to call, and very soon.

Heat shimmies ran through the block of light on the ceiling. The details of the day were starting to press on me but I already felt removed from everything, pulled out of my routine to some place where no one else could go.

I picked up the phone on the first ring.

"Did I wake you?" asked my mother.

"No. This is the time I usually wake up."

"Ah." My mother is one of those people who remembers things audibly. "Well, I've been up all night."

"Something wrong?"

"Yes. Or—well, not exactly *wrong*. There's a problem."

"What is it?" I asked. I knew exactly what she was going to say but sometimes you can't skip any steps in a process.

"It's . . . it's hard to explain on the phone. Easier if you just come here and I can lay the whole thing out for you."

"Uh-huh."

"I don't know what you're doing now . . . what kind of job do you have?"

“I’m a chauffeur.” I smiled into the phone at her baffled silence. “A limo driver. I take people out to the airport and pick them up when their planes come in. Nothing I can’t walk away from.”

“Yes, that’s you. Never do anything you can’t walk away from.”

“It always seemed like a good policy,” I said, pushing down the sheet and kicking it off.

“Well, will you come?”

“Mom,” I said, “what do *you* think.”

* * * *

I could have saved my job by just saying I had a family emergency—my mother was in the hospital in critical condition and I had to rush to her bedside for a will-she-live-or-die vigil—but I didn’t. It wasn’t that I was so scrupulously truthful—in fact, I’ve always lied quite a lot—but that there are times when a lie is ... bad. Now, that would sound crazy to all those lovers of truth walking the streets in search of an honest man with their lanterns dangling precariously in front of their self-righteous noses. But the fact is, the truth is a very dangerous thing and most people aren’t very careful with it because most of the time, they don’t even recognize it. Consequently, they end up lying when they think they’re being truthful, and spilling the truth when they think they’re covering up.

Only if you know what the truth is can a lie be useful, a distraction for the sake of personal protection. And anyone who has ever kept quiet to keep from looking foolish has no business feeling disdainful at that.

Truth, or a lie: the right tool for the right job, that’s all it is. I knew that whatever my mother had called me about had something to do with truth, and so if I’d lied to my supervisor at the Silver Eagle Limo Service, I’d have queered things somehow, gotten off to a bad start and gone downhill from there. So I just told him that I was going to see my mother in Seattle (I’d remembered right) and I didn’t know how long I’d be gone.

Victor went around and around about it and, I had to go along with him, because otherwise he would never have seen. He asked me if she was sick and I said no, not to my knowledge. Was she in the hospital? No, of course not, if she wasn’t sick, then she wouldn’t be in the hospital. Was this an emergency? Well, my mother seemed to feel it was. Did she have anybody out there she could turn to? No, no one. What about my father? I hedged on that and just said, good question. Which it was, since I didn’t know the answer myself. Was my mother in trouble? Yes, some kind but she hadn’t told me what. Could I find out? Not without going to see her.

He'd pause there and sit back from his messy desk, tapping his lower front teeth with a pen until he hurt himself. Then he'd sit up straight, tap the pen on the desk, and start all over again. Was my mother sick? Not that I knew of. Was she in the hospital? No. Was this an emergency? For her, yes. Wasn't there anyone else? No. Your father? Good question. Was she in trouble? Yes. What kind? Shrug. Sit back; tap teeth; wince; sit up, tap desk, start over. Like a recurring dream. I wondered idly if Victor had ever had one.

Finally he came out with the cycle-breaker: who did I think was going to do my airport runs if I just took off? I said I didn't know, I hadn't seen the work schedule.

That did it for him, of course, but he had to ask one last question just to make sure—why did I insist on screwing everything up like this, did I really want to make everything hard on everyone else?

No, I told him, I just wanted to go see my mother. So that made him sure he'd had enough and he fired me. I turned in my uniform and a driver named Barney let me deadhead out to the airport, where he was going to pick up half a dozen people named Gershon returning from a family reunion. I sat in the front seat and Barney chattered all the way out, mostly about what a dick Victor was and how smart I'd been to make him fire me because now I could collect unemployment. I hadn't thought of that; it had just been cleaner, more definite. I could face Seattle and my mother completely unencumbered.

Well, maybe not completely—I still had my apartment, but there wasn't much in it that belonged to me, and anything I felt I couldn't do without was in my backpack. I could return to it or not, and it wouldn't make a bit of difference in the long run, like a disposable bookmark.

Barney gave me a raised fist salute as he drove away from the curb at the terminal to go in search of the homeward-bound Gershons. It gave me a good feeling, as if he had passed me a little of his power to use for the trip, so I could conserve my own.

I'd never thought of myself as a superstitious person, but then it's bad luck to say you're superstitious. No; actually, I'd just never thought of it in those terms but I suppose that, seen from the outside, I was devoutly superstitious. From the inside, I thought of it as having experience.

* * * *

My mother was waiting right there at the gate when I got off the plane in Seattle. She was easy to spot in the crowd, even though at five feet, she had to look up at most people, including me. Her black hair, streaked with a little more silver than last time I'd seen her, flowed down below her shoulders, a few strands catching here and

there on her gauzy peasant blouse. She had probably bought the calf-length skirt at one of those semi-ethnic shops, though I couldn't tell which culture she was paying tribute to. The dark socks crumpled around the tops of her hiking shoes made her legs look like sticks.

"You look good, Mom," I said, bending down to hug her.

Her hands batted against my shoulders like nervous, fluttering birds. "I look the same."

"And that's good."

She reached up and brushed back the hair hanging over my right eye. It fell forward again immediately, to her disapproval, but she just tucked one hand into the crook of my elbow and led me through the airport, telling me about the big old house she'd acquired and how the rain made her woolen wall-hangings smell.

The cool, damp air was a relief after the unrelenting dry and hot spell in the midwest. I'd never been to this area of the country before and I could see why my mother had ended up here. The climate and the mountains suited her, and the city was variegated enough to accommodate all kinds of perspectives.

"As close to an enlightened society as I'm going to come," she said, pulling up in front of a three-storey brick house. The porch had been painted recently. "I suppose stain would look better, but I had a coupon for Glidden's rainy-day gray."

"Really?"

She paused in the act of unlocking the front door. "What do *you* think." My mother would hoist me on my own petard at any moment, for no other reason than to show that she could.

I smelled the woolen wall-hangings as soon as I walked in. There were two very large ones hanging on either side of the entry hall, straw-colored things with mandala-like patterns woven into them. "Mary had a monster lamb," I said, sniffing. "Was this ever shepherding country? I can't remember."

"You never knew," said my mother. "It's impossible to remember what you've never known. I don't know, either."

I dropped my backpack at the foot of the stairs and followed her into the kitchen for the tea-making ritual. All visitors, including me, meant a fresh-brewed pot of darjeeling. In many ways, my mother was like an eccentric from central casting, and on purpose, as if following a script was her safety net.

She kept chatting about innocuous things while she heated some designer

bottled water and prepared the teapot and cups. It was an antique pot, of course, yellow porcelain with pinkish-purple flowers splayed over it, shaped a bit like Aladdin's lamp. She'd had it for as long as I could remember and I had no idea how it had managed to survive so many moves without even getting chipped.

Still telling me about the other women in her food co-op, she put every-thing on a bamboo tray and led me into the living room, which had only Japanese-style mats around a long, low table. I was starting to feel a little restless and impatient and even though I tried to suppress my feelings, my mother knew.

"Just trying to keep you from getting a case of the psychic bends," she said, pouring carefully. "You know how that can be, going from one world into another."

"Do you live in another world, Mom?"

"Always have. You know that, too."

I picked up the cup. Something strange mixed in with the tea aroma hit my nose. "What's in this?" I said, frowning at the dark liquid.

"Drink it. It'll help you relax."

"You're the one who always said that if I were any more relaxed, I'd be on life support."

"You need to relax your mind. I want it all open and receptive."

I smiled. "Are you going to play with my mind, Mom? Reshape it? Don't you think it's little late for that? I've already made a lot of choices."

She smiled back at me through the steam snaking upwards from her own cup. "Yes, not to choose is to choose, I told you that myself and I don't regret it."

The tea tasted as strange as it smelled; whatever had been added gave it a musty under-flavoring, like something on the verge of going stale. It made my tongue feel dry.

"You've always trusted me, haven't you," my mother said, watching me drink.

"Why shouldn't I? You're my mother."

She didn't stop smiling but her eyes suddenly became very bright, as if they were welling up. "Yes, that sort of trust is very important, isn't it. Child trusts mother, mother presumably trusts child. But I haven't always trusted you, I'm sorry to say. That wasn't your fault, and it wasn't mine. Sometimes things just happen in

ways they aren't supposed to. But you see, children aren't really trustworthy. Not in the adult sense." She finished her cup and poured herself another. I wasn't halfway through my own. There seemed to be so much of it, an ocean of tea in one little cup. I would have tried to finish it anyway, but I couldn't move.

"You haven't had this in a long time, so it doesn't take much for you," my mother said, matter-of-factly. "I've built up quite a tolerance over the years, so I'll have to drink most of the pot. I know you won't mind if I do."

I didn't. I didn't mind anything; I didn't mind having been called halfway across the country so my mother could drug me. This was more the drug than my roll-with-it worldview and I knew it. But I didn't mind about that, either. If anything, it was a relief to know that I had to be drugged to be this compliant.

"The last time you drank this tea, you were eight years old," my mother said. Her words seemed to melt into my brain. "That was the only other time. You don't remember because I told you not to. Now, I'm telling you to remember why I gave it to you."

Obediently, or maybe reflexively, my memory began to reconfigure itself, as if it were a stage set undergoing a scenery change by an intangible crew, pieces being turned around, turned over, regrouped to reveal hidden designs and different uses. Here was an old interest in music I'd forgotten completely, a request for guitar lessons that I'd never gotten around to making; there was an old talent for drawing left to atrophy; over there was a high-school-level French book I'd been reading in an empty classroom after school, half-listening to my third-grade teacher explain something called The Gifted-And-Talented Program to my mother, just before we made another of our many moves away.

Here was everything, in vivid technicolor and three dimensions, that I'd once wanted to fill up my life with but then turned away from, all interest gone. It was somebody else's dream now, but I could get a little of the feeling of what it had been like when it had been my own dream.

That dream was replaced by another I was more familiar with.

My head drooped forward and my eyes closed. I heard my mother's skirt rustle as she got up and came around to help me lie down before I fell over. She put one hand on my forehead and reached across the table for her tea with the other. I felt her drinking the last of it and the warmth of her hand on me intensified, making my skin tingle.

"You knew," she said after a while. "You were a very talented, *knowing* little girl, perceptive, intuitive. I thought this would be useful at first, for both of us. There would be so much I wouldn't have to tell you, I thought, so much that I wouldn't have to explain or prove to you, or, failing that, hide from you.

“It was your lineage coming out, of course. I congratulated myself on that—having chosen well so that the combination of mother and father would result in a child with our strengths and gifts naturally reinforced. In those days, I believed we secret people should only marry each other, or at least breed only with each other, because I thought only about things like dilution. I didn’t really know anything about genetics. I still don’t know very much, but I do know that it applies to secret people as well as everyone else. We stacked the deck but there was no guarantee that you’d get the winning hand. You could have come out with almost everything recessive and only a stronger-than-average empathetic streak to show for all my hopes ...” She paused. “I’d have loved you just as much ...” Her voice trailed off again and I could feel how she wanted to believe that last statement but she really wasn’t sure.

I felt badly for her, for her shame over it. I’d always said there were times when the truth was vastly over-rated and this was certainly one of them.

“But it’s ridiculous to speculate on what might have been when it’s some-thing that can’t be,” she went on, adjusting her hand on my forehead. “After all, you *were* everything I had hoped for. You were the perfect tribute to my pride and vanity. I didn’t understand that was how I saw you until it was brought home to me that I had been concentrating on your gifts without a thought to protecting either one of us from them.”

All feeling of my surroundings had faded away now as well as any sensation of my physical body, with the exception of the warm spot that was my mother’s hand. It was the focus of my awareness and of my mother’s voice, the only thing that seemed to be keeping me from floating away.

“You flourished, as any hothouse flower will in the absence of adverse forces and natural enemies. There should be no constraints, I thought, and no restraints. Why shouldn’t you know everything there was to know about . . . oh, god, I’m not sure I can tell you now. Except that we live in many worlds all at once and secret people—you, me, your father, certain others— can use the multiplicity of forces in them to our own advantage.

“What we do depends on what our talents tend toward. Some of us use our special knowledge to become healers—but you’ll find very, very few either in doctor’s offices or in ads in the back of tabloids. There are teachers who have never been in a classroom, leaders who seem to do nothing all their lives but follow.

“You were just finding your way through the possibilities when you spoke my Name.”

I almost heard it in my mind—that Name from the dream, her secret Name. Had it been *my* voice, then? I didn’t think so, but I couldn’t remember what it had

sounded like, whether it was a child's or an adult's, a man's or a woman's.

“You didn't understand what you were doing, of course. Not the magnitude of it. I hadn't even told you anything about Names, that's how powerful you had already become. It was something you had simply divined, a leap in logic that was the equivalent of an eight-year-old understanding nuclear fission by learning about atoms.

“But far, far more dangerous.”

There was a familiarity to what she was telling me, but I felt no personal involvement in it. She might have been reminding me about an old movie we had watched together.

“I was lucky you were a child, with all of a child's love and respect and dependence. Especially dependence. You still wanted me to be Mother when you Named me. You didn't want the power over me that Naming me had given you. You didn't even realize what it meant to Name me, though that understanding wouldn't have been long in coming to you.

“But it wasn't you I was really worried about, it was him. The third person in the equation that gave you to me, of course.” She paused. “You never asked me about your father, you know. You never even asked me if you had a father, or where he was, not even while you were free to do so. I don't know what I would have told you if you had—maybe just that he and I had gone our separate ways before you were born. But then you'd have wanted to know why he never wanted to see you and I didn't really want to have to explain that he didn't know about you because I hadn't told him.

“He found out, though. He found out the moment you Named me.”

A picture of a man's face was forming in my mind. I'd never seen him before but I knew this had to be my father. He was old enough to be my grandfather. His years became him, probably better than his youth had; very encouraging, since I looked a great deal more like him than I did my mother.

“That shouldn't have happened. Because he didn't know about you, there shouldn't have been a link. But it was there. Maybe you were just so powerful that he couldn't help sensing you, sensing what you are. Or maybe he was suspicious after I conveniently took myself out of his life instead of trying to hang onto him. Anyway, before I could prepare something to keep you from Naming me or anyone else indiscriminately—and to prevent you from letting your own Name slip—he called me.”

“I want to congratulate you on the success of your project,” he said, all cheery-nasty. ‘Our little monster—’ he actually called you that—our little monster is

certainly a prodigy. If you had let me know, I would have been generous with support checks. But if you didn't want my support in the past, I don't suppose you want it now.'

“‘You're right,’ I told him, ‘I want nothing from you, I need nothing from you.’”

“‘Nothing *more*, you mean,’ he said. ‘Listen, I'm all for everyone's right to self-determination, but don't you think it's rude beyond the pale to use a person's own tissue this way without so much as a please or thank-you? I certainly do. I have to tell you that while *I* was apparently what you had in mind, *you* weren't *my* choice.’”

“‘So what,’” I said.

“‘So we're a family now, that's what,’ he said. ‘Whether you like it or not. You can't have it both ways, you know, I can't be the father and *not* be the father at the same time. Which means that you and I are connected now, if not exactly bound. But I've found in my old age that I suddenly respect that kind of bond much more than I used to. There are certain advantages. I would ask you to marry me, but *you* didn't ask for what you wanted so I don't feel obliged to ask now for what *I* want. And I don't have to. Our little monster will just give it to me.’”

“‘He meant my Name, of course. And yours. He would eventually have been able to divine your Name because of his link to you. Once he knew your Name, he would have complete power over you and all of your own power as well. Getting you to tell him my Name would be pretty much an anticlimax, but he'd have done it anyway, just to show he could.’”

The effects of whatever she had put in the tea were receding . . . sort of. I was beginning to feel more alert mentally, the memories were becoming more vivid, more real, and more personally involving.

“‘I thought about killing you,’” my mother said.

I remembered that, too, though I hadn't really understood at the time. I'd just had the idea that my mother was considering something harmful and I hadn't been so much afraid as curious. Because I'd known that in the end, she wouldn't hurt me . . . couldn't hurt me. . . .

“‘No, I couldn't. You wouldn't let me. That was the last time you exercised the power of my Name over me. And you were right; even if I could have brought myself to kill my own child, it would have been a very foolish thing to do. Even if the fact that it was murder had gone unnoticed—I could have fixed it that way—your father would have known and *that* would have given him a certain amount of power over me. Not quite as much as knowing my Name, but too much. I had brought you

into the world without his consent; to send you out of it also without his consent would have cost me my will. I would never have been able to do anything again without his permission. He couldn't have forced me to do anything—like tell him my Name—but he could have prevented me from doing anything simply by telling me I couldn't. Whether it was using my powers or just washing my face.” She paused. “You’ve seen people who seem to be unable to take care of them-selves, haven’t you? Many of them are just incompetent for some prosaic reason. But many others are secret people who lost their souls.”

She sighed and I realized that she was near exhaustion. “So, instead of killing you, I hid you. Actually, I sent you into hiding within yourself. The only reason I could do it was because you let me. You could have stopped me—after all, you knew my Name—but you were a little girl. You wanted me to take care of you. So I took care of you. I gave you some nice hot tea and told you that nothing mattered any more and you would forget everything. Including my Name.”

So I’d grown up healthy, happy, and completely detached, unaware of my power, or my mother’s, or my father’s. Whatever *power* meant—flying through the air? Leaping tall buildings, picking winning lottery numbers, raising the dead?

“You’re a knower. Like your father. What you know about, you have power over. If you want it, it’s yours, if you don’t want it, it goes away. That doesn’t mean you wouldn’t have had to pay for anything you wanted—you always have to pay, and, like anything else, sometimes the price-tag isn’t worth the goods. I don’t know what course you’d have chosen for yourself once you had come into your own, and sometimes I wonder if this wasn’t the right thing after all. Maybe it wouldn’t have been right to let someone so powerful walk loose in the world, even if it had turned out you had wanted nothing more than some personal success and material rewards and an especially long life-span. That stuffs cheap, when you can have all you want.

“Well, that was over twenty years ago and I figured that was the end of it. Even if your father came face to face with you, he’d never recognize you for who or what you were, and I didn’t have to worry about your telling anyone my Name or your own.

“You *do* know your own Name, by the way. You learned it before you learned mine, but you never told it to me. I don’t want to know. I couldn’t make you forget that, but I was able to camouflage it. It’ll take you a little while to figure it out, but it’ll come to you. And you’ll need it, because apparently my hiding you didn’t put an end to things the way I thought it would.

“Your father didn’t call me again but he had to have known that I’d done something to protect you. I knew that he’d look for us, so I kept us moving. Movement is very strong power when done in the right sequence. That was one of *my* specialties; I’m a traveler and, by extension, a geographer. I turned every place we went into unfamiliar country, so that he’d always get lost before he could even

get near us.

“And then you grew up and left, and I thought that would mean we were permanently safe, because he couldn’t possibly go in two directions at once. I kept traveling anyway while you just . . . kept busy. And I was right, he couldn’t go in two directions at once. He just came after me.

“It took him a long, long time, but I’d underestimated his, oh, dedication, I guess you could call it. He honestly felt I had stolen from him, you see, and he was incomplete until he recovered what was rightfully his. That would be you. But you were too well hidden even for the blood-link between you and him, so he concentrated on finding me.

“Travelers who don’t want to be found might as well be invisible. As far as he was concerned, I thought I was. But I’d never thought that he would actually go to all the time and trouble of following me. The problem, you see, is that unfamiliar country doesn’t stay unfamiliar; sooner or later, you can figure it out if you want to badly enough. And he did.

“It took a chunk of his life—over twenty years and a good number of borrowed years as well, but I guess he figured that being in debt to a time-keeper was worth it. If he could catch up with me and get to you, he’d be able to pay it all back with interest and still end up with more time than he’d had at the start.”

She started rubbing my hands and I realized they’d gone numb. My whole body was numb; it was coming back to life, the feeling that was returning to my hands spreading up my arms and out to the rest of me.

“In recreating my travels, he has come to know a great deal about me. And about you. I hid you from your power, but I couldn’t hide the fact that you are powerful, and power calls to power. It won’t be long before he knows my Name. He’s getting closer to it all the time and I can’t do anything about it—in the act of trying to stop him, I would only reveal the last of what he needs to know.

“*You* have to do it.”

I opened my eyes. The living room was gone; so was my mother. I was lying on my back in the field under the evening sky.

Raising up on my elbow, I looked around. Through the weeds, I could see something that might have been my mother’s silhouette. It moved suddenly and melted into the darker night shadows behind it. Safe for now, I thought, and turned away to face the golden glow on the other side of the sky. It was too bright to look at, and I had to close my eyes again.

* * * *

I woke up in a hotel room in downtown Seattle. Or was it uptown Seattle? I didn't know how they numbered their streets here, but I knew I was in the city proper, whatever they called it, and my father wasn't far away.

My backpack was lying on the floor next to the bed. A mother will always remember you need clean underwear. Even a mother like mine, who was apparently a travel agent as well as a traveler, I thought, amused, and got up to wash and dress.

The hotel was one of those nondescript places that charge by the week, where people stay when they have no real place to go, all worn carpeting and thrift-shop furniture and stained porcelain in the bathroom. Up to twenty-four hours before, I wouldn't have thought anything about it one way or the other. There was a part of me that still didn't care; old lifestyles die hard. But mostly, I wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible, find my father, and do whatever I had to do about him, and then figure out how I was going to spend the rest of my life.

The cool Seattle air was full of mist and I felt as if I were melting my way through it as I walked along the sidewalk. Having set me down somewhere near my father, my mother had left it to me to locate him exactly, as a way of flexing those long-unused muscles, a warm-up for the main event.

It didn't take long. My father was very sure of himself these days. His power radiated uncamouflaged, like a dare: here I am, come and get me, if you can.

And just to make sure there was no mistaking the address, my mother was in the front window of the gallery, looking out on the street with a wary expression so subtle that it couldn't have read to anyone who didn't know her.

Actually, her entire face wouldn't have read to anyone who didn't know her. The rendering was photographically real, but the subject had been painted as standing behind some transparent barrier so thick that it obscured and distorted. One hand was clutching the edge of the barrier hard enough that the knuckles were white but it wouldn't be clear—ha, ha—even after long study, whether she was trying to push the barrier aside, or hold it in place. Unless you knew her.

ArTricks was the name on the door, in silvery script. I pushed inside and my father's presence rushed over me with the carefully climate-controlled air. The entire gallery had been given over to his work, not just for a few weeks or for a month, but indefinitely, though probably no one realized it. My father would camp here for as long as he needed or wanted, and that used-and-abandoned feeling wouldn't kick in for a long time after he left. I understood quite a lot about my father. It was all there in those paintings he'd done of my mother.

They were arranged on the gallery walls in a way that reminded me of the Stations of the Cross in a Catholic church. There was an intended sequence, or

rather, two intended sequences. In the order dictated by his numbering, my mother's face started out extremely obscured and progressed toward being more clearly identifiable. This was for the general population of art appreciators, who would see only paintings and believe one followed another just the way he said they did.

The other sequence was secret, the real order in which the paintings had been done. The real first portrait was the clearest one in the sequence, the one everyone else was supposed to think was the most recent: *Untitled, #12*. The obscuring barrier was only slightly less than window-clear—my father's acknowledgment that he had known my mother as she had wanted him to know her. It resembled her in some ways, but she could have stood right next to it and no one would have identified her as the subject.

The next one was on the other side of the airy gallery room, posing as the first one he'd painted. The face was so completely obscured in this one that it wasn't possible to tell where the features were, whether it was a man or a woman, or even a human being.

He had followed that up with the portrait placed in the middle of the sequence, labeled *Untitled #6*. Had it been closer to *#12*, it might have been possible to see that he'd actually had much more understanding of the face taking shape on the board than he'd had when he'd done *#12*. Or maybe not; my father's skill engaged expectations while it diffused perceptions.

The third painting was *#11*, his affirmation of the face my mother showed the world. Looking closely, I could see that he had painted her image in excruciatingly exact detail before muddying it.

And so on. I found my way from portrait to portrait, moving back and forth among the dozen paintings, minus the one in the window, which was actually the most recent one. Yes, I thought, my father must have been *very* sure of himself, to display it so openly, telling my mother how close he was. In the next portrait, her face would be completely clear and so would her Name, not just to my father but to anyone with the ability to know.

“Do you know Boileau?”

I had been so lost in the study of my mother's face that the man had come up right behind me. He was very young, too thin, and probably too rich for his own good. “Pardon?” I said.

“Do you know Boileau? The artist. I've been watching you from my desk. I've never seen anyone come in here and view the paintings in the real order before.”

That my father hadn't kept this completely a secret showed an arrogance that I found perversely pleasing. “Well, I know his other work,” I said.

The man's eyes narrowed. "Really? That's amazing, considering there isn't any other work. This is all there is—thirty years of discovering the same woman. When he finishes the last one, he says he'll put down his brush for good."

"He says that, does he?" I looked around; my mother's face seemed to jump out of each picture and then recede again. "I wonder what he'll do to keep busy."

"Boileau is an extraordinary man as well as a gifted artist. I imagine he could do anything he wanted to."

I shrugged. "Oh, I don't know. Sometimes when the grip of obsession loosens, people fall apart. Does he live around here?"

The guy clammed up. It was exactly like that—he put his lips together deliberately and looked away from me with a haughty tilt to his head, making it clear he wasn't going to dignify my question by even recognizing it.

I took a step back, looked him up and down, and spoke his Name.

The effect was immediate; I owned him. He'd been pissing me off but mostly I did it to see what would happen. I hadn't been prepared for the *utterness* of it, either because I was too used to not giving a rat's ass one way or the other about most things, or because the idea of someone with absolutely no power at all really is unfathomable, until you've seen it. I half-expected him to turn into a blob of jelly or something, so unreserved was his surrender. And then I realized he damned well *could* turn into a blob of jelly if I wanted him to. Whatever I wanted was now the law as far as he was concerned, and this was irreversible.

He remained perfectly still while I walked around him, looking him over. He was just a gallery manager, a culture vulture whose life was focused on finding The Next Big Thing in the artistic community, an insulated world that breathed rarefied air, followed its own traditions, anointed its own high priests, and admitted no outsiders. When this gallery closed, he would find another, and another after that. His function was to sit with art, and talk about it, and contain various facts and terms and acquaintances without knowing anything.

Or it would have been, except I owned him now. I could have told him to be a truck driver or a ditch-digger and he would have walked out of the gallery and gone off to drive trucks or dig ditches without a backward glance.

"I just want you to take care of yourself," I said after a while. "Go on as you were before, do whatever you were going to do, be whatever you were going to be. But tell me where he lives."

"He's got a house on Vashon Island. You'll need to take the ferry."

“What’s the address?”

“I don’t know. But I can draw you a map of how to get there.”

“Then do that. And then go back to whatever you were doing before I came in here. Think you can manage that?”

“If you say so.”

He drew me a map. He had no artistic talent at all, but it was a good enough map for my purposes. And it was all for my purposes. He was so much mine, he would have spent hours on the details. I watched him filling in landmarks, his aristocratic face tight with concentration. This was how my mother would look if my father managed to divine her Name.

I wasn’t sure for a moment whether I was ashamed of what I’d done, or just unhappy that I had to care now.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, turning to look at me. Concern flowed off him in waves; I could almost see the air shimmy with it.

“Nothing,” I said. “Is the map done?”

He held it up. “Can you find your way from this?”

It looked like he’d put in most of the major roads and a good many of the minor ones as well. “I can show the more heavily-settled areas—”

“That looks good.” I took the map from him, folded it up, and stuck it in my shirt pocket. “I want you to go back to your life. Can you do that?”

He shrugged. “I can keep working here, if that’s what you mean.”

“What about anything else?”

He frowned. “What else is there? Look, do you want me to take you there? I’ll just close up and we can go now, if you want.”

His Name might as well have been written all over his face—anyone with even a minor bump of knowledge could have Named him in the dark. “I don’t want you to go with me. I want you to stay here and go back to the way you were.”

“Oh? And what are *you* going to do?” he said bitterly. “*Not* know whatever you know?”

“What?” I said.

“You come in here and mess me up, and now you want it to be as if it never happened. Because it’s inconvenient for you, I guess.” He made a face at my puzzlement. “Oh, come on, didn’t you realize I’d know what hap-pened? Well, not exactly *what*, or even how—I didn’t understand what you said—but I know what it did to me. I know what you are now, too. I always thought there were people like you in the world, but my shrink kept telling me it was just another facet of my neurosis, thinking that there were people walking around who could ... do things. Boileau’s one of them, too, isn’t he? All my life I’ve been trying to get next to people like you. Even if it didn’t rub off on me, I thought maybe I could reap some of the benefits, anyway.”

Well, that explained how I’d been able to divine his Name so easily. I could also see why my father hadn’t gotten to him first, even though he could have quite easily: Naming someone like this was obviously more trouble than it was worth. I’d have to keep that in mind.

“It’s not my fault you’ve been standing around waiting to surrender to somebody,” I said after a bit. “So you shouldn’t complain now that someone’s taken you up on it. But I’m giving you a chance to breathe on your own. It won’t be easy, but you can get the hang of it with practice.”

He sneered. “It must be wonderful, to have life be so simple for you. No, it’s not your fault I was that way, but it doesn’t relieve you of responsibility for your own actions.”

“I’m not going to hang around here listening to a gallery manager lecture me on personal responsibility,” I said. “Forget what happened. Learn to cope.”

He hesitated. “All right. But someone should have told you that even when you buy something you don’t want, you still have to pay for it.”

I didn’t like the sound of that, but I just wanted to get away from him and head my father off before he turned my mother into a lapdog. I made him give me directions to the ferry and left him sitting at his desk, doodling faces on the blank pages of his appointment book.

* * * *

The ferry was like a great big floating house—there was a lived-in feeling to it. The feeling was all there was, at first. But as the boat plowed steadily through the water, I began to get flashes of the residents themselves. They were well-camouflaged, moving unnoticed among the passengers with ease but also with practiced caution. Some of them had been passengers them-selves once, I realized.

Just as an experiment, I bought several packages of chocolate cupcakes from the snack bar on the upper deck and then found an unoccupied bench facing the stern. I unwrapped a package, set it down next to me, and got up to stand at the railing and stare at the slowly-receding mainland.

Only a minute later, I heard the open cellophane crackle, but I knew better than to turn around. "It's not what I would have suggested, but it's the thought that counts."

The voice came from below, not behind. I looked down; two women were standing on the lower deck almost directly underneath where I was, chatting confidentially over flimsy cups of bad coffee. The cellophane crackled some more, to let me know I had it right.

"Well, I've always said an offer is an offer." The woman on the left sipped her coffee. "What do you want to do about it?"

"I don't know," said the woman on the right. "I guess I'll have to hear the terms and conditions attached to it." The wind came up suddenly; they shuddered together and went back inside.

"Think of it as a gift." I spoke softly into the wind, letting it carry my voice back. "Or payment, in exchange for the use of your . . . residence."

"I knew who it was right away," said another voice. Now a man and a woman were standing on the deck below me, holding their collars closed against the wind. "You know how that is, when you get a call from someone you know *of*, but you haven't actually met in person? I'd been dealing with the company itself for so long that I felt like I really had met everyone in it, so I had to remind myself that we weren't actually acquainted."

The woman's murmur of agreement carried up to me quite clearly. "I really don't find knowing someone personally to be any kind of definite advantage," she said. "Sometimes, it even works the other way. I've had people try using that to pressure me into doing what they want me to. They try using the personal to influence the business we're doing. So I've taken to keeping everything on a strictly business level, I don't ask about their kids or their spouses or talk about my own life."

"It's okay," I said. "I didn't want anything. The cupcakes are yours, free and clear."

The cellophane rustled aggressively. I turned around just in time to see it be swept away by a sudden crosswind. It danced high in the gray air for a few moments before it blew out of sight.

I found a long bench indoors on the lower deck and set another opened package of cupcakes next to me. This time, I slumped down and closed my eyes. It took a little longer, but the presence was more tangible; the bench creaked and shifted a little. Amid the general noise and the rumble of the engines, the conversation that had been taking place behind me went from an unintelligible murmur to audible.

“I can spot *that* kind a mile away,” an older woman was saying. “I’ve been around long enough that nothing gets by me any more.”

I smiled to myself, still keeping my eyes closed.

“But they’re like anyone else, you know, they’re just people. Some of them are okay and some of them you have to watch out for. *But*, like anyone else, they all want something and don’t let anybody ever tell you differently. Everybody in this world, no matter how good they are, is out for themselves on some level. You’ve got to remember that, and never fool yourself into thinking that anybody is ever doing anything one hundred percent for *your* benefit. Nobody’s going to do anything for anybody unless there’s something in it for them as well.”

Ferry-boat philosophy, I thought, amused. Well, they weren’t very good cupcakes, after all, so I probably shouldn’t have expected much. There was a rustle of cellophane. I opened my eyes to find the empty package had been pushed close to me for disposal.

I tried another bench indoors on the upper deck, away from the windows. This time I slipped my watch in between the cupcakes before pretending to take a nap.

Over at the snackbar, the attendant was having a loud conversation with what must have been a ferry regular. “So I says to myself, ‘Now, that’s more *like* it. Something *real*, that isn’t just junk.’ You know?”

I could sense the regular nodding in agreement. “I mean, it’s not like I really want so *much*,” the attendant went on. “I mean, if I wanted so much, would I be hanging around in a place like this, working my ass off? Hell, no. But you want to know someone’s making an effort, that it means something to them, right?”

The regular said something about a token.

“Yeah, well, I believe in stuff like that, a token of affection and esteem, all that stuff. So you know, now I know it matters. Enough, anyway.”

I left the last three packages of cupcakes in various unobtrusive spots and wandered aimlessly around the ferry. Twice I overheard people thanking each other and once, someone saying, *That doesn’t even begin to cover it and what took you*

so long anyway?

The clouds were lower and heavier by the time the ferry docked; it was going to get dark early. Standing among the crowd waiting to be let off, I saw a tall woman who looked like a garage mechanic showily checking her watch. She glanced up, caught my eye and turned her wrist slightly so I could see before lowering her arm. The crowd moved forward then and she seemed to move along with everyone else, but she never appeared on the dock.

You're a knower, my mother had said. The other part of that was knowing whether what I knew was at all useful, and I didn't know that yet. But I was pretty sure it would come to me eventually.

* * * *

The line of cars stretched a quarter-mile along the road running past my father's house. He was giving a party. I had the guy I'd bummed the ride from let me off near the last car and I walked back. A mailbox marked the path that led down the steep embankment to where the house sat on the shore of the inlet.

Where it was tonight. I could hear the party sounds before I reached the mailbox; it wasn't rowdy, there were just lots of people.

A little ways down, the path had been made into an outdoor staircase, each packed dirt step bordered with a branch. I hesitated on the first one; below, the party had spread out of the house, all around the yard and down to the shore in spite of the coolness of the already-fading afternoon. Nicely-dressed people, like something out of a high-class magazine ad. My guy hadn't mentioned this; I guess my father hadn't considered him worth telling.

Or maybe he'd wanted to surprise me. My father, that is. He was expecting me; the sense of it drifted up to me with the people's voices, along with the force of his presence, faint at this distance but there nonetheless. When I got a little farther down the steps, he'd sense my presence like a ripple crossing his own. My father, the spider.

I turned away from the stairs and began making my way along the embankment through the brush and dead leaves until I was directly behind the house. I half-climbed, half-slid down the embankment, trying to be quiet and failing completely. Still, no one bothered to take a look around the back and see what all the crunching and rustling was about. Either they all figured it was the indigenous wildlife or they couldn't really hear it that well.

The rear windows were high up and not terribly large, but the ledges were generous. Jumping, I caught the rough edge of the one farthest from the party noise, and there was enough room for me to rest my forearm on it and pull myself up.

I was looking into my father's studio. The easel holding my mother's portrait stood in the center of the room, facing away from me toward the door. This was it, the big unveiling of the capstone of his career, if you could call thirteen paintings of one blurry woman a career. But being a knower himself, he'd known exactly how to play it as an artistic obsession. He could have been well-known if he had chosen to allow his notoriety to expand beyond the small local but lucrative scenes he'd been cultivating here and there around the country.

But this would do it for him, I realized. Like that other artist, Wyeth, with the Helga paintings.

Helga? If I could have seen the entire series right then, I would have known *her* Name immediately.

The window was locked; I broke one of the panes and managed to unlock it without severing any major blood vessels on the shards left in the frame. Pushing the window up and clambering inside seemed to take forever and left me with sore arm muscles. I was surprised that I could do it at all; moving around vigorously was something else I'd never engaged in much.

The portrait was covered with a white linen cloth. I hesitated, holding one corner, and then slipped my hand underneath. The paint—acrylics? oils? Glidden's rainy-day gray?—felt almost-sticky, as if it were a minute or so away from being completely dry.

"Go ahead. You might as well. I painted it to be looked at."

I didn't turn around.

"Besides, family shouldn't have to wait until the ceremonial unveiling."

He came over and put his hands on my shoulders. "Of course, if you *want* to wait, I won't insist," he added.

"When did you finish it?" I asked, pulling my hand away from the painting.

"Who says it's finished?" He tried to turn me around but I refused to move and he let go of me. "I thought I'd show it tonight and get some comments on it before I did anything final to it. If, indeed, I need to, other than take a last look."

Yeah, sure, I thought.

He walked around behind the easel and leaned on the top of the painting, studying me. I raised my eyes to look at him. My mother had shown him to me but I wasn't prepared for the sight of him as he was now, in person. I could see

everything immediately and I reached for the cloth, intending to yank it off. He clapped a hand down over it, holding it in place.

“Sorry—changed my mind. You’re a smart girl,” he said, almost approvingly. “Excuse me—woman. Though people your age are more children than not to me. It really isn’t finished, you know; I couldn’t finish it until I’d met my daughter. I must say, I had thought you would look much more like *her*, so this is a pleasant surprise. You don’t seem to know, though, whether you came to try to stop me, or just to kill me. Why don’t you come out and meet the other guests while you’re thinking it over?”

He came around the easel and tucked my hand into the crook of his elbow. It was such a corny thing to do that I couldn’t help laughing. This seemed to startle him, but he didn’t say anything about it, leading me through the house as if he were already parading in victory. The house itself was surprisingly shabby, the furniture faded, old, and worn. In the dining room, people stood around in clumps, picking at the enormous spread of carefully-arranged party food, hors d’oeuvres and deli-style cold-cuts, salad mixtures in big stoneware bowls, and bottle after bottle of champagne, standing in rows.

They still reminded me of magazine-ad people; I half-expected my father to regroup them more artfully. But he just introduced me around and those generic faces gave me generic smiles, expressed tasteful astonishment that Boileau had a daughter, and went back to their generic party discussions.

“Pretty harmless group,” I said, as my father led me outside.

“They don’t have the faintest idea,” my father said, handing me down the front steps. “Let me show you.”

He went up to the nearest person, a blond, bearded man in conversation with a tall, black-haired woman, and tapped him on the shoulder. “Henry, Alberta, I’d like you to meet my daughter.”

Alberta beamed while Henry hurriedly transferred a paper plate of potato salad to his other hand so he could shake hands with me. “Well, this is a surprise and a pleasure!” he said heartily.

“She’s come to put a stop to me,” my father said, giving me a sidelong glance. “Probably by driving a stake through my heart or something.”

“Really,” said Alberta. “And where did she go to school?”

“Wherever her mother chose to take her. Mostly bad public schools with no budgets and demoralized teachers, I imagine.”

“Ah. My next-door neighbor’s kids all went there,” said Henry. “They seemed to enjoy it. Do you paint, also?” he asked me.

“Oh, my daughter hasn’t done much of anything for the last twenty-some years, thanks to her mother. But now that she has come into her own, I guess she’ll do whatever she wants—enslave a few people, maybe win a lottery or two—under different names, of course—and possibly kill her mean old father this evening.”

“Well, that’s what I understand from many people such as yourself,” Henry said congenially. “The children all tend to go off in other directions, and I guess that’s understandable, if you’ll pardon my saying so.”

“No offense taken,” I said, and turned to my father. “They really don’t get it.”

“None of them do,” my father said. “You could walk around here like the invisible woman, completely unnoticed, unless I called their attention to you.”

I looked around suspiciously.

“Haven’t touched them,” he said. “If you want to know the truth, I’m not so sure that most of them even *have* Names. They’re more like a herd of sheep, they’ve been told what to do and what to expect since they were born. Since *before* they were born. They are their clothes, their cars, their jobs; their things own them. Not me. I could have them if I wanted, I suppose, but that can be more trouble than it’s worth. Right?”

Of course he had sensed what I’d done at the gallery—all of his paintings were there, and they were as much of him as they were of my mother. He hadn’t thought I’d know that, which was why he’d changed his mind about letting me see his nearly-finished masterpiece. I wondered how he planned to finish it and show it now.

He didn’t seem concerned. We drifted through the crowd in the yard, meeting more of them. He continued to play his little conversation game, though to what purpose I didn’t know. Maybe just because they were so willing and he was so able.

Eventually, I noticed that the day had stopped darkening. The slight wind that had been rustling the surrounding trees had also ceased and the party gabble had acquired a strangely muffled sound, as if it were coming from under a belljar. People who had been wandering about the yard and going in and out of the house were now rooted to wherever they stood—without noticing, of course.

“Timing,” my father said, cheerfully. “What you need in this business is a good sense of timing and for that you have to understand time itself.”

“I thought you were a knower, not a timekeeper,” I said, taking a

bacon-wrapped morsel off a plate held by a woman in black satin pajamas.

“Knowers are multi-talented that way,” he said. “Don’t eat that. Nothing’s edible when it’s stuck between moments, it’ll be like chewing a lump of styrofoam.”

I put the hors d’oeuvre back on the plate. “What about them? Are they still functioning?”

He nodded, looking at the quiet water. “They’re right with me, as much as they can be, which is enough for my purpose.” He turned his smile to me. “It’s finished, now, in case you didn’t know. I’ve been finishing it while I’ve been walking around here with you. Now I know what I should see, what we should all see. Time to bring it out.”

“I’ve brought it out for you.”

My mother was standing in the middle of the yard next to the easel, one hand resting gracefully along the top like a game-show hostess’s. Once the initial shock had passed, I knew I shouldn’t have been surprised. Diverting him with me was the only way she could possibly have gotten close to him.

“I’m sure you meant to invite me,” she went on, smiling at the people standing around. “A great artist would never unveil a masterpiece without inviting the subject to be present.”

He took a step toward her and she grabbed a corner of the linen covering.

“Come on, *Boileau*,” she said. “*You’ve* had all the fun up to now. Let me have the privilege of unveiling it.”

“No—”

The motion of her yanking the linen away lasted forever. The cloth flew up and out, its folds twisting and turning like a flower opening up before it sailed away.

It was now a picture of the two of them. There was still only one subject but what my father had put into it of himself was now equally as obvious as my mother’s face and, consequently, her Name. You couldn’t see it without seeing both of them. Of course. My mother hadn’t been able to undo any of the last thirty years, so she had just done a little more.

Someone began to applaud. It spread through the gathering; they were all putting their plates and glasses down on the ground beside them and clapping their hands enthusiastically. Someone even whistled.

My mother went to my father and pulled him over to the easel. She bowed,

turned and gestured to him, and then began to clap her own hands, slowly and deliberately, almost in his face. “Sometimes a stalemate is the best victory you can hope for,” I heard her tell him over the ovation still going on around them. “Maybe that’s the only victory that really means anything for people like us.” She looked at me; her smile was grim. “You remember that. You remember that you can’t really Name Names without Naming yourself.”

It was true, I saw, as she moved around behind the easel and continued applauding my father. You had to look really closely to see that it was not just a picture of the two of them but a family portrait of the three of us, but since most people didn’t know about me, they’d never quite see it in the right way. And my mother would go on making sure they didn’t, as long as nobody ever spoke her Name. Especially me.

I turned and ran up the dirt stairs to the road. There was a car idling by the mailbox.

“Need a lift?” said the guy from the gallery. It wasn’t really a question.

“Who’s minding the store?” I asked him.

He laughed. “You are. As if you didn’t know.”

* * * *

They were out in force on the ferryboat this time, not bothering to hide themselves. I couldn’t get away from all the conversations taking place around me, even in the bathroom. It wasn’t chocolate cupcakes that they wanted.

I considered it. My new friend—his name, I learned belatedly, was Gus, short for Augustus, and what *had* his parents been thinking of?—wouldn’t be happy here, but he wasn’t going to be happy anywhere any more. That wasn’t his purpose in life.

“Just think it over,” one woman was telling another on a nearby bench. “Of course, you can’t take too long but that’s the nature of the business we’re all in.”

I made Gus stay there while I went up to the upper deck. A group of kids, teenagers, were comparing notes about some party they’d all been to.

“... give *anything* for a system like that ... all that power ...”

“... more than I make in two months, maybe three ...”

“... everybody’d always be hitting on you to come over and use it, though ...”

“... and the whole world wants to be your best friend. I dunno if I want best

friends like that..."

"... got to use it while you were there . . . think it over ..."

Big help. I went back down to the lower deck. Gus was gone. I thought one of them had gotten impatient and decided to force the issue, but then I found him standing outside near the stern.

"Is that how it is?" he said. "When we dock, you just walk off and I don't? That's a pretty big offering. What do you get in return, a whole ferryboat and all the bad snacks you can stuff in your face?"

"Are you wearing a watch?" I asked.

"Yes. A Rolex."

"Give it to me." I wrapped a ten-dollar bill around the wristband and left it on a bench.

"My parents gave me that," he said accusingly.

"You can get another. I'll buy you another."

"You'll have to. I need things like that. It's what I am, you know." He smiled. "Yeah, I guess you *do* know."

I did. His Name stood for material things and status symbols, the acquisition of shiny stones and metals and pretty pictures. They owned him, the condition of my ownership, for as long as it was in force. He was going to be an expensive pet; I'd have to win a lottery or two.

I could feel him settling into his new life. That was the real price, I thought. Once you had power, you ended up having to depend on it. Eventually, like anything else, it owned you.

Eventually? No, from the beginning; we just don't bother admitting it at first.

We were close to the mainland now and would be docking in a few minutes. Gus linked arms with me and dragged me into the middle of the crowd gathering impatiently at the exit. "I don't like to wait in line, either," he said. "I like to go first." He put his arms around my shoulders and gave me a hard squeeze. "You know, I'm going to like this a lot better than I thought I would."

I smiled up at him. "Behave yourself."

"Or what—you'll bring me back here and leave me?" He laughed.

“No,” I said. “I’ll tell you my Name.”

It was a month before he dared to speak again. I bought him the Rolex anyway.