

## *Murder Mysteries*

*The Fourth Angel says:*

Of this order I am made one,  
From Mankind to guard this place  
That through their Guilt they have foregone  
For they have forfeited His Grace;  
Therefore all this must they shun  
Or else my Sword they shall embrace  
And myself will be their Foe  
To flame them in the Face.

— *CHESTER MYSTERY CYCLE,*

*THE CREATION AND ADAM AND EVE, 1461*

This is true.

Ten years ago, give or take a year, I found myself on an enforced stopover in Los Angeles, a long way from home. It was December, and the California weather was warm and pleasant. England, however, was in the grip of fogs and snowstorms, and no planes were landing there. Each day I'd phone the airport, and each day I'd be told to wait another day.

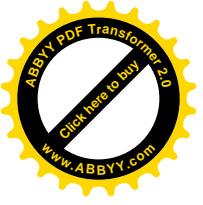
This had gone on for almost a week.

I was barely out of my teens. Looking around today at the parts of my life left over from those days, I feel uncomfortable, as if I've received a gift, unasked, from another person: a house, a wife, children, a vocation. Nothing to do with me, I could say, innocently. If it's true that every seven years each cell in your body dies and is replaced, then I have truly inherited my life from a dead man; and the misdeeds of those times have been forgiven, and are buried with his bones.

I was in Los Angeles. Yes.

On the sixth day I received a message from an old sort-of-girlfriend from Seattle: she was in L.A., too, and she had heard I was around on the friends-of-friends network. Would I come over?

I left a message on her machine. Sure.



That evening: a small, blonde woman approached me as I came out of the place I was staying. It was already dark. She stared at me, as if she were trying to match me to a description, and then, hesitantly, she said my name.

‘That’s me. Are you Tink’s friend?’

‘Yeah. Car’s out back. C’mon. She’s really looking forward to seeing you.’

The woman’s car was one of the huge old boatlike jobs you only ever seem to see in California. It smelled of cracked and flaking leather upholstery. We drove out from wherever we were to wherever we were going.

Los Angeles was at that time a complete mystery to me; and I cannot say I understand it much better now. I understand London, and New York, and Paris: you can walk around them, get a sense of what’s where in just a morning of wandering, maybe catch the subway. But Los Angeles is about cars. Back then I didn’t drive at all; even today I will not drive in America. Memories of L.A. for me are linked by rides in other people’s cars, with no sense there of the

shape of the city, of the relationships between the people and the place. The regularity of the roads, the repetition of structure and form, mean that when I try to remember it as an entity, all I have is the boundless profusion of tiny lights I saw from the hill of Griffith Park one night, on my first trip to the city. It was one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen, from that distance.

‘See that building?’ said my blonde driver, Tink’s friend. It was a redbrick Art Deco house, charming and quite ugly.

‘Yes.’

‘Built in the 1930s,’ she said, with respect and pride.

I said something polite, trying to comprehend a city inside which fifty years could be considered a long time.

‘Tink’s real excited. When she heard you were in town. She was so excited.’

‘I’m looking forward to seeing her again.’

Tink’s real name was Tinkerbelle Richmond. No lie.

She was staying with friends in a small apartment clump, somewhere an hour’s drive from downtown L.A.

What you need to know about Tink: she was ten years older than me, in her early thirties; she had glossy black hair and red, puzzled lips, and very white skin, like Snow White in the fairy stories; the first time I met her I thought she was the most beautiful woman in the world.

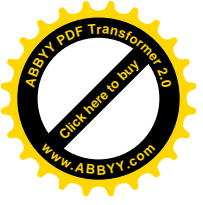
Tink had been married for a while at some point in her life and had a five-year-old daughter called Susan. I had never met Susan —when Tink had been in England, Susan had been staying on in Seattle, with her father.

People named Tinkerbelle name their daughters Susan.

Memory is the great deceiver. Perhaps there are some individuals whose memories act like tape recordings, daily records of their lives complete in every detail, but I am not one of them. My memory is a patchwork of occurrences, of discontinuous events roughly sewn together: The parts I remember, I remember precisely, whilst other sections seem to have vanished completely.

I do not remember arriving at Tink’s house, nor where her flatmate went.

What I remember next is sitting in Tink’s lounge with the lights low, the two of us next to each other, on her sofa.



We made small talk. It had been perhaps a year since we had seen one another. But a twenty-one-year-old boy has little to say to a thirty-two-year-old woman, and soon, having nothing in common, I pulled her to me.

She snuggled close with a kind of sigh, and presented her lips to be kissed. In the half-light her lips were black. We kissed for a little on the couch, and I stroked her breasts through her blouse and then she said: -

‘We can’t fuck. I’m on my period.’

‘Fine.’

‘I can give you a blowjob, if you’d like.’

I nodded assent, and she unzipped my jeans, and lowered her head to my lap.

After I had come, she got up and ran into the kitchen. I heard her spitting into the sink, and the sound of running water: I remember wondering why she did it, if she hated the taste that much.

Then she returned and we sat next to each other on the couch.

‘Susan’s upstairs, asleep,’ said Tink. ‘She’s all I live for. Would you like to see her?’

‘I don’t mind.’

We went upstairs. Tink led me into a darkened bedroom. There were child-scrrawl pictures all over the walls — wax-crayoned drawings of winged fairies and little palaces — and a small fair-haired girl was asleep in the bed.

‘She’s very beautiful,’ said Tink, and kissed me. Her lips were still slightly sticky. ‘She takes after her father.’

We went downstairs. We had nothing else to say, nothing else to do. Tink turned on the main light. For the first time, I noticed tiny crow’s feet at the corners of her eyes, incongruous on her perfect Barbie doll face.

‘I love you,’ she said.

‘Thank you.’

‘Would you like a ride back?’

‘If you don’t mind leaving Susan alone...?’

She shrugged, and I pulled her to me for the last time.

At night Los Angeles is all lights. And shadows.

A blank, here, in my mind. I simply don’t remember what happened next. She must have driven me back to the place where I was staying — how else would I have gotten there? I do not even remember kissing her good-bye. Perhaps I simply waited on the sidewalk and watched her drive away.

Perhaps.

I do know, however, that once I reached the place I was staying, I just stood there, unable to go inside, to wash, and then to sleep, unwilling to do anything else.

I was not hungry. I did not want alcohol. I did not want to read or talk. I was scared of walking too far, in case I became lost, bedeviled by the repeating motifs of Los Angeles, spun around and sucked in so I could never find my way home again. Central Los Angeles sometimes seems to me to be nothing more than a pattern, like a set of repeating blocks: a gas station, a few homes, a mini-mall (doughnuts, photo developers, Laundromats, fast foods), and repeat until hypnotized;



and the tiny changes in the mini-malls and the houses only serve to reinforce the structure.

I thought of Tink's lips. Then I fumbled in a pocket of my jacket and pulled out a packet of cigarettes.

I lit one, inhaled, blew blue smoke into the warm night air.

There was a stunted palm tree growing outside the place I was staying, and I resolved to walk for a way, keeping the tree in sight, to smoke my cigarette, perhaps even to think; but I felt too drained to think. I felt very sexless, and very alone.

A block or so down the road there was a bench, and when I reached it I sat down. I threw the stub of the cigarette onto the pavement, hard, and watched it shower orange sparks.

Someone said, 'I'll buy a cigarette off you, pal. Here.'

A hand in front of my face, holding a quarter. I looked up.

He did not look old, although I would not have been prepared to say how old he was. Late thirties, perhaps. Mid-forties. He wore a long, shabby coat, colourless under the yellow streetlamps, and his eyes were dark.

"Here. A quarter. That's a good price."

I shook my head, pulled out the packet of Marlboros, offered him one. 'Keep your money. It's free. Have it.'

He took the cigarette. I passed him a book of matches (it advertised a telephone sex line; I remember that), and he lit the cigarette. He offered me the matches back, and I shook my head. 'Keep them. I always wind up accumulating books of matches in America.'

'Uh-huh.' He sat next to me and smoked his cigarette. When he had smoked it halfway down, he tapped the lighted end off on the concrete, stubbed out the glow, and placed the butt of the cigarette behind his ear.

'I don't smoke much,' he said. 'Seems a pity to waste it, though.'

A car careened down the road, veering from one side to the other. There were four young men in the car; the two in the front were both pulling at the wheel and laughing. The windows were wound down, and I could hear their laughter, and the two in the backseat ('*Gaary, you asshole! What the fuck are you onnn, mannnn?*'), and the pulsing beat of a rock song. Not a song I recognised. The car looped around a corner, out of sight.

Soon the sounds were gone, too.

'I owe you,' said the man on the bench.

'Sorry?'

'I owe you something. For the cigarette. And the matches. You wouldn't take the money. I owe you.'

I shrugged, embarrassed. 'Really, it's just a cigarette. I figure, if I give people cigarettes, then if ever I'm out, maybe people will give me cigarettes.' I laughed, to show I didn't really mean it, although I did. 'Don't worry about it.'

'Mm. You want to hear a story? True story? Stories always used to be good payment. These days ...' — he shrugged — '... not so much.'

I sat back on the bench, and the night was warm, and I looked at my watch: it was almost one in the morning. In England a freezing new day would already have begun: a workday would be starting for those who could beat the snow and get into work; another handful of old people, and those without homes, would have died, in the night, from the cold.



‘Sure,’ I said to the man. ‘Sure. Tell me a story.’

He coughed, grinned white teeth — a flash in the darkness — and he began.

‘First thing I remember was the Word. And the Word was God. Sometimes, when I get *really* down, I remember the sound of the Word in my head, shaping me, forming me, giving me life.

‘The Word gave me a body, gave me eyes. And I opened my eyes, and I saw the light of the Silver City.

‘I was in a room — a silver room — and there wasn’t anything in it except me. In front of me was a window that went from floor to ceiling, open to the sky, and through the window I could see the spires of the City, and at the edge of the City, the Dark.

‘I don’t know how long I waited there. I wasn’t impatient or anything, though. I remember that. It was like I was waiting until I was called; and I knew that some time I would be called. And if I had to wait until the end of everything and never be called, why, that was fine, too. But I’d be called, I was certain of that. And then I’d know my name and my function.

‘Through the window I could see silver spires, and in many of the other spires were windows; and in the windows I could see others like me. That was how I knew what I looked like.

‘You wouldn’t think it of me, seeing me now, but I was beautiful. I’ve come down in the world a way since then.

‘I was taller then, and I had wings.

‘They were huge and powerful wings, with feathers the colour of mother-of-pearl. They came out from just between my shoulder blades. They were so good. My wings.

‘Sometimes I’d see others like me, the ones who’d left their rooms, who were already fulfilling their duties. I’d watch them soar through the sky from spire to spire, performing errands I could barely imagine.

‘The sky above the City was a wonderful thing. It was always light, although lit by no sun — lit, perhaps, by the City itself; but the quality of light was forever changing. Now pewter-coloured light, then brass, then a gentle gold, or a soft and quiet amethyst...’

The man stopped talking. He looked at me~ his head on one side. There was a glitter in his eyes that scared me. ‘You know what amethyst is? A kind of purple stone?’

I nodded.

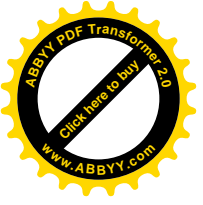
My crotch felt uncomfortable.

It occurred to me then that the man might not be mad; I found this far more disquieting than the alternative.

The man began talking once more. ‘I don’t know how long it was that I waited in my room. But time didn’t mean anything. Not back then. We had all the time in the world.

‘The next thing that happened to me, was when the Angel Lucifer came to my cell. He was taller than me, and his wings were imposing, his plumage perfect. He had skin the colour of sea mist, and curly silver hair and these wonderful grey eyes...

‘I say *he*, but you should understand that none of us had any sex, to speak of’ He gestured toward his lap. ‘Smooth and empty. Nothing there. You know.’



‘Lucifer shone. I mean it — he glowed from inside. All angels do. They’re lit up from within, and in my cell the Angel Lucifer burned like a lightning storm.

‘He looked at me. And he named me.

‘ “You are Raguel,” he said. “The Vengeance of the Lord.”

‘I bowed my head, because I knew it was true. That was my name. That was my function.

‘ “There has been a... a wrong thing,” he said. “The first of its kind. You are needed.”

‘He turned and pushed himself into space, and I followed him, flew behind him across the Silver City to the outskirts, where the City stops and the Darkness begins; and it was there, under a vast silver spire, that we descended to the street, and I saw the dead angel.

‘The body lay, crumpled and broken, on the silver sidewalk. Its wings were crushed underneath it and a few loose feathers had already blown into the silver gutter.

‘The body was almost dark. Now and again a light would flash inside it, an occasional flicker of cold fire in the chest, or in the eyes, or in the sexless groin, as the last of the glow of life left it forever.

‘Blood pooled in rubies on its chest and stained its white wing feathers crimson. It was very beautiful, even in death.

‘It would have broken your heart.

‘Lucifer spoke to me then. “You must find who was responsible for this, and how; and take the Vengeance of the Name on whosoever caused this thing to happen.”

‘He really didn’t have to say anything. I knew that already. The hunt, and the retribution: it was what I was created for, in the Beginning; it was what I *was*.

‘ “I have work to attend to” said the Angel Lucifer.

‘He flapped his wings once, hard, and rose upward; the gust of wind sent the dead angel’s loose feathers blowing across the street.

‘I leaned down to examine the body. All luminescence had by now left it. It was a dark thing, a parody of an angel. It had a perfect, sexless face, framed by silver hair. One of the eyelids was open, revealing a placid grey eye; the other was closed. There were no nipples on the chest and only smoothness between the legs.

‘I lifted the body up.

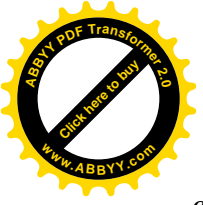
‘The back of the angel was a mess. The wings were broken and twisted, the back of the head staved in; there was a floppiness to the corpse that made me think its spine had been broken as well. The back of the angel was all blood.

‘The only blood on its front was in the chest area. I probed it with my forefinger, and it entered the body without difficulty.

‘*He fell, I thought. And he was dead before he fell.*

‘And I looked up at the windows that ranked the street. I stared across the Silver City. *You did this, I thought. I will find you, whoever you are. And I will take the Lord’s vengeance upon you.*’

The man took the cigarette stub from behind his ear, lit it with a match. Briefly I smelled the ashtray smell of a dead



cigarette, acrid and harsh; then he pulled down to the unburnt tobacco, exhaled blue smoke into the night air.

‘The angel who had first discovered the body was called Phanuel.

‘I spoke to him in the Hall of Being. That was the spire beside which the dead angel lay. In the Hall hung the...the blueprints, maybe, for what was going to be...all this.’ He gestured with the hand that held the stubby cigarette, pointing to the night sky and the parked cars and the world. ‘You know. The universe.’

‘Phanuel was the senior designer; working under him were a multitude of angels labouring on the details of the Creation. I watched him from the floor of the Hall. He hung in the air below the Plan, and angels flew down to him, waiting politely in turn as they asked him questions, checked things with him, invited comment on their work. Eventually he left them and descended to the floor.

‘ “You are Raguel,” he said. His voice was high and fussy. “What need have you of me?”

‘ “You found the body?”

‘ “Poor Carasel? Indeed I did. I was leaving the Hall — there are a number of concepts we are currently constructing, and I wished to ponder one of them, *Regret* by name. I was planning to get a little distance from the City — to fly above it, I mean, not to go into the Dark outside, I wouldn’t do that, although there has been some loose talk amongst...but, yes. I was going to rise and contemplate.

‘ “I left the Hall, and...” he broke off. He was small, for an angel. His light was muted, but his eyes were vivid and bright. I mean really bright. “Poor Carasel. How could he *do* that to himself? How?”

‘ “You think his destruction was self-inflicted?”

‘He seemed puzzled — surprised that there could be any other explanation. “But of course. Carasel was working under me, developing a number of concepts that shall be intrinsic to the universe when its Name shall be Spoken. His group did a remarkable job on some of the real basics — *Dimension* was one, and *Sleep* another. There were others.

‘ “Wonderful work. Some of his suggestions regarding the use of individual viewpoints to define dimensions were truly ingenious.

‘ “Anyway. He had begun work on a new project. It’s one of the really major ones — the ones that I would usually handle, or possibly even Zephkiel.” He glanced upward. “But Carasel had done such sterling work. And his last project was so remarkable. Something apparently quite trivial that he and Saraquael elevated into . . .” he shrugged. “But that is unimportant. It was *this* project that forced him into nonbeing. But none of us could ever have foreseen. .

‘ “What was his current project?”

‘Phanuel stared at me. “I’m not sure I ought to tell you. All the new concepts are considered sensitive until we get them into the final form in which they will be Spoken.”

‘I felt myself transforming. I am not sure how I can explain it to you, but suddenly I wasn’t me — I was something larger. I was transfigured: I was my function.

‘Phanuel was unable to meet my gaze.

‘ “I am Raguel, who is the Vengeance of the Lord,” I told him. “I serve the Name directly. It is my mission to discover the





nature of this deed, and to take the Name's vengeance on those responsible. My questions are to be answered."

'The little angel trembled, and he spoke fast.

' "Carasel and his partner were researching *Death*. Cessation of life. An end to physical, animated existence. They were putting it all together. But Carasel always went too far into his work — we had a terrible time with him when he was designing *Agitation*. That was when he was working on *Emotions*. . ."

' "You think Carasel died to — to research the phenomenon?"

' "Or because it intrigued him. Or because he followed his research just too far. Yes." Phaniel flexed his fingers, stared at me with those brightly shining eyes. "I trust that you will repeat none of this to any unauthorized persons, Raguel."

' "What did you do when you found the body?"

' "I came out of the Hall, as I said, and there was Carasel on the sidewalk, staring up. I asked him what he was doing, and he did not reply. Then I noticed the inner fluid, and that Carasel seemed unable, rather than unwilling, to talk to me.

' "I was scared. I did not know what to do.

' "The Angel Lucifer came up behind me. He asked me if there was some kind of problem. I told him. I showed him the body. And then. . . then his Aspect came upon him, and he communed with the Name. He burned so bright.

' "Then he said he had to fetch the one whose function embraced events like this, and he left — to seek you, I imagine.

' "As Carasel's death was now being dealt with, and his fate was no real concern of mine, I returned to work, having gained a new — and, I suspect, quite valuable — perspective on the mechanics of *Regret*.

' "I am considering taking *Death* away from the Carasel and Saraquael partnership. I may reassign it to Zepkiel, my senior partner, if he is willing to take it on. He excels on contemplative projects."

'By now there was a line of angels waiting to talk to Phaniel. I felt I had almost all I was going to get from him.

' "Who did Carasel work with? Who would have been the last to see him alive?"

' "You could talk to Saraquael, I suppose — he was his partner, after all. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

'He returned to his swarm of aides: advising, correcting, suggesting, forbidding.'

The man paused.

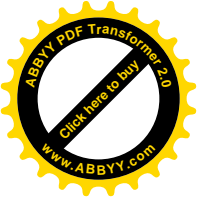
The street was quiet now; I remember the low whisper of his voice, the buzz of a cricket somewhere. A small animal — a cat perhaps, or something more exotic, a raccoon, or even a jackal — darted from shadow to shadow among the parked cars on the opposite side of the street.

'Saraquael was in the highest of the mezzanine galleries that ringed the Hall of Being. As I said, the universe was in the middle of the Hall, and it glinted and sparkled and shone. Went up quite a way, too...'

'The universe you mention, it was, what, a diagram?' I asked, interrupting for the first time.

'Not really. Kind of. Sorta. It was a blueprint; but it was full-sized, and it hung in the Hall, and all these angels went around and fiddled with it all the time. Doing stuff with *Gravity* and *Music* and *Klar* and whatever. It wasn't really the universe, not yet. It would be, when it was finished, and it was time for it to be properly Named.'





‘But.. .’ I grasped for words to express my confusion. The man interrupted me.

‘Don’t worry about it. Think of it as a model if that makes it easier for you. Or a map. Or a — what’s the word? Prototype. Yeah. A Model-T Ford universe.’ He grinned. ‘You got to understand, a lot of the stuff I’m telling you, I’m translating already; putting it in a form you can understand. Otherwise I couldn’t tell the story at all. You want to hear it?’

‘Yes.’ I didn’t care if it was true or not; it was a story I needed to hear all the way through to the end.

‘Good. So shut up and listen.

‘So I met Saraquael in the topmost gallery. There was no one else about — just him, and some papers, and some small, glowing models.

‘ “I’ve come about Carasel,” I told him.

‘He looked at me. “Carasel isn’t here at this time,” he said. “I expect him to return shortly.”

‘I shook my head.

‘ “Carasel won’t be coming back. He’s stopped existing as a spiritual entity,” I said.

‘His light paled, and his eyes opened very wide. “He’s dead?”

‘ “That’s what I said. Do you have any ideas about how it happened?”

‘ “I... this is so sudden. I mean, he’d been talking about...but I had no idea that he would...”

‘ “Take it slowly.”

‘Saraquael nodded.

‘He stood up and walked to the window. There was no view of the Silver City from his window — just a reflected glow from the City and the sky behind us, hanging in the air, and beyond that, the Dark. The wind from the Dark gently caressed Saraquael’s hair as he spoke. I stared at his back.

‘ “Carasel is...no, was. That’s right, isn’t it? *Was*. He was always so involved. And so creative. But it was never enough for him. He always wanted to understand everything — to experience what he was working on. He was never content to just create it — to understand it intellectually. He wanted *all* of it.

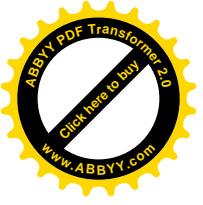
‘ “That wasn’t a problem before, when we were working on properties of matter. But when we began to design some of the Named emotions...he got too involved with his work.

‘ “And our latest project was *Death*. It’s one of the hard ones —one of the big ones, too, I suspect. Possibly it may even become the attribute that’s going to define the Creation for the Created: If not for *Death*, they’d be content to simply exist, but with *Death*, well, their lives will have meaning — a boundary beyond which the living cannot cross. . .“

‘ “So you think he killed himself?”

‘ “I know he did,” said Saraquael. I walked to the window and looked out. Far below, a *long* way, I could see a tiny white dot. That was Carasel’s body. I’d have to arrange for someone to take care of it. I wondered what we would do with it; but there would be someone who would know, whose function was the removal of unwanted things. It was not my function. I knew that.

‘ “How?”



‘He shrugged. “I know. Recently he’d begun asking questions —questions about *Death*. How we could know whether or not it was right to make this thing, to set the rules, if we were not going to experience it ourselves. He kept talking about it.”

‘ “Didn’t you wonder about this?”

‘Saraqael turned, for the first time, to look at me. “No. That is our function — to discuss, to improvise, to aid the Creation and the Created. We sort it out now, so that when it all Begins, it’ll run like clockwork. Right now we’re working on *Death*. So obviously that’s what we look at. The physical aspect; the emotional aspect; the philosophical aspect..

‘ “And the *patterns*. Carasel had the notion that what we do here in the Hall of Being creates patterns. That there are structures and shapes appropriate to beings and events that, once begun, must continue until they reach their end. For us, perhaps, as well as for them. Conceivably he felt this was one of his patterns.”

‘ “Did you know Carasel well?”

‘ “As well as any of us know each other. We saw each other here; we worked side by side. At certain times I would retire to my cell across the City. Sometimes he would do the same.”

‘Tell me about Phaniel.’

‘His mouth crooked into a smile. “He’s officious. Doesn’t do much — farms everything out and takes all the credit.” He lowered his voice, although there was no other soul in the gallery. “To hear him talk, you’d think that *Love* was all his own work. But to his credit, he does make sure the work gets done. Zephkiel’s the real thinker of the two senior designers, but he doesn’t come here. He stays back in his cell in the City and contemplates; resolves problems

from a distance. If you need to speak to Zephkiel, you go to Phaniel, and Phaniel relays your questions to Zephkiel..

‘I cut him short. “How about Lucifer? Tell me about him.”

‘ “Lucifer? The Captain of the Host? He doesn’t work here... He has visited the Hall a couple of times, though — inspecting the Creation. They say he reports directly to the Name. I have never spoken to him.”

‘ “Did he know Carasel?”

‘ “I doubt it. As I said, he has only been here twice. I have seen him on other occasions, though. Through here” He flicked a wingtip, indicating the world outside the window. “In flight.”

‘ “Where to?”

‘Saraqael seemed to be about to say something, then he changed his mind. “I don’t know.”

‘I looked out of the window at the Darkness outside the Silver City.

‘ “I may want to talk with you some more, later,” I told Saraquael.

‘ “Very good.” I turned to go. “Sir? Do you know if they will be assigning me another partner? For *Death*?”

‘ “No,” I told him. “I’m afraid I don’t.”

‘In the centre of the Silver City was a park — a place of recreation and rest. I found the Angel Lucifer there, beside a river. He was just standing, watching the water flow.

‘ “Lucifer?”



‘He inclined his head. “Raguel. Are you making progress?”

‘ “I don’t know. Maybe. I need to ask you a few questions. Do you mind?”

‘ “Not at all.”

‘ “How did you come upon the body?”

‘ “I didn’t. Not exactly. I saw Phaniel standing in the street. He looked distressed. I inquired whether there was something wrong, and he showed me the dead angel. And I fetched you.”

“I see.”

‘He leaned down, let one hand enter the cold water of the river.

The water splashed and rolled around it. “Is that all?”

‘ “Not quite. What were you doing in that part of the city?”

‘ “I don’t see what business that is of yours.”

‘ “It is my business, Lucifer. What were you doing there?”

‘ “I was...walking. I do that sometimes. Just walk and think. And try to understand.” He shrugged.

‘ “You walk on the edge of the City?”

A beat, then “Yes.”

‘ “That’s all I want to know. For now”

‘ “Who else have you talked to?”

‘ “Carasel’s boss and his partner. They both feel that he killed himself — ended his own life.”

‘ “Who else are you going to talk to?”

‘I looked up. The spires of the City of the Angels towered above us. “Maybe everyone.”

“All of them?”

‘ “If I need to. It’s my function. I cannot rest until I understand what happened, and until the Vengeance of the Name has been taken on whosoever was responsible. But I’ll tell you something I *do* know”

‘ “What would that be?” Drops of water fell like diamonds from the Angel Lucifer’s perfect fingers.

‘ “Carasel did not kill himself”

‘ “How do you know that?”

‘ “I am Vengeance. If Carasel had died by his own hand,” I explained to the Captain of the Heavenly Host, “there would have been no call for me. Would there?”

‘He did not reply.

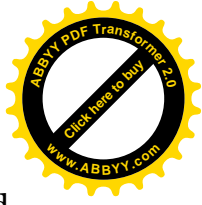
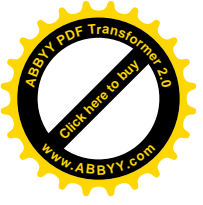
‘I flew upward into the light of the eternal morning.

‘You got another cigarette on you?’

I fumbled out the red and white packet, handed him a cigarette.

‘Obliged.

‘Zephkiel’s cell was larger than mine.



‘It wasn’t a place for waiting. It was a place to live, and work, and *be*. It was lined with books, and scrolls, and papers, and there were images and representations on the walls: pictures. I’d never seen a picture before.

‘In the centre of the room was a large chair, and Zephkiel sat there, his eyes closed, his head back.

As I approached him, he opened his eyes.

‘They burned no brighter than the eyes of any of the other angels I had seen, but somehow they seemed to have seen more. It was something about the way he looked. I’m not sure I can explain it. And he had no wings.

‘ “Welcome, Raguel,” he said. He sounded tired

‘ “You are Zephkiel?” I don’t know why I asked him that. I mean, I knew who people were. It’s part of my function, I guess. Recognition. I know who *you* are.

‘ “Indeed. You are staring, Raguel. I have no wings, it is true, but then my function does not call for me to leave this cell. I remain here, and I ponder. Phanuel reports back to me, brings me the new things, for my opinion. He brings me the problems, and I think about them, and occasionally I make myself useful by making some small suggestions. That is my function. As yours is vengeance.”

‘ “Yes.”

‘ “You are here about the death of the Angel Carasel?”

“Yes.”

‘ “I did not kill him.”

‘When he said it, I knew it was true.

‘ “Do you know who did?”

‘ “That is *your* function, is it not? To discover who killed the poor thing and to take the Vengeance of the Name upon him.”

“Yes.”

‘He nodded.

‘ “What do you want to know?”

‘I paused, reflecting on what I had heard that day. “Do you know what Lucifer was doing in that part of the City before the body was found?”

‘The old angel stared at me. “I can hazard a guess.”

‘ “Yes?”

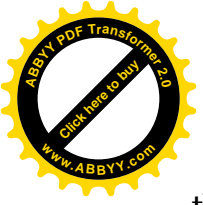
‘ “He was walking in the Dark.”

‘I nodded. I had a shape in my mind now. Something I could almost grasp. I asked the last question:

‘ “What can you tell me about *Love*?”

‘And he told me. And I thought I had it all.

‘I returned to the place where Carasel’s body had been. The remains had been removed, the blood had been cleaned away, the stray feathers collected and disposed of There was nothing on the silver sidewalk to indicate it had ever been



there. But I knew where it had been.

‘I ascended on my wings, flew upward until I neared the top of the spire of the Hall of Being. There was a window there, and I entered.

‘Saraqael was working there, putting a wingless mannikin into a small box. On one side of the box was a representation of a small brown creature with eight legs. On the other was a representation of a white blossom.

‘ “Saraqael?”

‘ “Hm? Oh, it’s you. Hello. Look at this. If you were to die and to be, let us say, put into the earth in a box, which would you want laid on top of you — a spider, here, or a lily, here?”

‘ “The lily, I suppose.”

‘ “Yes that’s what I think, too. But *why*? I wish...” He raised a hand to his chin, stared down at the two models, put first one on top of the box, then the other, experimentally. “There’s so much to do, Raguel. So much to get right. And we only get one chance at it, you know. There’ll just be one universe — we can’t keep trying until we get it right. I wish I understood why all this was so important to Him...”

‘ “Do you know where Zephkiel’s cell is?” I asked him.

‘ “Yes. I mean, I’ve never been there. But I know where it is.”

‘ “Good. Go there. He’ll be expecting you. I will meet you there.”

‘He shook his head. “I have work to do. I can’t just...”

‘I felt my function come upon me. I looked down at him, and I said, “You will be there. Go now.”

‘He said nothing. He backed away from me toward the window, staring at me; then he turned and flapped his wings, and I was alone.

‘I walked to the central well of the Hall and let myself fall, tumbling down through the model of the universe: it glittered around me, unfamiliar colours and shapes seething and writhing without meaning.

As I approached the bottom, I beat my wings, slowing my descent, and stepped lightly onto the silver floor. Phaniel stood between two angels who were both trying to claim his attention.

‘ “I don’t care how aesthetically pleasing it would be,” he was explaining to one of them. “We simply cannot put it in the centre. Background radiation would prevent any possible life-forms from even getting a foothold; and anyway, it’s too unstable.”

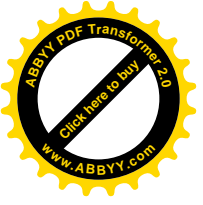
‘He turned to the other. “Okay, let’s see it. Hmm. So that’s *Green*, is it? It’s not exactly how I’d imagined it, but. Mm. Leave it with me. I’ll get back to you.” He took a paper from the angel, folded it over decisively

‘He turned to me. His manner was brusque, and dismissive. “Yes?”

‘ “I need to talk to you.”

‘ “Mm? Well, make it quick. I have much to do. If this is about Carasel’s death, I have told you all I know.”

‘ “It is about Carasel’s death. But I will not speak to you now. Not here. Go to Zephkiel’s cell: he is expecting you. I will meet you there.”



‘He seemed about to say something, but he only nodded, walked toward the door.

‘I turned to go when something occurred to me. I stopped the angel who had the *Green*. “Tell me something.”

‘If I can, sir”

‘ “That thing.” I pointed to the universe. “What’s it going to be *for*?”

‘ “For? Why, it is the universe.”

‘ “I know what it’s called. But what purpose will it serve?”

‘He frowned. “It is part of the plan. The Name wishes it; He requires *such and such*, to *these* dimensions and having *such and such* properties and ingredients. It is our function to bring it into existence, according to His wishes. I am sure *He* knows its function, but He has not revealed it to me.” His tone was one of gentle rebuke.

‘I nodded, and left that place.

‘High above the City a phalanx of angels wheeled and circled and dove. Each held a flaming sword that trailed a streak of burning brightness behind it, dazzling the eye. They moved in unison through the salmon pink sky. They were very beautiful. It was — you know on summer evenings when you get whole flocks of birds performing their dances in the sky? Weaving and circling and clustering and breaking apart again, so just as you think you understand the pattern, you realise you don’t, and you never will? It was like that, only better.

Above me was the sky. Below me, the shining City. My home. And outside the City the Dark.

‘Lucifer hovered a little below the Host, watching their manoeuvres.

‘ “Lucifer?”

‘ “Yes, Raguel? Have you discovered your malefactor?”

‘ “I think so. Will you accompany me to Zephkiel’s cell? There are others waiting for us there, and I will explain everything.”

‘He paused. Then, “Certainly”

‘He raised his perfect face to the angels, now performing a slow revolution in the sky, each moving through the air keeping perfect pace with the next, none of them ever touching. ‘Azazel”

‘An angel broke from the circle; the others adjusted almost imperceptibly to his disappearance, filling the space, so you could no longer see where he had been.

‘ “I have to leave. You are in command, Azazel. Keep them drilling. They still have much to perfect.”

‘ “Yes, sir.”

Azazel hovered where Lucifer had been, staring up at the flock of angels, and Lucifer and I descended toward the City.

‘ “He’s my second-in-command,” said Lucifer. “Bright. Enthusiastic. Azazel would follow you anywhere.”

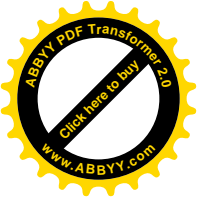
‘ “What are you training them for?”

‘ “War.”

“With whom?”

‘ “How do you mean?”





‘ “Who are they going to fight? Who else is there?”

‘He looked at me; his eyes were clear, and honest. “I do not know. But He has Named us to be His army. So we will be perfect. For Him. The Name is infallible and all-just and all-wise, Raguel. It cannot be otherwise, no matter what—” He broke off and looked away.

‘ “You were going to say?”

‘ “It is of no importance.”

‘We did not talk for the rest of the descent to Zephkiel’s cell.’

I looked at my watch; it was almost three. A chill breeze had begun to blow down the L.A. street, and I shivered. The man noticed, and he paused in his story. ‘You okay?’ he asked.

‘I’m fine. Please carry on. I’m fascinated.’

He nodded.

‘They were waiting for us in Zephkiel’s cell: Phaniel, Saraquael and Zephkiel. Zephkiel was sitting in his chair. Lucifer took up a position beside the window.

‘I walked to the centre of the room, and I began.

‘ “I thank you all for coming here. You know who I am; you know my function. I am the Vengeance of the Name, the arm of the Lord. I am Raguel.

‘The Angel Carasel is dead. It was given to me to find out why

he died, who killed him. This I have done. Now, the Angel Carasel was a designer in the Hall of Being. He was very good, or so I am told...

‘ “Lucifer. Tell me what you were doing before you came upon Phaniel, and the body”

‘ “I have told you already. I was walking.”

‘ “Where were you walking?”

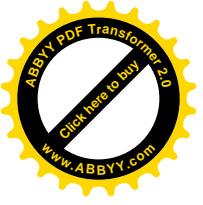
‘ “I do not see what business that is of yours.”

‘ “*Tell me.*”

‘He paused. He was taller than any of us, tall, and proud. “Very well. I was walking in the Dark. I have been walking in the Darkness for some time now. It helps me to gain a perspective on the City —being outside it. I see how fair it is, how perfect. There is nothing more enchanting than our home. Nothing more complete. Nowhere else that anyone would want to be.”

‘ “And what do you do in the Dark, Lucifer?”

‘He stared at me. “I walk. And...There are voices in the Dark. I listen to the voices. They promise me things, ask me questions, whisper and plead. And I ignore them. I steel myself and I gaze at the City. It is the only way I have of testing myself — putting myself to any kind of trial. I am the Captain of the Host; I am the first among the Angels, and I must prove myself”



‘I nodded. “Why did you not tell me this before?”

‘He looked down. “Because I am the only angel who walks in the Dark. Because I do not want others to walk in the Dark: I am strong enough to challenge the voices, to test myself. Others are not so strong. Others might stumble, or fall.”

‘ “Thank you, Lucifer. That is all, for now.” I turned to the next angel. “Phanuel. How long have you been taking credit for Carasel’s work?”

‘His mouth opened, but no sound came out.

‘ “Well?”

‘ “I...I would not take credit for another’s work.”

‘ “But you did take credit for *Love*?”

‘He blinked. “Yes. I did.”

‘ “Would you care to explain to us all what *Love* is?” I asked.

‘He glanced around uncomfortably “It’s a feeling of deep affection and attraction for another being, often combined with passion or desire — a need to be with another.” He spoke dryly, didactically, as if he were reciting a mathematical formula. “The feeling that we have for the Name, for our Creator — that is *Love*... amongst other things. *Love* will be an impulse that will inspire and ruin in equal measure. We are . . .” He paused, then began once more. “We are very proud of it.”

‘He was mouthing the words. He no longer seemed to hold any hope that we would believe them.

‘ “Who did the majority of the work on *Love*? No, don’t answer. Let me ask the others first. Zephkiel? When Phanuel passed the details on *Love* to you for approval, who did he tell you was responsible for it?”

‘The wingless angel smiled gently. “He told me it was his project.”

‘ “Thank you, sit Now, Saraquael: whose was *Love*?”

‘ “Mine. Mine and Carasel’s. Perhaps more his than mine, but we worked on it together.”

‘ “You knew that Phanuel was claiming the credit for it?”

‘ “...Yes.”

“And you permitted this?”

‘ “He...he promised us that he would give us a good project of our own to follow. He promised that if we said nothing we would be given more big projects — and he was true to his word. He gave us *Death*.”

‘I turned back to Phanuel. “Well?”

‘ “It is true that I claimed that *Love* was mine.”

‘ “But it was Carasel’s. And Saraquael’s.”

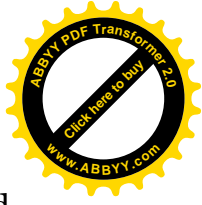
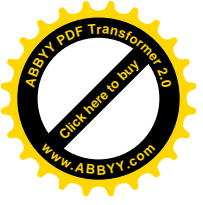
‘ “Yes.”

‘ “Their last project — before *Death*?”

‘ “Yes.”

‘ “That is all.”

‘I walked over to the window, looked at the silver spires, looked at the Dark. And I began to speak.



‘ “Carasel was a remarkable designer. If he had one failing, it was that he threw himself too deeply into his work.” I turned back to them. The Angel Saraquael was shivering, and lights were flickering beneath his skin. “Saraquael? Who did Carasel love? Who was his

lover.

‘He stared at the foot. Then he stared up, proudly, aggressively. And he smiled.

“I was.”

‘ “Do you want to tell me about it?”

‘ “No.” A shrug. “But I suppose I must. Very well, then.

‘ “We worked together. And when we began to work on *Love*... we became lovers. It was his idea. We would go back to his cell whenever we could snatch the time. There we touched each other, held each other, whispered endearments and protestations of eternal devotion. His welfare mattered more to me than my own. I existed for him. When I was alone, I would repeat his name to myself and think of nothing but him.

‘ “*When I was with him...*” he paused. He looked down.

“Nothing else mattered.”

‘I walked to where Saraquael stood, lifted his chin with my hand, stared into his grey eyes. “Then why did you kill him?”

‘ “Because he would no longer love me. When we started to work on *Death*, he...he lost interest. He was no longer mine. He belonged to *Death*. And if I could not have him, then his new lover was welcome to him. I could not bear his presence — I could not endure to have him near me and to know that he felt nothing for me. That was what hurt the most. I thought... I hoped... that if he was gone, then I would no longer care for him — that the pain would stop.

‘ “So I killed him. I stabbed him, and I threw his body from our window in the Hall of Being. But the pain has *not* stopped.” It was almost a wail.

‘Saraquael reached up, removed my hand from his chin. “Now what?”

‘I felt my aspect begin to come upon me; felt my function possess me. I was no longer an individual — I was the Vengeance of the Lord.

‘I moved close to Saraquael and embraced him. I pressed my lips to his, forced my tongue into his mouth. We kissed. He closed his eyes.

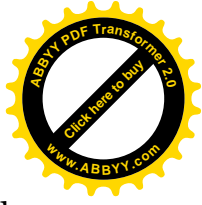
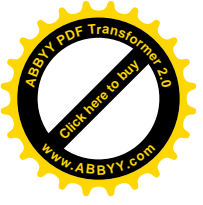
‘I felt it well up within me then: a burning, a brightness. From the corner of my eyes, I could see Lucifer and Phanuel averting their faces from my light; I could feel Zephkiel’s stare. And my light became brighter and brighter until it erupted — from my eyes, from my chest, from my fingers, from my lips: a white searing fire.

‘The white flames consumed Saraquael slowly, and he clung to me as he burned.

‘Soon there was nothing left of him. Nothing at all.

‘I felt the flame leave me. I returned to myself once more.

‘Phanuel was sobbing. Lucifer was pale. Zephkiel sat in his chair, quietly watching me.



‘I turned to Phanuel and Lucifet “You have seen the Vengeance of the Lord,” I told them. “Let it act as a warning to you both.”

‘Phanuel nodded. “It has. Oh, it has. I...I will be on my way, sir. I will return to my appointed post. If that is all right with you?”

‘ “ Go.”

‘He stumbled to the window and plunged into the light, his wings beating furiously.

‘Lucifer walked over to the place on the silver floor where Saraquael had once stood. He knelt, stared desperately at the floor as if he were trying to find some remnant of the angel I had destroyed, a fragment of ash, or bone, or charred feather, but there was nothing to find. Then he looked up at me.

‘ “That was not right,” he said. “That was not just.” He was crying; wet tears ran down his face. Perhaps Saraquael was the first to love, but Lucifer was the first to shed tears. I will never forget that.

‘I stared at him impassively. “It was justice. He killed another He was killed in his turn. You called me to my function, and I performed it.

‘ “But...he *loved*. He should have been forgiven. He should have been helped. He should not have been destroyed like that. That was *wrong*.”

“It was His will.”

‘Lucifer stood. “Then perhaps His will is unjust. Perhaps the voices in the Darkness speak truly, after all. How *can* this be right?”

‘ “It is right. It is His will. I merely performed my function.”

‘He wiped away the tears with the back of his hand. “No,” he said, flatly. He shook his head, slowly, from side to side. Then he said, “I must think on this. I will go now.”

‘He walked to the window, stepped into the sky, and he was gone.

‘Zephkiel and I were alone in his cell. I went over to his chair. He nodded at me. “You have performed your function well, Raguel. Shouldn’t you return to your cell to wait until you are next needed?”

The man on the bench turned toward me: his eyes sought mine. Until now it had seemed — for most of his narrative — that he was scarcely aware of me; he had stared ahead of himself, whispered his tale in little better than a monotone. Now it felt as if he had discovered me and that he spoke to me alone, rather than to the air, or the City of Los Angeles. And he said:

‘I knew that he was right. But I *couldn’t* have left then — not even if I had wanted to. My aspect had not entirely left me; my function was not completely fulfilled. And then it fell into place; I saw the whole picture. And like Lucifer, I knelt. I touched my forehead to the silver floor. “No, Lord,” I said. “Not yet.”

‘Zephkiel rose from his chair. “Get up. It is not fitting for one angel to act in this way to another It is not right. Get up!”

‘I shook my head. “Father, You are no angel,” I whispered.

‘Zephkiel said nothing. For a moment, my heart misgave within me. I was afraid. “Father, I was charged to discover who



was responsible for Carasel's death. And I do know."

' "You have taken your Vengeance, Raguel."

' "*Your* Vengeance, Lord."

' And then He sighed and sat down once more. "Ah, little Raguel. The problem with creating things is that they perform so much better than one had ever planned. Shall I ask how you recognised me?"

' "I...I am not certain, Lord. You have no wings. You wait at the centre of the City, supervising the Creation directly. When I destroyed Saraquael, You did not look away. You know too many things. You..." I paused and thought. "No, I do not know how I know. As You say, You have created me well. But I only understood who You were, and the meaning of the drama we had enacted here for You, when I saw Lucifer leave."

' "What did you understand, child?"

' "Who killed Carasel. Or, at least, who was pulling the strings. For example, who arranged for Carasel and Saraquael to work together on *Love*, knowing Carasel's tendency to involve himself too deeply in his work?"

' He was speaking to me gently, almost teasingly, as an adult would pretend to make conversation with a tiny child. "Why should anyone have 'pulled the strings', Raguel?"

' "Because nothing occurs without reason; and all the reasons are Yours. You set Saraquael up: yes, he killed Carasel. But he killed Carasel so that *I* could destroy *him*."

' "And were you wrong to destroy him?"

' I looked into His old, old eyes. "It was my function. But I do not think it was just. I think perhaps it was needed that I destroy Saraquael, in order to demonstrate to Lucifer the Injustice of the Lord."

' He smiled, then. "And whatever reason would I have for doing that?"

' "I ... I do not know. I do not understand — no more than I understand why You created the Dark or the voices in the Darkness. But You did. You caused all this to occur."

' He nodded. "Yes. I did. Lucifer must brood on the unfairness of Saraquael's destruction. And that — amongst other things — will precipitate him into certain actions. Poor sweet Lucifer. His way will be the hardest of all my children; for there is a part he must play in the drama that is to come, and it is a grand role."

' I remained kneeling in front of the Creator of All Things.

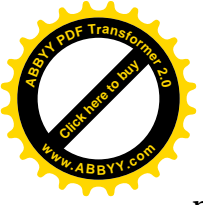
' "What will you do now, Raguel?" He asked me.

' "I must return to my cell. My function is now fulfilled. I have taken Vengeance, and I have revealed the perpetrator. That is enough. But — Lord?"

' "Yes, child."

' "I feel dirty. I feel tarnished. I feel befouled. Perhaps it is true that all that happens is in accordance with Your will, and thus it is good. But sometimes You leave blood on Your instruments."

' He nodded, as if He agreed with me. "If you wish, Raguel, you may forget all this. All that has happened this day" And then He said, "However, you will not be able to speak of this to any other angel, whether you choose to remember it or



not.”

‘ “I will remember it.”

‘ “It is your choice. But sometimes you will find it is easier by far not to remember. Forgetfulness can sometimes bring freedom, of a sort. Now, if you do not mind,” He reached down, took a file from a stack on the floor, opened it, “there is work I should be getting on with.”

‘I stood up and walked to the window. I hoped He would call me back, explain every detail of His plan to me, somehow make it all better. But He said nothing, and I left His Presence without ever looking back.’

The man was silent, then. And he remained silent — I couldn’t even hear him breathing — for so long that I began to get nervous, thinking that perhaps he had fallen asleep or died.

Then he stood up.

‘There you go, pal. That’s your story. Do you think it was worth a couple of cigarettes and a book of matches?’ He asked the question as if it was important to him, without irony.

‘Yes,’ I told him. ‘Yes. It was. But what happened next? How did you. . . I mean, if.. .’ I trailed off

It was dark on the street now, at the edge of daybreak. One by one the streetlamps had begun to flicker out, and he was silhouetted against the glow of the dawn sky. He thrust his hands into his pockets. ‘What happened? I left home, and I lost my way, and these days home’s a long way back. Sometimes you do things you regret, but there’s nothing you can do about them. Times change. Doors close behind you. You move on. You know?’

‘Eventually I wound up here. They used to say no one’s ever originally from L.A. True as Hell in my case.’

And then, before I could understand what he was doing, he leaned down and kissed me, gently on the cheek. His stubble was rough and prickly, but his breath was surprisingly sweet. He whispered into my ear: ‘I never fell. I don’t care what they say. I’m still doing my job, as I see it.’

My cheek burned where his lips had touched it.

He straightened up. ‘But I still want to go home.’

The man walked away down the darkened street, and I sat on the bench and watched him go. I felt like he had taken something from me, although I could no longer remember what. And I felt like something had been left in its place — absolution, perhaps, or innocence, although of what, or from what, I could no longer say.

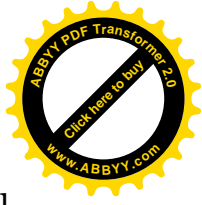
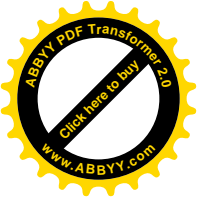
An image from somewhere: a scribbled drawing of two angels in flight above a perfect city; and over the image a child’s perfect hand print, which stains the white paper blood-red. It came into my head unbidden, and I no longer know what it meant.

I stood up.

It was too dark to see the face of my watch, but I knew I would get no sleep that day. I walked back to the place I was staying, to the house by the stunted palm tree, to wash myself and to wait. I thought about angels and about Tink; and I wondered whether love and death went hand in hand.

The next day the planes to England were flying again.





I felt strange — lack of sleep had forced me into that miserable state in which everything seems flat and of equal importance; when nothing matters, and in which reality seems scraped thin and threadbare. The taxi journey to the airport was a nightmare. I was hot, and tired, and testy. I wore a T-shirt in the L.A. heat; my coat was packed at the bottom of my luggage, where it had been for the entire stay.

The airplane was crowded, but I didn't care.

The stewardess walked down the aisle with a rack of newspapers:

the *Herald Tribune*, *USA Today*, and the *L.A. Times*. I took a copy of the *Times*, but the words left my head as my eyes scanned over them. Nothing that I read remained with me. No, I lie. Somewhere in the back of the paper was a report of a triple murder: two women and a small child. No names were given, and I do not know why the report should have registered as it did.

Soon I fell asleep. I dreamed about fucking Tink, while blood ran sluggishly from her closed eyes and lips. The blood was cold and viscous and clammy, and I awoke chilled by the plane's airconditioning, with an unpleasant taste in my mouth. My tongue and lips were dry. I looked out of the scratched oval window, stared down at the clouds, and it occurred to me then (not for the first time) that the clouds were in actuality another land, where everyone knew just what they were looking for and how to get back where they started from.

Staring down at the clouds is one of the things I have always liked best about flying. That, and the proximity one feels to one's death.

I wrapped myself in the thin aircraft blanket and slept some more, but if further dreams came then they made no impression upon me.

A blizzard blew up shortly after the plane landed in England, knocking out the airport's power supply. I was alone in an airport elevator at the time, and it went dark and jammed between floors. A dim emergency light flickered on. I pressed the crimson alarm button until the batteries ran down and it ceased to sound; then I shivered in my L.A. T-shirt in the corner of my little silver room. I watched my breath steam in the air, and I hugged myself for warmth.

There wasn't anything in there except me; but even so, I felt safe and secure. Soon someone would come and force open the doors. Eventually somebody would let me out; and I knew that I would soon be home.