

An Image in Twisted Silver

Charles L. Grant

The annual World Fantasy Convention, which moves about from state to state, occasionally from country to country, issues each year a program book of consciously artistic value, with stories, essays, and artwork by leading lights. Charles L. Grant's tale is taken from the 1986 program book, the year he was guest of honor, illustrated by that year's artist GoH Jeff Potter.

Charles is one of our best-selling horror novelists and an advocate of "quiet horror," as exemplified in his series of Shadows anthologies. He's himself a master of the short form, as every reader of horror well knows. He's also active in the small presses, having contributed to Whispers, Fantasy Macabre, Fantasy Tales, Fantasy Book, Weirdbook, Shayol, Midnight Sun, and others. Author of over one hundred short tales, there are many, like "An Image in Twisted Silver," that have not yet been collected.

Robert locked the bathroom door when Joann began screaming. He leaned against it and closed his eyes, felt the sweat on his brow, felt the damp cold under his arms, and felt the heel of his left foot tap rhythmically on the floor. In time to his wife's voice. Faster, now slower, now faster again when she realized what he'd done and threw something against the wall. His words were garbled, if words they were at all, and he stopped trying to give them meaning -- the sound of her was enough, the anger and the hatred and the overwhelming despair that had begun in her pale eyes when he told her he was going to quit the firm, that traveled in a rippling crescent from one cheek to the other, that settled around her mouth as her tongue licked her lips, as the lips began to tremble while the tears began to well, as her teeth clacked together as if she were freezing.

The sound of it beginning as a growl in her throat, pitching higher as she backed away from the kitchen table, higher still when she pointed at the stack of envelopes on the counter and demanded to know how the hell she was expected to pay all those bills if he no longer had a job. And why the hell hadn't he talked with her first, leaving the house that morning filled with the power of the righteous, the strength of ideals, the foolishness of the young who thought they'd live forever -- because the goddamned bills were over there, stacked on the counter and waiting for the goddamned checks that would never be written because he had principles but no goddamned sense and she was sick of listening to his goddamned sermons about living with himself, about sleeping, about what had to be done before the world was made right.

He'd said nothing.

She was still screaming.

He'd only watched her pace the kitchen, slamming a hand down, kicking a cabinet door, opening the refrigerator to show him the food that would have to last them a while because they'd just bought a new car, just returned from vacation, just redecorated the front room and their bedroom in anticipation of his raise, and so had raided their savings because it was all going to be just fine. Then she pointed out the window to the backyard where their children were playing and asked him too sweetly how she was expected to explain it to them when all they would understand was that Daddy no longer had to go to work in the morning, that Daddy had decided there was no future in the law if the law wouldn't ensure a future for those who lived it, for those who enforced it, for those who tried to make it affordable for those who needed it the most. How, she wanted to know, opening and closing drawers, still kicking at the doors, was she going to explain his professional suicide to their friends, and their family, and to herself when all she wanted was not to return to the rundown places they'd lived in while he'd studied, and if that was too much to ask why the hell were they still married.

He said nothing.

She was still screaming.

He opened his eyes and looked left, to the mirror over the basin, and to his face looking back. Distorted because of a flaw in the surface, a whorl and a bulge that elongated his neck and turned his hair to wire and gave his lips a silly smirk when he stood in the wrong spot while he was shaving. He shrugged at it now, wondering for a moment why it seemed so young, the way he used to be young, back in the days when he believed so damned strongly in everything he believed.

He laid his head back, feeling rage make the door tremble, feeling his own anger stiffen his spine and tighten his buttocks and finally force him to stand upright and turn around, hands in fists, ready to go after her and compel her to understand that it wasn't he who had changed since their days in college and their first day of marriage and their first years together as they dreamed of modest wealth, modest family, modest hopes; it wasn't he who had fallen in love with a house much too large for four people, who had fallen in love with the checks that could be written every month while he wrote the briefs dealing with the homeless and the unwanted that made local history; and it wasn't he who had almost laughed when he almost cried at the turnabout the office made the week before when one of his court appearances had failed, had reached the papers, had made him look like a Quixote in a three-piece suit and school tie.

He didn't move.

She was still screaming.

And he knew she was afraid.

He understood, though she didn't know it, what the future would be like until he was back on his feet, in his own office, in another town.

He was willing to take the risk. Like Scrooge after the Phantom

has shown him the grave, he had come to loathe the cynicism and the defeatism that were cloaked in excuses of the real world, when the real world was only an excuse for old failures perpetuated on the young.

She hadn't listened when he tried to explain; she thought he was kidding.

She hadn't listened when he told her he couldn't take it anymore.

But she had listened this afternoon when he'd given her the news -- with the ear that had heard the cries of their first child in that place they had tried to make a home when all it was a hovel; with the ear that had heard him swear on his love for her and the boy that he would never permit them to live that way again.

Something hard crashed against the door.

He stepped back too quickly and the grey rug beneath him almost slipped out from under his feet. He grabbed for the basin counter and steadied himself, shook himself, winked I'm all right to his worried still-young reflection, and was astonished to see the tears in his eyes.

I'm not wrong, he told himself suddenly, fearing she had discovered a weakness; I'm not wrong. I'm not. I'm right, and you know it.

His children probably wouldn't understand, that much was true, and the only thing he could do was pray that understanding would come as they grew older. He loved them too much to deliberately hurt them, and he counted on their love for the support he would need even though they'd be blinded.

There was quiet.

Joann stopped her screaming.

His reflection lifted an eyebrow, and he turned to the door, wondering what she was up to, turned back and saw the expression on his face. A young face, doubting, and darkening with anger he couldn't feel. He shook his head. Distortions trembled. He stepped away and scrubbed his cheeks with his palms until the imperfections in the mirror had him strangling himself.

"Jesus," he said, and looked away quickly.

Something leaned against the door, and he heard Joann whisper his name. Not a begging. And not a quiet screaming. A name, nothing more, telling him the tantrum was over and she was ready to talk.

He stared at the glass doorknob, at the towels on the rack, at his bathrobe on the hook near the top of the door.

"It's been so long," he heard her say. "Robert, it's been so long."

He closed his eyes briefly. Not denying, but holding her away, trying to keep her from telling him what he already knew. Too long in the trenches, too long for them to return.

He knew that.

He wasn't stupid.

He wasn't so much the fool that he hadn't coveted what he now had, hadn't worked the miserably long hours in order to build

up what his banker not so laughingly called his estate, hadn't dreamt of even more until he was given the assignment to defend a charitable group who showed him the alleys and the gutters and the trash and the people who lived there because they'd grown too thin to walk the cracks; until he looked at them and remembered how his father had worked double shifts and his mother had worked as well and how his education had been paid for in their dying; until he came home one evening and was so filled with love at the sight of his wife and the sounds of his son and new daughter that he felt at once blessed, and disgusted with himself. A disgust because he knew that to beat the system he had to work in it, and in working in it had become lost, and in getting lost had lost his life.

Sentiment, he told himself.

His reflection stretched and widened and collapsed upon itself. Easier for the rich, not so easy for those who caused it.

Practical. Windmills. Reality. It happens.

"Robert," she said. "Robert, please open the door."

He filled the basin with lukewarm water and splashed it on his face, looked up at his dripping reflection and could no longer see the tears.

"Idiot," he whispered.

The shattered face stared back, eyes narrow, lips tight, and he nearly laughed at the parody of anger he saw, reminding himself that even Scrooge had probably compromised a little the day after he had given over the free Christmas goose.

"Robert, come on, we have to talk. I'm sorry."

He knew she was sincere, that she wasn't lurking out there with a knife behind her back or a club in her hand; he knew that weeping for Tiny Tim wasn't the same as weeping for the man who lived in a cardboard box. He knew that now. Perhaps he hadn't known it before. Perhaps, in telling her over the last few months what he wanted to do if he ever got the nerve, he hadn't seen the response in her eyes, in the way she held him, in the way her hands clasped together, knuckles white while lips were smiling. Perhaps...

He reached for the doorknob and looked at himself in the mirror.

Jesus, he thought with a quiet laugh and shake of his head, it's a wonder I don't cut my head off every morning.

He laughed again, a bit louder, and told Joann not to worry, she'd scared him but he was fine.

She giggled and rattled the knob. "Open up," she said. "I think I'm ready."

"So am I," he told the face that looked at him with regret.

"And the first thing in the morning I'm going to give you a new look, one that won't scare me awake."

"Robert?"

He turned the knob.

And his reflection reached out and tore a hole in his throat.