

# DR. COUNEY'S ISLAND

*Steven Popkes*

*“Dr. Couney ‘s Island” was purchased by Gardner Dozois, and appeared in the December 1994 issue of Asimov’s, with an illustration by Laurie Harden. Steven Popkes is not a prolific writer by the high-production standards of the genre, but he has contributed a number of memorable stories for the magazine, including “The Color Winter,” a Nebula finalist, and his popular no-vella, “The Egg.” His well-received first novel Caliban Landing appeared in 1987, and was followed by an expansion to novel-length of “The Egg,” called Slow Lightning. He was also part of the Cambridge Writers’ Workshop project to produce science fiction scenarios about the future of Boston, Massachusetts, that cumulated in the 1994 anthology Future Boston.*

*Here he shows us that wherever the real Camelot might have been, Camelot is also in our hearts.*

\* \* \* \*

It was damned cold that morning. You never thought Coney Island would ever be that cold. All you ever thought about the Island were the lights, bright like Fourth of July sparklers, and the smell of crowds and spilled beer, hot dogs and sau-erkraut. And it was funny, he mused for a long minute, lying on his side on the frozen sand. Funny, you never remembered the smell of the ocean but here it is, as sudden and surprising as flashpowder: salt and the ripe stink of dirty water. What was the ocean more than that?

Merlin rolled himself up and leaned back against the clap-board wall of Dreamland—No it wasn't. Dreamland burned down years ago, burned down, oh the bright lights of that fire!, and was rebuilt by somebody new, died a financial death and was buried in the middle of Steeplechase. Where was he? He'd been nearly fifty when that happened. How old was he now?—and looked out over the water. His stomach hurt, a hard, unyielding knot. The flat land and calm sea looked as if they were drawn on

paper. It was early morning just before the sun rose and the sun's breezes bit, as small and sharp as small dogs. Merlin huddled in his torn coat at their expectation.

\* \* \* \*

(The beach on the Normandy coast was always cold. A hard wet sandy beach that matched him, hardness for hardness, when he stepped off the boat. A hardness in me at leaving. A hardness in me at being forced to leave. Arthur, I thought. You're on your own.)

He shook his head. He was trying to remember something. The beach. He was somewhere on the beach—near Nathan's down from the boardwalk. They came here last night—who?

\* \* \* \*

Jimmy the Pinhead was lying next to where Merlin had been sleeping. Merlin slapped him on the rump. "Wake up," he said. Then coughed up a fluid mess, spit it on the sand and eyed it curiously. He shivered as the sun flared over the sea. Baths, he thought. I remember the baths—was that ten?

Twenty years ago? Before John McKane died. Warm, they were. Hot. Steamy.

"Wake up, damn it." He kicked Jimmy viciously in the foot.

"Leave a sick man alone," Jimmy groaned and pushed him away.

"We stay here much longer and we won't be sick." Merlin leaned over him and shouted in his ear. "We'll be dead!"

Jimmy put both hands over his ears and sat up. "You're a filthy old man."

"You're right about that."

"You hurt my foot."

"Stop whining or I'll break your head." Merlin shivered again. "We got to get somewhere warm."

"There any more liquor?"

Merlin stood and stretched, coughed again. “Yeah. French champagne. Come on.”

He half led, half pushed Jimmy back up over the boardwalk and down the alley towards Asa’s place. As the breeze rose Merlin felt even colder and there were moments of sharp panic when he couldn’t seem to remember how to breathe— leaning against the closed storefronts.

Jimmy waited for him, patient as a drafthorse. Finally, Merlin brought them into the warm crook created by the space between Asa Moore’s flower shop and Bond’s Nickel Beer.

“This is warm, Merle,” said Jimmy, sniffing the air. “Smells nice, too.”

Merlin didn’t answer. He huddled with his back against the brick wall of the flower shop, feeling the warmth of the coal furnace seep slowly into him. It loosened some glutinous sub-stances deep in his chest and he was wracked with deep, painful coughs. Blackness edged his vision and everything he saw had showers of colors. Merlin had a sudden image of himself turned inside out. Then, the coughing passed and he felt the cold mentholated air filling his lungs.

\* \* \* \*

(The air in Salem had been sweet, each breath like a labored symphony as I struggled to lift my chest one more time. Trapped with a mountain lying across me. I wanted to cry out that I was no witch. Cry out that I was, after all—just for a clean death. Either admission would destroy my children. Instead, I stayed silent, trying to breathe, wishing I could just die. I heard a voice ask me to confess—to what? Ravings? Had I breath and inclination I might have laughed. Had my body less strength I might have died right then. Neither happened. Only my breath, sucked in against too much weight and leaving too quickly.)

What was it he was trying to remember?

\* \* \* \*

Someone took his arm, placed it across his shoulder and hoisted him to his feet.

“Stupid,” Asa Moore said as he helped Merlin into his shop. “You were always stupid. Now no better than when you were a kid.”

The sunlight seemed brighter in the greenhouse in the back of Asa's shop, reflected from rows of lilies and camellias, budding now but not yet bloomed. And it was steamy warm as when John McKane had taken Merlin and other ballot box enforcers to the baths on the night of the Coolidge election as a reward for faithfulness.

\* \* \* \*

(Steamy, as when I'd sat with the Emperor and we'd been talking about what to do with the Senate. "They'd be useful as goats. Not otherwise," he'd said, and I had agreed.)

Asa took Merlin's head in his hands and brought his face close.

"It's me, George. Asa Moore."

"I know you. I was just thinking."

Asa let him go. "Good. You get crazier every year."

Merlin shook his head. "I'm not crazy."

"Of course not." Asa spun around and grabbed Jimmy by the neck. "Damn you, don't touch the flowers!"

Jimmy snatched his hands back and held them under his arms. "I'm sorry. I was just trying to smell them."

"Go sit over there, next to the furnace."

Jimmy sat on the bench in the corner and in a few moments was asleep.

Asa snorted. "At least, he's easy."

Merlin nodded, sleepy himself. The smell of the budding camellias had a hypnotic effect on him. "Best pinhead act on the island."

Asa smiled sourly. "Such a great achievement." He rubbed his chest. "It's too much work carrying you in here. My heart isn't what it used to be. I have to work too hard as it is— two thousand carnations. Three hundred lilies. A hundred ca-mellias. Them, I have to take care of. Otherwise, I don't make it through the year. You, I leave to freeze next time."

“Guinevere loved camellias. I did, too, for that matter.”

“Shut up with that crap. You can stay here and keep warm but I don’t have to listen to that King Arthur crap.”

“He’s Merlin,” said Jimmy, suddenly awake. “He told me.”

“Crap!” Asa stood up, short and furious. “His name is George Thomas and he grew up in Gravesend the same as I did, before it had hotels or amusement parks. We fought over the same girl. We worked for McKane together, keeping his tax collectors and prostitutes in line. George’s been drinking himself dead since before you were born. I’ve seen it for forty years right into the middle of this goddamned depression. You think I don’t know who he is *now!*”

Chastened, Jimmy huddled back down on the bench.

“And you,” Asa said, turning to Merlin. “Don’t tell me flowers. You know how I know you’re crazy? ‘Cause there were no camellias in King Arthur’s time—not there. Camellias aren’t native to England. A goddamned florist knows these things. They were brought to Europe. Long, long after your great king!”

\* \* \* \*

(Short, like Keaton is short, standing on the field when the house fell down, so convinced of his own skills, of his planning, that when he stood there, serene as a saint, I had to look away. I’ve seen the last of him, I thought. He’s dead, sure. And we all turned away—even his wife, a slight and pretty thing—and heard the crash and turned back and he was standing, looking at us. And in that moment, we could all read his mind as sure as if he’d shouted at us: “Did you get it? Was the camera rolling?” And all we could think was, “How did you *do* that?”)

That’s not it. It was something else.

\* \* \* \*

“Some other flower, then. Something like camellias. Asa, you don’t understand.” Merlin rubbed his face with his hands, suddenly aware of the smell of his clothes, the ancient sea smell of his skin. How much could Asa know? Merlin remembered listening to pronouncements and whimperings across the night wind when he was a child. Listening, rapt, to everyone still

living, to those that had died. Was there any wonder he was confused? "It's like," he groped for words, feeling the leftover remains of alcohol like wool in his thoughts. "It's like we can all remember each other. Like remembering dreams."

"Crap!" shouted Asa, beating the air with his hands. "You started this crap when McKane went to jail and we had to hide out in Jersey. It was crap then and crap now."

"He's all the time, fulla' crap," came a thin voice behind Asa.

Asa turned around and let his arms fall, rubbed his chest with one hand and nodded. "Yeah. Hi, Joe."

Joe Littlefinger stepped down into the greenhouse, smoking a cigar as thick as his wrist. Joe's wrist, like the rest of him, was diminutive. He was slightly over three feet tall, but every inch of him was dressed impeccably: vest, jacket and pants, gold watch chain and derby. He knocked ash off the end of his cigar into one of the lily pots.

Asa reached down and gently plucked the cigar from his hands. "Later, when you go outside. I have enough problems without you killing my flowers." He reached through the door and placed the cigar outside.

Joe nodded, imperturbable. "Sure, Asa. I'm going up to Doctor Couney's place to look at the kids. Any of you guys want to go along?"

Merlin looked at him. "They're closed up. No tours until spring."

Joe shrugged. "I'm feeling generous today. One of the nurses will let us look at them for a half a buck each."

"I don't even have that."

"I'll spring for everybody." Joe waved his hand at them.

Asa had flowers to take care of and Jimmy had fallen asleep again. As Merlin followed Joe out the door, Asa grabbed his arm.

"Don't make me bring you in again, George," he said. "You come on in and sleep next to the furnace. You'll die if you stay out there."

"Thanks, Asa."

Asa looked deep into his face, grimaced. "You won't do it. I'll find you huddled next to the wall outside, dead, one day."

Outside, the cold had sharpened but with the sun stronger now, it didn't feel quite so close. Joe retrieved his cigar care-fully from the stoop and lit it, puffed it in glorious satisfac-tion.

"Life's worth living if y'got a good cigar, eh?" Joe tried to blow a smoke ring. The light breeze defeated him and he shrugged.

Doctor Martin Couney's Premature Baby Incubators had once been a featured attraction of Dreamland. But Dreamland was gone and the babies remained, now down the Bowery from Asa's shop. Joe and Merlin walked quickly to get out of the cold.

"Say, Merle," said Joe matter-of-factly as they walked. "Jimmy tells me there's something to this magic stuff of yours."

"There is no such thing as magic," said Merlin shortly. A sudden breeze down the street made him shiver. "I know."

"Not the way he tells it."

"Jimmy's a pinhead."

Joe nodded. "What's the truth, then?"

Merlin shrugged. "I don't know."

"Come on. Don't clam up on me."

"I don't know what it is. We remember each other. That's all. That's all I've ever said. Asa thinks I'm crazy." Merlin stopped in the middle of the road and stared down at Joe. "Do you think I'm crazy?"

Joe inspected the end of his cigar. "I think you were smart when you were with McKane and then you started drinking too much and talking too much. Now you're a bum."

Merlin laughed. "That's honest." He stood up straight and looked around him. The sky was a light turquoise and there were gulls flying overhead on sun-gilded wings. He held his arms wide. "I remember Arthur as a child—when the Ro-mans left England, running off when the King fell. People dying—a thousand men in an hour. Can you imagine that? I ran. I

remember the Romans, marching up big, wide roads-better roads than we got here, f'Christ's sake—into France. But we didn't call it France then. I don't remember what we called it. But I remember watching them. I remember march-ing with them. I remember marching with the Redcoats through Concord—I remember a lot of marching. I think I remember the Pharaohs—but it gets hazy that far back. Like remembering when you were three. I remember—”

“Right, Merle. Come on.” Joe took the edge of his coat and started to pull him down the street. “Let's get out of the damned cold.”

“I remember it all.”

“Yeah.” Joe spit on the ground. “Right. I should have known. Asa said you grew up together as kids. He says he should have known it then: you're crazy as they come.” He strode ahead quickly, his feet striking the ground like small hammers.

“I said I remember it.”

“Just like I remember being that son-of-a-bitch Charlie Stratton, too,” said Joe viciously. “And his bitch Lavinia. I'm thirty-eight inches. Four too many inches and fifty years too damned late. I could have made meat out of him. He was so genteel. I can sing. I can dance. I can play the fucking piano. You know how hard that is with these fingers?” He held up his stubby hand.

Merlin stared at him, bewildered. “What are you talking about?”

“I'm talking about show business, knucklehead.” Joe slapped his arm. “Tom Thumb is my *stage name*,’ he said. Like there was something else. I had my name changed. I don't give a cobbler's piss I was born John Quincy Armont. I'm Joseph Littlefinger *now*.”

“What—”

Joe stopped in front of him and in a sudden unexpected display of strength grabbed his jacket and pulled Merlin to his knees. “I'm talking movies! Jimmy said one of these ghosts of yours makes fucking movies! In California!”

“Christ,” moaned Merlin, and started laughing. He fell backwards into the street, sat down heavily. “You want an introduction.”



“Yes, goddamn it. Stop laughing.”

But Merlin was coughing and spitting and laughing on the ground.

“Stop laughing,” Joe said again, took a long pull on his cigar and breathed out a great cloud of smoke. “It’s a stupid idea.”

Merlin gasped for breath and sat up. “Not really. It just doesn’t work that way. I don’t know any of these people. I just remember them—as if things happened to me. I don’t even know their names.”

“Right. You’re a bum and a drunk and an ancient magi-cian.” Joe chuckled wryly. “But even a blind pig in shit will find an acorn sometime. And like the hedgehog said to the hairbrush, you can try anything once. Get up. Let’s go see the babies.”

Merlin felt obscurely stung to be so blithely cast aside. “Maybe I can figure out who he is. He works with Buster Keaton.”

“Never mind.”

“We’re all related somehow—maybe we had the same ancestor somewhere.”

“Adam No-navel, no doubt.”

“Look, I didn’t ask to have this happen to me,” Merlin shouted at him. “Did I? I *liked* John McKane. I was happy working for him. This stuff eats away at you. It’s not my fault.”

Joe gently took his arms. “‘Suffer the fools,’ they say. Come on, Merle. John McKane’s been dead for thirty years. Coney’s answer to Boss Tweed died before I was born. And Midget City was never what it was cracked up to be. It’s been a whole new world for forty years.”

“You think I’m crazy.”

“Who isn’t? I come up to your waist. Makes me a little crazy, too.”

Merlin still felt sore. “Then, how come you’re always inviting me along?”

Joe grinned at him. “How tall am I?”

“How the hell should I know?”

“Exactly,” said Joe. “Come on. Let’s go see the babies.”

\* \* \* \*

(A baby is always small. The hand cradles the child’s head easily. Perhaps God shaped men’s hands for this purpose and this purpose alone, I thought, holding my son in my arms. All other possible uses for them are but happy accidents. Lie still, little one, I croon. Lie still and sleep. Perhaps some day you will be a great carpenter.)

What was it he was trying to remember?

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There were six incubators in the room, large white enamel and glass cabinets, each with its impossibly small infant contents. Here was a little girl, her hands the size of thumbnails. Next to her was a bluish boy, his chest no bigger around than a cup, struggling for breath. The breath goes in, the breath goes out.

The nurse smiled at Joe and looked dubiously at Merlin, but let them both in when Joe gave her an additional quarter. They walked past the different children until Joe stopped before one small, swollen-eyed child.

“You have to meet Billy,” he whispered. “Billy Watterson, meet Merlin the Magician. Merle, meet Billy.”

“Hello, Billy,” whispered Merlin. Billy was no more than skin covering cords and veins. He was smaller than the others, no bigger than a Nathan Frank. Merlin pressed his face against the glass so he could hear the boy’s tiny breath. Straining, he heard the faintest rustle of leaves, the mere ghost of breathing.

“I like the tyke,” said Joe softly. “He’s less than two pounds—but Coney says you can’t tell what he really weighed when he was born. They lose weight so fast, he said.”

“Mister Billy Watterson, welcome to Coney Island.”

They stood together in silence for a long time.

“You know,” Joe said slowly. “This is his island.”

“Billy?”

“No. This is Doctor Couney’s island.” Joe put his hand on the glass and leaned forward to see if the baby would respond. The baby seemed too intent on breathing to pay attention. “You and I are just so much air. McKane died. Tweed died. Dreamland died. Luna Park’s dying. Steeple-chase will die someday. And no one will remember them or us. But they’ll remember Martin Couney and these little in-cubators. And the babies that live here and grow up, strong and tall. People will remember them and forget us.”

Merlin shook his head. “No. It won’t be like that. They’ll remember the lights and the rides and the spectacles and the fat ladies and the strong men and the beaches and the crowds and Nathan’s hot dogs and the freak shows. But Couney and his babies they’ll forget.”

“You’re a drunken bum,” Joe snarled at him softly. “What the hell do you know?”

Merlin grinned and tapped his skull. “Crazy, too. Merlin has second sight, doesn’t he?”

The nurse came in suddenly. She pointed at Merlin. “You have to leave. Doctor Couney knows Joe, but he doesn’t know you. He doesn’t like to have his nursery cluttered with smelly, drunken bums. Now get out of here.”

“Who’s smelly?” chuckled Merlin.

“Go on,” Joe pushed him. “I’ll catch up to you later.”

Outside, the air had warmed and it was almost noon. He wandered over behind Nathan’s to rummage in the backalley cans for lunch. He was lucky. There was a half pound of moldy cheese and some buns only partly soggy. Sometimes he wondered if the cooks at Nathan’s were leaving food out on purpose. He walked back up Twelfth Street and back under the boardwalk to eat. Merlin scraped the cheese against the corner of a brick piling and tossed the wet portion of the bread out to the gulls. In a small protected area, the sun shone on him and reflected from the walls and he was almost cozily warm. He savored the cheese and the bread and the resulting full stomach, and drowsily asked the air for a bottle of wine. The air was unmoved and he fell asleep.

Some long time later, he felt a rough hand shaking him rudely awake. Merlin sat up, blinked several times and rubbed the gum from his eyes. It was Joe, sitting on the sand. Word-lessly, Joe handed a bottle of cheap brandy over to him.

“What’s the occasion?” asked Merlin. “Not that there needs to be one.”

“We are drinking,” said Joe ponderously, “to the late Wil-liam Watterson.”

It was a moment before Merlin knew who Joe was talking about. “Oh, no,” he said when he understood.

Joe nodded. His clothes were dirty from walking under the boardwalk and there were deep gouges in the leather of his shoes. Joe did not seem to notice. “Mister Watterson, after a valiant effort at the very basics of living, quit this mortal coil about an hour ago. Doctor Couney tried to persuade the young man to stay but to no avail. Mister Watterson was adamant. This was no world for him.”

All Merlin could think of was the tiny sound of the baby’s breathing, imagining the faint, almost imperceptible cough, the deepening strain and then a deep sigh and silence. He rubbed his face with his hand, then tipped the bottle up and drank. “To young Billy.”

“To young Billy. We hardly knew you,” echoed Joe as he took back the bottle. “Christ, Merle. He was so little and he tried so *hard*. I never knew anything so small could work so hard just at breathing.” Joe looked as if he was going to weep, as if, for a moment, he was a child himself. “The kid deserved a rattle, or a ball—or at least a tit, like a normal kid. Not a glass box and a little coffin. The best we can give him is a good drunk.”

\* \* \* \*

(As I lay on the bed, each breath was life bubbling to me through the fluid in my lungs. I was drowning—hadn’t I heard once that drowning was an easy way to die? The man who wrote that was lost in an opium dream. “Gladly live, gladly die...” Did I write that? I never dreamed the last moments would be so hard. The body doesn’t die easily. It dies hard—it fights for every breath, every heartbeat. Until, like coal burning, the ashes overwhelm it.)

That was almost it.

\* \* \* \*

Merlin found tears on his own cheeks and wiped them away. He sniffed and that brought on another coughing attack, each building from within to an explosive climax, like nitroglycerin in his lungs, priming the next until there was no breath at all, just one long ragged wheeze.

Joe held him as he fought for breath. "Don't die on me now, Merle," Joe moaned. "I just couldn't take it. I swear, I just couldn't take it."

The cold air finally filled his lungs and he breathed carefully, as a thirsty man is careful with water. When he could, Merlin sat up and drank some of the brandy, feeling the warmth in his throat soothe his lungs, put a fire in his belly and a rubbery strength in his arms and legs.

"I left Jimmy over at Asa's shop. I got to go over and check on him. Asa's always scared he'll break something." Merlin stood up and dizzily leaned against the piling.

"Yeah." Joe drained the bottle and threw it viciously against the piling. The glass exploded and Joe stared at the wet spot. "Poor little son-of-a-bitch. I'm going to go home and get so drunk I can't sit in a chair." He looked up to Merlin. "You come on by if you don't want to sleep under the boardwalk. You always were good drinking company. Good company all around."

Merlin looked down at the sudden compliment. "Yeah. We'll see. I don't know where I'll end up."

"You think about it. It gets damned cold out here." Joe straightened his suit, pulled a cigar out of his pocket and lit it. The fetid smell almost made Merlin throw up.

Joe tipped his hat to Merlin and started walking down the beach towards Steeplechase. Merlin watched him for a moment, then ducked back under the boardwalk to Twelfth Street towards Asa's shop.

\* \* \* \*

(It was a measure of my stature as a physician that I would be called to treat someone such as Harry Houdini. The escape artist had proven difficult to treat not because of the injury—which was, in fact, terminal—but because of Houdini's personality, which I found abrasive and made worse by his great pain. Still, it was hard not to feel pity as the man was pulled inexorably

towards death. Houdini's pact with his wife, to come back after death, struck me as pitiful.

"There is no magic," Houdini whispered when we were alone. He looked about the room as if his wife would hear him.

"I know," I said, remembering everyone who remembered me. "More than you do.")

I know I'm looking for something. I know that. Desper-ately, completely. I want to know what it is.

\* \* \* \*

He met Jimmy on the Bowery next to where the corner of Dreamland used to be.

"Hi, Merle," Jimmy said affably. He jerked his head to-wards Asa's flower shop. "He didn't look too good, so I thought I'd go home."

Merlin stared for a moment towards the shop, then searched Jimmy's slack face. "How'd he look?"

"Real tired, Merle." Jimmy shrugged. "I thought Gunther'd give me some wine if I came back on my own. He was real pissed the last time he found me under the boardwalk with you."

"Okay. You go on." He pushed Jimmy up the street. "I was just coming to get you."

"You have any wine?" asked Jimmy wistfully.

"Not a drop. But Joe does."

Jimmy nodded. "I'll go see him."

With that, he turned and walked steadily up the street, plac-ing his feet with careful exactness. Merlin, watching him, was reminded of the time he and Jimmy had gotten drunk and the pinhead had fallen and broken his knee. Jimmy must have decided to be more careful from that, or had it pointed out to him. It wasn't clear if Jimmy was smart enough to figure it out for himself.

Asa had fallen asleep in his chair in the shop. His broad face lay on

his chest like a deflated child's ball and snored faintly through his nose. His face was gray and chalky and he looked shrunken in his sleep, as if pulling away from a deep and abiding pain. Asa's heart had been troubling him for over ten years and Merlin knelt next to him and peered closely, trying to see if Asa's heart had begun to fail at last.

\* \* \* \*

(Arthur had already heard the songs being sung about him as he lay on the bed. The King looked bad. His face was white and the continual, constant pain had given his voice a whim-pering quaver that I hated. He hated it more than I, especially the craven sound that lurked in it when he asked for drugs.

"I never wanted to die," he said through clenched teeth. "Always, I feared it."

"No man is different," I said and leaned close to him, cradled his head against my breast. Once he had taken pleasure in that touch but now it was mere consolation.

"You cannot cure me, eh? Not even of the pain?" He tried to chuckle but it sounded bitter. "You are not much of a witch."

"No, my love," I said, looking down into his eyes. "I never was."

"Give me another damned potion then."

I held his head as he sipped it.

"It is spring," he said after a moment, as if that were some great surprise. "Can you smell the camellias?"

He did not speak again and soon after we laid him amidst the flowers he loved.)

\* \* \* \*

"Maybe they weren't camellias," Merlin muttered under his breath. "Just because I remember them there doesn't mean they weren't there, does it?" Or did it? He remembered the smell strongly, as strongly as he could smell it here, now, in the greenhouse. A mistake in memory, maybe? Did that turn the whole tapestry of mind into rotting cloth?

The flower smell in the greenhouse was overpowering. Asa did not

rouse as Merlin watched him. For the space of a hundred breaths, Merlin remembered his own life, not the others. Remembered he and Asa growing up in Gravesend, growing corn and squash, watching as the first hotels were built down on the beach, watching Norton build his bar and gambling den and begin the building of Coney Island. He remembered the whores on Sheepshead Bay and the night John Y. McKane tried to keep his empire against the entire state of New York by protecting the ballot boxes with a mob of Irish thugs. Merlin had been there, had wielded a club against the state-appointed voting supervisors. So had Asa. And hiding up in Harlem for two months waiting to get caught as McKane's trial dragged on and on. Impatient, running from New York into New Jersey, waiting again, following the trial, following the hearsay up and down the coast, trying to find out if it was safe to go home. He remembered working with Asa bucking hay on a horse farm, telling him one day in a moment of weakness about the voices and flinching away at the confusion in Asa's voice. Then, later, when they were both drunk, trying to explain. He'd been trying ever since.

His memories since McKane were faded like old cotton, the past bright as flowers. Even so, Asa was always there. Asa and his carnations, caught up in the idea down in Jersey and coming home to make it happen. Marrying, birthing, dying, all those things mixed together in Asa's life and Merlin watched it from under the boardwalk, like some ancient bridge-confined troll, watching people glitter through the planks, the light of the world reduced to slits. Asa slept. His breathing was labored. Stealthily, Merlin unbuttoned Asa's shirt and rested his hand on the bare skin. A warm smell compounded of earth and sweat escaped from the cloth.

Now, he prayed. If there is no magic, there can be no harm done in this. But if there is—and my life says there might be—heal this heart. Take my own heart for his. I never thought there was a God as the priests told me. Prove me wrong this once.

Out beyond him, residing in the ether like small eddies in a great river, he felt them there, dead and living. He listened to them for a sign, a hint of what to do. All he heard was the sound of the sea. It was as if he were standing in the water with high tide rushing past him, eyes closed, hands in the ocean, overwhelmed, and when the tide had turned, he looked down in his hands to see what had been left him.

\* \* \* \*

(At last, I felt something give inside of me. The breath went out, the last of the good Salem air, and did not come back. And for a long, suspended



moment, as I waited for it to re-turn, knowing it would not, I realized that which had given way was life, and with the life the pain. There was no pain in dying. There was only the pain of holding onto life. I must remember this, I thought in sudden fever. I must remember.)

I remembered now.

\* \* \* \*

Merlin pulled his hand away from Asa's chest and carefully and gently replaced the cloth. He sat back and watched him for a long time.

Asa roused and Warily looked around the room. His gaze fell on Merlin. "Hey there." He straightened up. "I wasn't feeling too good so I sat down. I didn't mean to take a nap. What time is it?"

Merlin shrugged. "I don't know. It's late. It'll be dark soon. How do you feel now?"

Asa stretched experimentally. "Better, I think. I don't feel any pain, anyway. For me that's good news. But then, it comes and goes. You don't look so good."

Merlin shrugged again. "There's nothing new in that." He stood up and swayed a moment, felt his heart stab with a sudden pain.

"Are you okay?" Asa stood up and steadied him.

Merlin nodded. Smiled. "Yeah. I'm fine. I think I'll go down to the beach. I like the water."

Asa scowled. "You'll end up getting drunk down there and freezing to death. If it doesn't happen tonight, it'll happen later. Come on back here. Where it's warm."

Merlin shook his head.

"Christ! All those famous people you say you remember. Isn't there one ordinary person that has some sense?"

He chuckled, suddenly weary. "I'm a bum at Coney Island, Asa. What do you want me to do? What the hell else have I got?"

Asa softened. "Come on back. It's cold out there."

He looked at Asa, watched the small face as wrinkled as an old apple. "Maybe you're right, Asa."

Asa took him by the arms. "You aren't a young man, George. Come back here and stay warm."

George. He tasted the word. It had been a long time since he had thought of himself with that name. "Maybe I will. But I still want to go down to the beach for a while."

"You wouldn't disappoint an old man, would you?"

"Not if I can help it."

The wind died as the sun faded behind Steeplechase. The longest shadow was that of the parachute drop, two hundred feet tall, a long, skeletal umbrella. Dark now against the light. Lit again, Merlin knew, in only a few months.

He stood in the middle of the beach and watched the board-walk turn charcoal black until there were only the silhouettes of things: the roller coaster, the shuttered freak shows, the Ferris wheel. Behind them, he could see at that moment, the lost towers, minarets and battlements of Luna Park and Dreamland, and behind them, again, the lost palaces and castles of Africa and Araby. Behind them, at last, he could see the memories of his own life, all of them, and adding to them now his own.

Pain shot through him, lancing his life like a scalpel across a boil. He coughed so long and hard that there was thunder in his ears and he forgot how to breathe.

There is no pain in dying, he remembered, proud that this salient fact had stayed with him. And he held this thought as the dark came toward him.

That night, across the cold ether of the world, there were the faint and intermittent sounds of mourning and remembered death. And, if one were quick, the smell of camellias.

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