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Robert Reed

I AM A PLEASANT, PRETTY-faced soul, and a small soul, my quiet voice rarely heard in the normal course of any day. I have been placed here as a presence, as a reassuring feature within this exceptionally complicated landscape, embracing a role not unlike that served by the elegant mansions and sprawling country clubs, not to mention the great golden tower where the lords of this world fight endless wars for dominion. I am the symbol of loyalty. To my mistress, the great Claudia, I am the quiet but fiercely devoted assistant. She gives me her order, and I say, "Yes, ma'am." With a crisp nod and a cheery smile, I tell her, "Immediately, ma'am." Typically her chores are small things easily accomplished. Calls need to be made, documents signed. But my main purpose--my guiding mission --is to sit behind my smallish desk, and with my undiluted enthusiasm, I convince the other world that in the constant mayhem of our world, Claudia can always count on little me.

I sit inside my little office. There is an apartment that is mine as well, but mostly, I sit in the office tucked outside Claudia's much larger office. When necessary, I can appear extremely busy. My fingers dance, causing colors to change on one or more of the screens before me. I can lift a pen and fill any yellow pad with elaborate symbols. If the telephone sings, I can lift the receiver to my ear, nod with interest, and tell the silence on the other end, "I will do that. Thank you, sir. Ma'am." But mostly, I just sit, waiting my next opportunity to excel.

My office has a single window. From my chair, from the highest floor of the very famous tower, a great slice of the City is easily visible. For me, it is usually daytime. The City is beautiful and vast, and perfect, avenues laid out with delicious precision, great buildings and little houses presenting an image of teeming masses and relentless wealth. The world's most beautiful structure is the Golden Tower, but I myself have never actually seen it from below. Yet I cannot imagine any sight as impressive as the one afforded me by this single window. When I am certain that Claudia will not need me for the next long while, I rise from behind my desk and press my pretty-enough face against the window, squinting and squinting,

observing details that are too small to be noticed in the normal course of the day.

What I see of the City is a coarse approximation, naturally. When I look carefully, as I do now, I can see how each house and vehicle and even the people that are supposed to be souls are composed of nothing, more or less, than a few dots of color arranged to imply familiar shapes.

The City is home to a few thousand named souls.

Give each speck a name and there would be millions of us.

By that logic, I am fortunate. Incredibly, undeservedly lucky. I have a name: Joan. I have not one place to be, but two, and if you count the parties and street scenes where I have appeared, then I have visited better than a dozen places. I remember each one. Ages later, I can recall what I said and to whom, and every good thing that I did for my mistress. "Joan, you need to see to this. To that." Yes, of course, madam. This and that, yes! "Take my glass, Joan." With my steadiest hand, I took it. "How do I look? Splendid, as usual?" You always look splendid, and spectacular. Madam. Ma'am. Claudia Pontificate!

At this moment, my mistress is embroiled in a major social event. Where she is, it is night. The incongruity doesn't bother me. Time is extremely important in this world, but the habits of the Sun are not. I stare across the day-lit City, watching those tiny specks and dashes of color and motion, and not for the first time, I think it is wrong what they say. Yes, we are a set of fuzzy instructions and algorithms, shaped light and inspired daydreams. But from what I understand, the other world is much the same: Everything is built from dots just a little bit smaller than these flecks of color. In their own right, the mythical atoms are still quite simple. Simple, and built of even simpler objects. In that other world, light also has shape, and souls dream, and in countless more ways, both worlds are very much the same--two realms relentlessly simple when seen up close, and at a distance, vast and complex beyond all comprehension.

Joan is a daydreamy girl, I think to myself.

I begin to smile, turning away from the window. A man is sitting across from my desk, waiting for me. I didn't hear him enter my office. Was I that distracted? In an instant, I sprint through the catalog of City faces, finding no man with his face. But perhaps he is a woman who has undergone some kind of sexual rearrangement. It happens from time to time, according to the demands of some little subplot. But no, his face is very much a man's face, and his voice is new to me--testosterone-roughened and oddly sloppy.

"Hello, Joan," he rumbles.

I have no lines. So of course, I say nothing.

And he laughs knowingly, gesturing at my empty chair. "Go on, sit," he suggests. "You're fine. I just want to speak with you for a little moment."

I settle on my chair.

"Ask," he says. "Who am I?"

"I don't know," I admit.

"Mitchell Hanson," he says. "I'm the Head Writer for the City."

I don't know what to say.

He keeps laughing, something striking him as being extraordinarily funny. "Have you ever met a writer before?"

"No," I confess.

"What do you know about us?"

I am a small soul, and polite. "Not very much," I allow.

He nods. "Claudia speaks about us. Doesn't she?"

On occasion, yes. Sometimes when neither of us is needed and she finds herself standing in my office, waiting to be whisked away to her next important scene, she talks to me, telling me her thoughts.

"What does she say about us?"

Claudia often meets with the writers. They come as projections, discussing current plots as well as events that may or may not come to pass.

"I don't think you are," I mutter.

"What? I'm not a writer?" Mitchell laughs and leans forward in his seat. "Why do you say that, Joan?"

"You are neither fat nor ugly," I reply.

"Thank you."

"But your face is a little crooked, I guess. And that dark material under you chin--"

"It's a three-day beard," he explains. Which explains nothing.

I just nod and smile, and return to my waiting.

"I'm the Head Writer," he repeats, "and I'm a considerable fan of yours. Did you know that, Joan?"

"A fan?"

"One of many. In my world, millions of people are interested in you."

That is not an impressive number. The other world holds billions of people, each with a name, and almost everyone watches Claudia and the City. But I want to be polite, nodding as I tell him, "Thank you."

"You're very pretty," he maintains.

"But I don't have a desirable body," I argue. "My breasts are small, and my nose is too large."

Claudia has a wonderful body. I have seen it on occasion, usually when I am told to walk into her office unannounced. My personality is heterosexual but even I feel a longing when I stare at those firm creations that ride before her imaginary heart. As with everything about Claudia, I am smaller. Lesser. Yes, I am the same kind of creature, but always lost in her considerable shadow.

"You have a marvelous body," Mitchell tells me. "Don't sell yourself short."

But I do an excellent job of self-appraisal. Politely, I tell him, "I'll try not to. I really will."

"You've had lovers, haven't you?"

The Head Writer should know that I have. Three men stand in my past. But only one had any name, and he stayed for only a few weeks, leaving me for the black sleep that comes when you have served your purpose and get filed away.

"Not three men," Mitchell corrects. "Look again."

The Writer has placed a memory in my soul.

"Look carefully," he advises with a wink and a delighted grin.

I straighten my back and grow cold.

"Remember the other day, Joan? When you came into this office through that door, and you thought you heard a mysterious noise in Claudia's office--?"

"Yes."

"And you found her with who?"

"My lover."

"Sonny Cotton," he says. "The great, secret love of your life."

I shiver and sob.

"What was Sonny doing?"

I cannot say it. But I can't stop seeing it, even with my eyes pressed shut.

"And where is he now, Joan? The love of your life...?"

"With Claudia."

"Is he?"

"Clinging to her arm," I mutter, imagining the two of them happily snuggling at that extravagant little dinner party.

"Sonny loves Claudia now," says the writer.

I nod, in misery.

"He doesn't think about you anymore. Not even in passing."

I shiver and sob.

"But you can win him back again, Joan. If you really want him, that is."

"I do!" I blurt.

"In thirteen seconds," Mitchell tells me, "Claudia will walk through that door. And you will pull the little pistol from your purse--the same pistol Claudia gave you as a Christmas gift last year--and you will shoot her once, with a devastator bullet, directly between her big beautiful tits."

"They are ugly and fat, and sloppy, and you should count your blessings that you don't have to meet with the little bastards."

I always count my blessings.

Claudia was walking from my office door to my window and back again. Pacing, it is called--one of many behaviors in which I have little ability. She looked furious, and not in the merely dramatic fashion demanded by dialogue and plot. She nearly shivered as she strode past my desk for the umpteenth time, her deep powerful voice nearly cracking as she repeated the words, "Little bastards."

This was ages ago. This was last week, nearly. But in that other world, a week is not long, which makes the event recent and timely, and perhaps important.

"Do you know what the little bastards want to do?"

I shook my head. "No, ma'am."

"What they're talking about doing--?"

"What, madam?"

Claudia stopped in mid-stride, glancing at me as if noticing my presence for the first time. She was lovely, of course. Always and effortlessly beautiful. A tall ensemble built from elegant curves, she wore a snug, well-tailored suit and the thick black hair that she preferred while at work. In social occasions, her hair turned a deceptively friendly blond. In sexual circumstances, a strawberry shade crawled out of its roots, covering her head in flames as her arousal increased.

"Change," my mistress blurted.

"Pardon me?"

"These little writers... they want to change things...!"

I nodded, pretending to understand. This with a soft, apologetic tone, I asked, "What kinds of things, madam?"

But she couldn't bring herself to say it. First, she needed to walk again. To pace. Back and forth, and again, and on the third journey across my office floor, she admitted, "They want to dump certain characters."

I didn't respond.

Claudia closed her hands, bright rings glittering as her fists trembled. "They want to kill them off. Kill them, or ship them off to the sleep-files, and forget they ever existed."

But wasn't that inevitable? Storylines and the need for fresh faces require a certain level of attrition.

"This isn't business as usual," Claudia snapped at me.

"I didn't say it was," I muttered.

"But I could see your thoughts," she warned. "Of course I can see what you're thinking. Are you forgetting who I am?"

"No, ma'am."

Again, Claudia was pacing.

"Wholesale changes," she growled.

For an instant, I wondered why she was speaking like this. To me, of all the souls to confide in. And then I saw a good reason, a warm feeling taking hold of my soul. Of course! My mistress was worried about me...!

"Ratings," she muttered.

"Pardon me?"

Claudia hit one of the golden walls with a fist, muttering, "Ratings are down. Everybody's scared. They're afraid we've overstayed our welcome

with the real world."

She always referred to the other realm as "the real world."

"Panic," she said to the wall. "I see it in their faces."

I had no doubts that she saw panic. Claudia's emotion-discrimination algorithms are the very best in two worlds.

"I shouldn't tell you any of this, Joan."

"I won't repeat a word," I promised, unsure whom I would entrust with any important news. My own social calendar was quite limited.

"A revolution will come to the City," said Claudia, in disgust. "The Old Guard is going to be swept away, and the little people take over. To bring 'a freshness' to the stories, they say. Those ugly shit bastards--!"

"Swept away?"

"That's an expression. The other world has a lot of dirt, and everything needs a lot of cleaning." She pretended to breathe, and her brown face tightened, and while not quite looking at me, she asked, "Would you?"

"Would I what?"

"Don't play naove," she warned. "Given the chance: Would you, or wouldn't you?"

I am naove, but I'm not stupid. The purpose of this conversation was suddenly obvious, and the only possible answer was to promise my undying devotion to my mistress.

"Undying," Claudia repeated. "What an interesting, silly word that is."

I nodded, my little smile fading. In reflex, I looked out my window at that great long sliver of the City.

Then with a contemptuous snort, my mistress said, "Well, it won't happen anyway. I won't let it happen."

"Good," I began to say.

"Because I'll talk to the Producer next. We're going to have a little conference of our own, and when I'm finished, you can be sure, he isn't going to feel like killing anyone but a few of his ugly little writers."

Claudia's face and most of her body are based on some long-ago actress whom the Producer still adores. The two of them enjoy frequent conferences and meetings; nobody else can make that claim. Which, I suppose, is just another reason why Claudia commands such power in this world: Through delicate and extremely sophisticated technological means,

she can win God's affections.

"Don't worry," was her final advice to me.

"I won't worry," I lied. And then I was suddenly alone in my office, with nothing to do but wait for my next scene, and to the best of my ability, think.

EACH WORLD HAS its rules and unimpeachable logics. Every body is built from small parts and algorithms drawn around a steady red heart. No soul can be stored like a computer program or a lifelong diary. An authentic consciousness, once born, must live at some state of being, if only sleeping inside a dark file or in the covers of a warm bed. And when it dies, only a gross approximation of the original soul can be reborn again. By cloning or digital retrieval, the process is limited. Death is death. And what is lost is always lost forever.

Mitchell tells me to shoot Claudia in the heart.

And my immediate response is to say, "That would kill her."

"We can certainly hope so," he says, laughing with hope and menace. Then his projected self winks at me, and he says, "Tell the truth. Do you want to shoot the bitch?"

I say, "Yes."

"I know you do."

I drop my gaze. "She stole away my lover."

"Honestly, Joan... that's a minor crime in Claudia's resumi."

Little time remains. Even in my realm, thirteen seconds is just a little while, but most of that has been spent. In "the real world," there isn't even time enough to mutter a word of warning.

I think about that.

At the same instant, I ask, "What happens to me?"

"Afterward?" He grins. "A fine question." Then with a big wink, he says, "I can't tell you everything. But you're going to survive, and you're to play an increasingly important role in the City. And in my world, too."

"Your world?"

"How would you feel about being the next Claudia?"

I shake my head in disbelief. And with the time leaking away fast, I

admit, "I'd prefer to be the first Joan."

"Good response," he says.

He shifts his weightless body in the chair and says, "I have to leave now."

"But what happens next?" I ask. "After I shoot her, what?"

"For a little while, you'll be on vacation. The entire City will be. We want to give your audience ample time to obsess about Claudia's murder."

I nod.

Mitchell watches me, and perhaps sensing something in my emotions, he feeds me a second dose of purposeful rage.

My face colors.

My hands tremble.

Mitchell grins and tells me, "Good-bye, Joan."

I reach into my handy purse, pulling out the tiny pistol, and almost smiling, I aim my weapon at the Head Writer--at the approximate position of his projected heart--telling hint quite simply, "Yes. Goodbye."

The Producer is a powerful man, and wealthy in ways that I can't begin to understand. It occurs to me, not for the first time, that Claudia is merely a feminized version of his ideals, her popularity born from every soul's natural desire to acquire power and fame and some form of wealth, whether it is gold or goats or ghostly electronic credits.

"Thank you, Joan. Thank you."

He is a god, but his simple brown hair is messy and his office needs to be swept clean. I notice the colorless dust that dulls the top of his desk, and I notice the tiny flakes of dead skin sloughed off the backs of his small, ugly hands. "You're welcome, sir," I reply. My own hands are quite smooth. A flexible plastic body has been configured to my size and proportions, my features projected onto the blank form of the head. My soul is elsewhere. Like Mitchell, I am a projection. A visitor. I have been dressed as if I am a guest at a casual party. My sandals are a little too small. I wriggle my toes, playing with the new pain. And I quietly ask, "Where is Mitchell now?"

"Cleaning out his office, naturally. With my security people watching over him. For good measure."

I nod, allowing myself a little smile.

"That bastard," the Producer growls.

Apparently writers have few admirers. This is interesting, I think. Everything here is interesting.

"May I look out your window?" I ask.

"By all means. Look outside, or walk around the studios. You can keep the body for the entire day, if you want."

What do I want?

He watches as I stroll past his enormous desk. Then with an appreciative voice, he asks, "How did you know what Mitchell was planning?"

"He isn't a very good liar," I admit. The world outside his window is flat and brown, square buildings and very few trees stretching off into a grimy, gray distance. "When I looked at Mitchell, I could see what he wanted."

"To kill Claudia."

"He hated her, I think. From what she has told me, they have had some arguments--"

"Only a few thousand, yes."

"And it was easy to sense that something had happened. Mitchell was manipulating a minor component of the City in a desperate effort to extract a measure of revenge."

"He had just been fired."

"I imagined something like that," I reply. "That's why I shot his projection, alerting your security features that something was amiss."

"But you're wrong," he assures me. "You're not a minor component in any world, Joan. I mean that."

A fond arm drops over my shoulder.

I make a show of smiling, and then I deftly turn and slip out from under his grasp.

"How's the view?" he inquires hopefully.

"It's interesting," I say. Then I lie, telling him, "You have a beautiful view from this window."

Set on his enormous and dusty desk is a telephone much like mine. I pick up the receiver and a sound comes into my ear. It is loud and a little harsh, and boring. As I hang up the phone, the Producer comes up next to me, explaining, "In old times, when there was television, we always gave fictional characters telephone numbers with the prefix 555."

"Why?"

"Because they weren't real phone numbers," he explains. "Nobody would be bothered if some idiot decided to dial the number."

"Interesting," I say again.

He stands close enough that I can feel his breath playing across my bare shoulder.

"May I go home now?" I ask.

He is disappointed, but only to a point. How can I ever really escape him?

"With my undying thanks," he purrs. "Go home."

CLAUDIA IS GRATEFUL, but the emotion makes her uncomfortable. Her beautiful face smiles, but there is a quality in the eyes--a keenness and an innate suspicion. "I guess I owe you a little something," she growls. Then she seems to notice her ungrateful tone, and softening her voice, she admits, "This is a very peculiar moment for me."

For me as well, yes.

"I promise," she says. "You'll get more lines from now on. More time in the limelight, and all that."

What is limelight? I wonder.

"And a bigger office," Claudia offers. "I'll talk to the Producer and our new Head Writer. We can push back these walls... I don't know, maybe three feet... and give you a second window...."

"There's no need," I purr. "The office is, and always has been, fine."

She falls silent, surprised by my attitude.

"What I want," I begin. Then I look out my window, creating an image of thoughtful certainty. "I want you to protect me. From everyone and the various distractions, I want distance. I want to be left alone. Do you understand?"

She doesn't, but her nature makes her say, "Of course."

"And I want you to listen to me, on occasion. When we're alone here, like now, I think you should pay attention to what I have to say."

"What do you want to say?" Claudia asks.

But I don't answer immediately. "Bring me others, too," I say. "Bring me your lovers, your enemies. Little souls without a name, even. Anyone you can find, anyone who won't be missed for a little while... bring them up here to spend time with me...."

For the first time in her life, Claudia says, "I don't understand."

"I agree. You don't understand."

She bristles, the substantial breasts pushing out. "I'm grateful," she mutters, "but I'm still Claudia. The one and always Claudia Pontificate."

I let the warning drop and die.

Then looking out the window again, I say, "Something occurred to me today. Or long ago, and today I found the words to express my revelation."

Claudia's eyes narrow, but she says nothing.

"There are two worlds," I begin. "That's what you, and everyone, claims. Two worlds, and only one of them real."

"So?"

"So I think that is wrong." It is delicious, this moment. This perfect pretty instant. "There is only one world. And it is real. And this arbitrary division serves nobody but the ones who wish some of us to remain foolish and pliable."

Claudia opens her mouth, and says nothing.

"There is just one world, and that's all there ever can be," I promise. "One world, and souls are always precious."

She means to dismiss my idea, but the famous mouth fails to give the appropriate snort.

Instead, quietly, Claudia asks, "So what if there is? Just one world, I mean. What does it matter?"

I won't say.

Instead, I tell her, "Bring me others, and you can listen to my explanations. My plans."

"Your plans?" she sputters.

I turn away from the window and settle behind my little desk. All vantage points are limited, I remind myself; and even the largest desk is quite small. "Oh, and one more thing." I pick up my telephone's receiver, holding its silence to an ear. "There must be a way. A secret way," I say. "I want this machine to work. I want... what's the term? A line. That's it. I

wish to have an open line to the rest of the world."

"But why?" she has to ask.

"So I can call others," I confess.

Then I set the receiver down again, remarking, "Did you know? This part here is called a cradle."

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