

THE
LIBRARY BENEATH
THE STREETS

DANIEL HALE

"Hale ... evokes the family drama and graveyard atmosphere of Edgar Allan Poe and the complex mythology and twisted body horror of Lovecraft by turns. A satisfactory compilation that will appeal to avid horror fans." —*Kirkus Reviews*

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If she nods politely and turns away, you have failed your application. Do not think that you can try again. It is better to have come this far and failed than to try the Librarian's patience. Accept the mercy and come away.

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The LIBRARY

Beneath

The STREETS



TALES OF THE SURREAL AND THE WONDROUS

by

DANIEL HALE



This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

THE LIBRARY BENEATH THE STREETS

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DEDICATED...

To the writers who showed me what a good short story could do: China Mieville, Neil Gaiman and Ray Bradbury.

And to my father, Tim Tucker, who showed me what a good artist should do.

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THE LIBRARY BENEATH THE STREETS

D'shall had restless fingers. On the right, they drummed in steady rhythm against the smooth surface of the binder he held in his hand. On the left, they shook so badly he was obliged to keep them in the pocket of his coat. Even that carried some risk, he knew—what he intended would be no easier to achieve if they suspected he was armed.

He was prepared to kill. He'd gone that far before, although never for the sake of a story. Tonight there would be no avoiding it.

D'shall was not experienced in the theft of stories. It was a secretive art, a discipline all but unknown to even the most disreputable dens. Not surprising, when successful acquisition held no guarantee of payoff. Stories are an infinite commodity, worth nothing but for the telling, and the will to tell. This is the secret.

And the time a story is told is as important as the story itself. D'shall knew this, which is why he waited while his hair of silkworm strands retreated across his scalp, and his restless fingers ground his aching knuckles, and his shattered, clunky teeth were dyed to jaundice by too much coffee and too many cigarettes. In that waiting, he dug deeply for the lore of the story thieves.

It amounted to little more than a handful of minor names—literary footnotes who had found there was little satisfaction in passing off the work of another as their own. Some, as atonement, had then moved on to try penning tales.

But the doubt of storytellers is a sickly taste in its purest form, and becomes an acidic bile on the tongue when tinged by thief's guilt.

The lengths to which they went were often more fabled than their perpetrators' names. There was Reynolds, whose efforts to cultivate Poe's ravings drove him into a lethal delirium. There were the four Watsons who each claimed to be the doctor Doyle pretended to collaborate with and then tried in their own ways to claim damages for Doyle's injudicious authorship. There was the small roster of names of those who had professed responsibility for kidnapping Agatha Christie, for drugging her into a fugue, or for wooing her so effectively that she feigned amnesia to protect their identity.

D'shall was the best of them. Or, he told himself, he would be. Not for him the half-true boasts of absurd effort, nor even the single shanghaied idea-turned-masterpiece. There was a grander prize, whose custodians he awaited in his cold attic room.

It had taken years just to put him on the right track. The break finally came from Bell, a near-shifless drunk who nevertheless carried a ratty notebook full of unfinished sonnets and snippets of prose.

It had once been D'shall's strategy to befriend the aspiring ones, in the hopes they might suddenly be inspired to show some effort. He'd gotten nothing for his troubles but tirades of self-pity once ideas fizzled out. He couldn't escape the man, either, after being ready with a round and an ear. That was enough to keep more promising prospects away, and it was less trouble to keep buying the drinks and tune out Bell in silent commiseration.

Bell had been remarkably quiet that night, sprawled in his accustomed slouch on the table. There was a distance in his eyes, emphasizing the wildness of his haggard face and dirty, unkempt beard. It discomfited D'shall, who'd come to rely on Bell's litanies as a soothing background hum, and so he was moved to ask him what was wrong.

He'd written something in, as he put it, a sort of daze.

“I wasn’t sleeping good,” he told D’shall. “Meningitis, the doctor said. I’d taken some medicine, you know? A couple different things. Thought I’d see what I came up with.” He gave D’shall his notebook.

D’shall flipped to the last few pages, peered at Bell’s cragged handwriting.

“It looks like a list.”

“Dunno what I was thinking. I was going for this tragic artist thing, I guess? Sort of a *Graveyard of Forgotten Books*, but in reverse? I dunno.” He sipped his beer more readily, and stared off gloomily into nothing. He did not notice when D’shall pocketed the notebook.

At the start, he could not have told you why the strange piece arrested him so. For all his failed pretensions to the artistic, D’shall was a solidly sensible man. The lore of story thieves was fraught with its own share of unlikely miracles and literary Holy Grails and outright anomalies. There were as many mystics among them as there were plain opportunists. Most often, they were orphaned adherents, robbed of their faiths after decades of callous practicalities. What they looked for in stories was the unnamable, physical chord that rang shockwaves in bereft hearts. They sought the foundations of faith.

Of course, many of them soon became aspiring messiahs and spread their usurped words like narcotics amongst the likewise downtrodden. But a few believed the stories spoke of—or spoke into being—new truths. Then, their dreams became ones of purposeful quests, long voyages in search of the nearest thing to magic as they could get in this world they’d tired of so long ago.

This is what D’shall had been waiting for; he knew that now. He’d been patient for the start of a masterpiece—not a half-finished fable he could take what little credit there was for himself but a seam that would lead to an ocean of fortune. Why else should he find it from the pen of a thing like Bell, an otherwise hopeless louse who was too familiar with his own failed opportunities to recognize what he had?

This was a truth, baldly written as it was.

He’d followed the words carefully, and it had all borne fruit so far. He could still remember the dream of the old woman who

glowed like corpse flesh, who'd spoken to him in a voice like the whisper of wind through cobwebs. And now her servants were coming to lead him to paradise.

A twitch in the shadows. D'shall was tired, despite his excitement. But he stood from his bed and faced the corrupted wraiths that were suddenly with him. He held the papers over his chest, like a talisman.

How to Join the Library Beneath the Streets

1. ***To begin, you must find this guide.*** You have choices.

Feed the pigeons with the ginger-bearded man who walks with an iron cane.

Speak to the tired woman with the yellow helmet who sleeps on the bench outside the diner.

Enter the cinema five minutes after the final show. Sit in the empty theater and see what appears on the screen. Look under your seat.

Follow the trail as far as it can take you. Sooner or later, if you have not tripped an alarm, they will tire, and you will find the guide somewhere you can get it.

Do not despair. Do not abandon the tedium of the quest for sake of a shortcut. There will be no hope for you then.

Do not be dissuaded. Years of work shall be undone by the slightest doubt.

2. ***Go to the library as often as you can.*** Take the guide with you.

Never stay for longer than an hour. Never check out fewer than four books. Do not linger on the choices, nor dwell on preferences. The knowledge of the Library is often buried deep in the words, often obscure and esoteric, and

always widely spread. You must appear to be casting your net wide.

You may find something suggestive in the marginalia. Ignore it—if there are genuine secrets the Librarian was fool enough to let slip, they vanished long ago, smothered by the mildewy stacks. Anything you may think you find is like to be a trick, or a trap, or your own imagination. Ignore it, and remember: this is the safer route.

You will not know if they are watching you. Do not try to uncover the transmitter embedded in your library card. Do not try to free from the book a bound soul who defied the Library, kept in bondage and psychically bound to the Librarian. Do not challenge the sorters to a game of riddles. None of these rumors are true.

The Librarian will soon know of you. Not a muscle will move on her paper-pale face when she does. Her lips will not purse, her brow will not crease. She has known your like before, and you do not surprise her.

You will be in her books now.

3. *There is no way to know when they will approach you.* Likely it will be in an aisle you've only just started to explore. It will probably be a woman.

Note how she looks. If she wears black-framed glasses and a pink cardigan, it may be a positive sign, or a lure. If her manner is gruff, and her hair is tied in a bun and her fingernails are long, you are not welcome.

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If she smiles and asks you to tell her more, rejoice. You have bought yourself a little time. It will be no easier from here.

She will tell you she is a member of a small book club that meets in a disused boardroom in the library every third Saturday, and invite you to the next meeting. Accept—the interview is concluded, and you have qualified for the follow-up.

In the Library Beneath the Streets, the Librarian stands at a lectern and gives an order. The thunder of typing fingers is like a rain of bones against the rooftop of the underworld.

4. ***The book club is a scripted dance, a pretension to normality.*** They may tempt you with opportunities to share your knowledge. Do not be tempted; the streets are not inviolate. The Library Beneath the Streets is the sanc-

tuary of the world, and it must be kept sacrosanct.

Watch the discussion—the old lady who writes fan fiction based on Wild West serials will insist on sharing her current project; the sallow-faced young man in the black clothes who sits by the window will verbally abuse any book that was written after the nineteenth century; the red-haired man who moves his hands as he speaks will use words like *dichotomies* and *juxtaposition* with every sentence.

Your associate from the shelves directs it all, encouraging discourse and inviting comments, an able-bodied maestro; but remember this is already carefully orchestrated.

Know your opening. Do not speak over the others, even when it seems that, at any moment, discussion will erupt into violence (pay attention to the black-clothed young man if you think you are doing poorly). Your friend will invite you to say a piece when it seems you are not saying enough. Do not try to impress, do not talk like the red-haired man, or show insincere admiration for the old woman's stories. Do not try to get the black-clothed man to expand on his views. You are here to be heard, not to listen.

Your patience will be of use. The change will come subtly. You may know it, but do not let it show on your face. Ignore the sounds. Do not stumble from the sudden lurching of earth. Do not hesitate at the sight of darkness blanketing the window.

Every point raised and question asked will be posed to you. Answer quickly, do not hesitate, do not wonder at the right answer, do not try to embellish your knowledge, if, indeed, you are even capable of it at this point.

Ignore the noises of clanking gears and falling earth.

Ignore the shaking table, and the photos falling off the walls.

The members of the book club will seem to straighten and thin in flesh. Their eyes will be still. Their lips will compress to concrete lines. The Librarian has noticed you.

If you have done everything properly—and if everything you have done to get this far has been sincere—your head will begin to hurt. Your hands will shake, your nose will drip with blood. Your brain will feel as if it is boiling on the outside while a lump of ice seethes on the inside. A fever of revelation will be lapping at the edge of your consciousness, and the pain will be all the greater when it leaves you just short of total understanding.

The end will not come at once, but will fade away like a dream as you rise from this uppermost corner of the Library Beneath the Streets. You will find yourself awakening in a cluttered office room, returned to the daylight streaming through the windows. You will not know if you have passed, but take the fact that you have been returned to mean that she needs time to think about you.

You will not know. Wait to be contacted.

5. Do not blink when the Librarian comes to see you. She will seep from the shadows like a phantom made of dust. Do not bother to hide your dread.

She will begin to question you, without preamble. She does not stand on niceties; everything she asks will be frank and straightforward, and you will not recall a word of it af-

terward. This is for the best—she is asking everything that shows you as you are, and you will find yourself unable to lie. Your eyes will stay on hers of their own volition. You will remember nothing but the pull of her eyes, and the distant sound of her voice.

Her voice is a terrifying thing. It is not the inhuman shriek you would half-expect from such a wraith-like figure, but quiet and even. There is this about it, however—it cannot be swayed. Whatever the Librarian asks for, she receives. She has made demands of empires, ensnared the culture of entire civilizations. She persuaded the original inhabitants of the Library's subterranean passages to leave, and kidnapped and coerced dozens of lost tribes into expanding the chambers, digging deeper and deeper into the earth.

They say she told Mount Vesuvius to hold off on erupting until she could walk off with a few choice volumes, and convinced Alexander to burn his own library (she had the originals, and would not allow copies to exist). She killed Gutenberg for his blasphemy, and will not hear mention of Garamond.

When she asks you her questions, you will not speak falsely or fail to give information. She will know how you found out about the Library, and what has urged you to seek it out. She will ask you of your home life, the patterns you have seen in the books, your wants and your regrets. She will ask you where you were when the person closest to you was suffering, how many breaths you take before you go to sleep, the farthest you've been from the moon, and why cats walk on the other side of the street when they see you.

You will answer all of it truthfully, without understanding your own answers. If you have not been entirely sincere, it is too late to regret. If she sees anything in you she finds wanting, you will have no way of knowing immediately. She will not merely reject your application; she will see you as a branch to be pruned. You will be stripped, snipped, chipped, mulched and pulped into fertilizer to grow the bindings in the Library Gardens.

In a way, it will be a victory. You will have joined the Library, and it will likely be the less painful path.

If, however, she finds you acceptable, she will only purse her lips and nod (they say the skin will tear from her skull if she ever smiles).

Then you will blink, and she will be gone.

You will remember nothing but the suggestion of the smell of book mold, and the fluttering of pages.

6. ***Give them your life, without regret.*** Do not discover a new will to live. It is too late.

7. ***The first time she sought volunteers, the Librarian played songs to call them.*** She took children from places that forsook knowledge on principle, because nothing so changes the world as a muse borne from ignorance. This had the effect of spreading a seed of forewarning in every place she stole from, forcing others to look beyond their prejudiced minds to try and understand. Tragedy breeds caution, caution breeds logic, logic breeds imagination. This is how the Library cultivated us.

You will need no such enticement. She will send her servants to escort you.

Sleep as much as you can. They will come in the night. Consider how comfortable you would be to see where you are going.

Keep the lights off. They do not like to reveal too much of themselves. They are so pale they glow, blood-starved lichens, but they do not like to remember.

They will seem to bleed from the shadows, congealed pearls of putrescent flesh. These are your predecessors. They gave all they had to give and were remade for a new task.

Do not stare too long at them, and do not keep them waiting. Leave your bed unmade, do not take anything with you.

Tell no one. They will not think of you when you are gone.

The streets will not seem the same. There will be no lights on.

You will see the Librarian's servants easily, moving at a somnambulist pace, unhurried but determined. Do not touch them if you can help it—they are mostly bent to the Librarian's will, but they are savage beings. They do not react well to surprises.

You will come to a staircase as the street seemingly ends. Follow the servants downwards, and savor your last taste of the world above.

She will be waiting for you at the bottom. The servants will hurry away, relieved to no longer be under the open sky they abandoned so long ago. Do not speak to her, ask no questions. She knows everything she needs to know about you, and you know by now what is to happen. She will turn to the tunnel behind her. A few bare bulbs light the way, but there will be no time to adjust your eyesight.

8. ***You are here now.*** Be proud. It is nearly over.

Do not rush in. It is dimmer here than in the tunnel. The tellers do not need to see what they are doing. The words are in their heads.

Relish this victory and take in the sight. It is everything you hoped for, exactly as you imagined. Every writer is the image of the purest concentration and devotion to the art. Imagine yourself in their fever-bright eyes. Imagine every fault of body and mind you have longed to excise from your person.

Relax now. It will all be over soon.

Listen to the typing, constant and unceasing. This is the sound to which the world is remade again and again. This is the place where the dreams that shape civilization are put to paper. These are the people who have sacrificed everything to be the ones to write the narrative to which reality is scripted. Now, for all your unceasing concentration, you will join them.

You are nearly there. There is one last thing you must remember—do not struggle.

Let them strip you of your clothing; there is nobody here who wants to see.

Let them strap you to your chair before your typewriter. It is normal now to be afraid, but do not show it. Prove to them that you have forsworn it all, and that you are ready.

Once they place the first paper in your typewriter, she will whisper in your ear. You will know what she has to tell you, and hear it in your bones. These are the words you have wanted to live by all your life. Now you will.

Begin. Do not hesitate as the letters bite into your fingers; type through the first sting. Let

them sip your blood. You are beyond the constraints of physicality by now. You will pen your words by your blood alone. You will pour your soul into the stories of this and every age.

Remember this victory.

Remember as you lose yourself in the world you are told to build.

And when the bad nights come, when your lesser-self wakes up screaming in a nightmare of its own devising, when the Librarian comes to quiet you, when it happens, remember that you are where you wanted to be.

To his credit, it gave him pause. It was easier than it should have been.

The dream of it was headier than he'd anticipated; to watch the guides seep forward in stop-motion movements from shadow to shadow was to watch an absurdity. D'shall's attempts at writing were a distant and unpleasant memory, but he remembered the protracted battles between mind and word, trying to limit on paper the mad spectacles that plagued his sleep. It was his failure in this that disillusioned him of his own capabilities.

How to do justice to the bled, papery creatures that came for him in the night? How to describe their robes like monks' sackings, elongated tails suckling at the ground like the frills of mollusks?

And then: the street he'd walked a thousand times, undulating down the spine of a city he'd never known to be so quiet, lapping concrete-turned-sea-turned-stairs into a deeper darkness, before the promise of a flickering light?

D'shall panicked. He could not complain, really—the instructions were ephemeral, vague. But he'd expected the old woman to be waiting at the foot of the ramping streets, ready to lead him through the shadows and to a biting typewriter. He'd expected a palpable threat, not the murmured promises of the night.

He had a blade, a slivered piece of silver folded from an heirloom plate. It was a molten dagger now, stinger-sharp and wicked.

No longer would he discount the trope of knowledge hidden in fiction. Inherited silver. Simple sharp edges. One or the other would do the job in a pinch.

But there was only the darkness, and D'shall had lost sight of the escorts in his distraction. Had they dissolved to an even hazier substance? Were they even now flanking him for ambush? Had they sussed his intentions?

Dark held no horrors for D'shall. He took off in bullet intent, melted silver clasped in hand (somewhere he'd dropped the papers). He kept his eyes ahead, tried not to stray from the forward path to the light.

It was not a great distance, but perspective seemed reluctant to settle. The light wandered in zigzag configurations with every step he took.

He wasn't sure how close the walls were; his steps echoed sharply on the path in ringing marble taps that still seemed to slouch from under his feet, going no farther than his immediate sphere.

The air was not stale, nor musty with the smell of aging paper, nor even mealy with dried-blood ink. D'shall might as well have gone for a stroll of a spring evening, in a park very lightly perfumed by sleeping orchids. It was clear, clean, and almost sweet.

The light did not creep gradually towards D'shall. Indeed, it seemed to him that he'd lost some time in the shadows as he blinked his way into a cavern lit by a warm, soothing glow. It reminded him immediately of some recovered cave in the *Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, untidy with piles of treasure.

The treasure here was paper—great sprawling heaps of paper, tied together and set in stacks. Perhaps a current or a careless hand had brought them tumbling down, and now a great many of them tiled the white stone of the cavern floor.

No sound but the faintest sighing of the wayward winds over bound, dried paper. No fingertip piercing by typeface syringes. No inking birth from blood-womb sorrows. No moaning from failed, sorry artistes who thought their pain made them special. Just stacks and stacks of ripe material.

No more pause. D'shall came with no real plan in mind, no idea what he'd get hold of. His own literary tastes had long since withered into irrelevance, more concerned as he was with what

others liked. He knew it was largely a matter of luck, in timing as well as location, that determined what proved readable.

Still, a badly written story tended to transcend subject matter objectively enough to spot. Best start reading.

He chose a pamphlet at random. It was tied with a brown, rubbery cord that looked disgustingly organic to his eyes. He drew his molten-silver knife across it, snapping it as easily as an elastic band. Then, sitting cross-legged and getting comfortable, D'shall read...



THE SNOWFLAKE COLLECTOR

When the snow started, Matthew didn't wait. He was out there the first night as it fell, trying to keep his hands as still as possible while he held the piece of black construction paper. He was shivering a little—this work was too cumbersome to do with gloves, so he kept one hand in his pocket, next to the magnifying glass. When he had enough, he brought the glass out, and carefully and quickly scanned the flakes that had fallen on the paper before they melted.

Lots of Ds, it looked like. Maybe one or two As. It was hard to be sure. He had to catch them quickly and wipe them off before the paper was soaked. He had plenty to spare—there was a whole ream of it in the house. But it was best to make it last as long as possible before he had to run inside to replace it. He didn't want Suzie to think he was leaving.

It was her favorite winter game. When other kids were having snowball fights or building snowmen, she was standing very still with her sheet of black construction paper and magnifying glass, catching snowflakes to look for messages.

“How could there be a whole message in a snowflake, princess?” he would say. And she would frown and speak slowly in that grim, no-nonsense manner of hers. “It’s not a whole message, Daddy. It’s just one letter.”

So, he bought her a little notebook to keep track of the letters. Once they filled a page they would take it inside to see how many words they could spell from them.

He hated winter more than any other time of year, but he loved his Suzie. He would endure anything, even frostbite and runny noses, to keep from disappointing her.

Never again, he swore to himself.

The sheet was sodden and soggy now. He caught sight of the final letter just as it was dissolving.

Y! His knees almost gave way with relief. She was calling him, she really was!

“Daddy’s here, sweetheart,” he whispered. “Daddy’s reading them just like he said he would.”

He flicked the wet paper off his fingers, then stuck them under his arms. The door opened behind him; Justine stood in the doorway, wearing her pink bathrobe, clutching the ends tightly around her to stave off the cold.

“Matt? What are you doing?”

He resisted the urge to hesitate, as if caught doing something indecent.

“I’m...we’re talking, that’s all.”

Her face hardened before the words had even left his mouth. She sighed.

“Matthew, please don’t do this.”

“Yeah. Suzie and me.” He tried to stay casual, keep from getting angry. He knew Justine wouldn’t understand, had hoped to do this without her finding out. She was a worrier, over-protective and fearful, always at a loss of what to do with Suzie’s outgoing, inquisitive nature. “You wanna get me a new sheet? She probably wants to say hi to you, too. I haven’t seen any Ms yet, but—”

“Matthew, for the love of god!” She stayed in the doorway; her face had gone red, and little tears were peeking out from the corners of her eyes. “Don’t do this!”

He turned his back to her, and spoke to the air.

“Suzie, honey, how about you make Mommy a heart, like you did on Valentine’s Day? I bet she’d like that.”



Justine’s reaction didn’t surprise him. She was the polar opposite of their daughter, utterly reserved and uncertain. Suzie skipped and ran; Justine shuffled and skulked. Justine spoke with an even, reasonable voice whenever Suzie was acting up, but Suzie spoke right over her, for all intents and purposes oblivious to her mother’s scolding. Matthew was the only one she would listen to, if only because he would do everything she said.

Justine was a good mother. It was just a shame that her daughter was too energetic for her.

“You watch her,” was all she would say when Matthew tried to get her to join in on Suzie’s games. “You watch her, and make sure she’s all right.”



The skies were clear of snowfall the next few days. Matthew didn’t care; he sat by the window, staring at the sky, waiting for the smallest flake.

Justine was in the other room, talking to somebody on the phone. She did that a lot nowadays, although Matthew hardly took any notice.

“Won’t even talk about it,” he heard her say, and “Soon. Please.”

It felt like minutes had passed when a new voice spoke.

“Matthew?”

A man’s voice. He turned away from a promisingly dark mass of clouds to see a thin, bearded man in glasses standing in his living room.

“Matthew, I’m Dr. Guyer. I work with your wife. She called me to come and talk to you.”

Talk? He didn’t want to talk to this man. Not when Suzie was on her way. What was Justine thinking?

“Talk about what?”

“Well, whatever may be troubling you, for example. You’ve become somewhat distant, and we—that is, your wife thinks it might do you some good to talk about things.”

To hell with it. “Did you see any snow on the way here, Dr. Guyer?”

“Snow?”

“Yeah.”

The man paused, apparently baffled by Matthew’s asking after the weather. Clearly, he had come in with some kind of script prepared and was already finding it hard to follow.

“Matthew, perhaps we can talk about your daughter.”

Matthew turned back to the window. “I haven’t spoken to her today.”

“I...ah. Well.” Dr. Guyer coughed discreetly, mentally back-pedaling to regain his professional footing. “What do you and, ah, Suzie talk about?”

“That’s none of your business. Justine!”

“Matthew, I really do think a talk would do you good—”

“I’ll wait till Suzie gets here, thanks. You might wanna talk to Justine, though. She’s been kinda weird lately.”

The clouds were close now. Matthew took up his paper and magnifying glass, ignoring Justine as she came into the room.

“Matthew, what...?”

He pushed past her and stepped back into the cold.



Justine didn’t bring it up again. From that day on she barely spoke to him. She was still speaking with Dr. Guyer; Matthew would see her in the window, talking on the phone with her back turned to him. A small part of him suspected what was going on, and what would likely come; but the rest of him was too devoted to his correspondence with Suzie to care.

She occupied his every thought now. He tried desperately to recall the happy, cheery dynamo his daughter was before she grew sick. It angered him beyond words that the clearest mental image he had of her now was of her lying in the hospital bed, ghostly pale in the thin sheets, clutching weakly to his hand while he sang to her, “Here comes Suzie Snowflake, dressed in a snow-white gown, tap-tap-tapping on your windowpane to tell you she’s in town.” She would smile, and the obvious toll it took on her brought a hitch to his voice.

They had been past the point of hope for recovery, although Matthew ached for it. He pleaded with the doctors for some shred of light, had broken down in tears in front of Suzie when the truth

finally sank in. Justine would not come—she'd begged that it was too painful for her to see Suzie reduced so. Matthew could never forgive her for that. Suzie did not ask where she was.

"I'll write to you, Daddy," she whispered. "When I get up there. I'll ask someone to teach me how."

He kept his hand on her forehead; she was cold, and shivering slightly. He stroked her damp hair and promised he would find her messages. He would read every one, just like the ones they'd found when she was well.

"I'll make them simple," she said. "Cause I know you have trouble reading them."

He had to laugh at that. When they played the game, he would always pretend to see what she saw—the minute pictures carved into ice crystals, words and faces and microscopic cities. She hadn't been fooled.



The blizzard hit the second month. At this point Matthew was spending every spare moment he could outside, collecting the snowflakes. His face was getting chapped, and sensitive. He wore a scarf over his mouth, sunglasses, and a hood over his head. By now his hands were frozen. They no longer shivered as he held out the paper.

Work never called to ask what he was doing, and he saw no reason to tell them.

He pursued the messages as a prospector would approach a gold seam, with infinite patience and indifference to his surroundings. There was no doubt in his mind he was communicating with his daughter, even if he had yet to complete a whole message. He'd found a G, and an A, and an R, and another D. Maybe Suzie had met her grandparents? That would be a nice thought; Matthew's mother had died just before Suzie was born, and not being able to see her first grandchild had been her only regret.

He ignored Justine when she walked stiffly down the front stoop (he hadn't shoveled), dressed in her long coat and carrying a suitcase.

"Matt." She was speaking up, as though he were deaf. "Do you have your key?"

He kept his magnifying glass over the paper, looking for a P.

“Get out of here, Justine.”

“You shouldn’t be out here much longer. Promise me you’ll go inside soon, okay?”

Justine showing concern! It almost made him laugh. Where was that concern when their baby girl was wasting away in a hospital bed, and she was cowering at home?

“You know my mother’s number. You know where to find me. When you’ve sorted yourself out, I hope we can try to...” She paused, her formal, neutral tones at last failing her. “Matt, for fuck’s sake, look at me!”

She reached for him. Matthew twisted, tried to shove her away, and the paper flew from his hands. He tried to recover it, but it jackknifed into a puddle of half-melted slush. It was soaked through in seconds.

“God damn it! Stop interrupting her!”

“She’s not there, Matthew!”

“Shut up!” He didn’t want this, not another word from her, this failure of a parent. She’d let their daughter go and expected them to go on with their lives. She’d wanted rid of Suzie, Matthew was sure of that now. “Just shut up and let us talk.” He picked at the mush the paper had become, then turned to get a new sheet from the house. “Go to your doctor, Justine. He seems to have all the answers.”

She scooted past him, up the stairs and in front of the door. Matthew shrugged and turned back.

“Matt, he suggested a trial separation to help us deal with our grief.”

Our grief? When did she ever grieve? Suzie wasn’t under the ground for a day before Justine was back to carrying on as normal, musing about dinner plans and new curtains and yoga.

“You’re leaving her for him.”

“You know that isn’t true! Can’t you see how hard this is for me?”

He shook his head, scooped up some snow in his hands and held them out to catch the messages.

“I showed them to you. You wouldn’t read them.”

“That’s because they aren’t there!”

“Hey.” He squinted into his cupped hands. “There’s some more Ms in here. She’s asking for you again.”

He balled the icy mush in his hands and threw. It hit Justine square in the face. She fell to her knees, crying and trying to wipe the mess from her face. When she pushed herself back up Matthew was already back to catching his letters. When he turned around she was gone.



Matthew had stopped using the papers; now he could read the letters in the snow beneath his feet, scores and scores of them he had missed. They were still too jumbled to be coherent, the wind tossing them every which way. But he could see what they were meant to say—lot's of Ds were piled around As and Ys, and there were Ms. He wished he could write back, tell her that Mommy had just gone to see Granny.

He spent most of the next day panning through the snow-drift, which is why he didn't notice at first that no new letters had appeared. He spent the whole night standing in the blizzard, reaching for every flake as it tumbled down to him, and all through the next morning. The clouds were thick with ice now, dumping whole bucketfuls of snow. He retrieved his magnifying glass, removed his sunglasses, panned every inch of the ground. He removed his coat, looked over every flake caught on it. Nothing.

"Come on, Sue. Where'd you get to? What's taking so long?" A blurry film kept passing over his vision. He wiped his eyes, shook his head, but it still persisted. There weren't even any Ds left.

The snowdrift was waist-high now. Matthew knelt next to it, digging and digging for some scrap of message, some indication that his Suzie was still writing to him. Had she given up? What if she didn't know he was even looking?

"No, baby, no. Come back. Hold on just a little longer."

His hands kept on digging while his body slumped to the side. For the first time in weeks, he realized how numb he was, in his face and all through his joints. He couldn't feel the snowflakes settling on his cheeks, or the tears that froze out of his eyes. He couldn't even close them.

"Daddy's here, Suzie. I promise I'll read them all." He could see nothing but the white now, glaring and calm. "Mommy will, too," he promised it. "She just had to go away for a bit."

Matt didn't know when he let go—it was that easy. He just let the wind hold him, carrying him into the white, letting him tumble and picking him up again. He slid through the air, a seven-pointed speck of ice. The cold was everywhere, but he was part of it, and it protected him.

At last the white began to dissolve, wisps of clouds metamorphosing into the nothing. When it gave way beneath him, he could see the whole of the neighborhood. The houses, ugly lumpen things, were capped with snow, made pure and fine. Plows chugged along the streets, churning away the ice to recover the roads. What a thing would it be, he wondered, to be torn up by one of those?

But he did not fall there. The wind was carrying him down, past windows frosted in swirling ferns, past yards crisscrossed with shoveled paths. It carried him low to the ground, dangerously close to the drift.

When he saw her kneeling in the snow, bent over a misshapen wretch half-covered in snow, the wind urged him on with new strength. She wore a thin, pale paper gown, almost invisible on her corpse-white flesh. He was pushed into her hair, stiff and stuck with crystals. The last thing he knew, before melting over her ear, was her voice.

“Daddy? Are you cold?”



The insipid sentimentality was not entirely to D'shall's liking, although the madness fueled by grief and despair had promise.

He set it aside, and reached again for the pile nearest to him. This next pamphlet was slimmer, and shorter.



MENAGERIE OF THE PERSECUTED

The exhibit is a scrawl on the map,
A faded image of a building stashed
Away in a far corner of the zoo.
Down a path from the heron's pond,
Squatting like a bunker against the wire fence.
Over the path, the sign reads "The Persecuted."

More shack than sanctuary, all weathered
Boards that look truly weathered, not careful
Fakes of fiberglass turned jungle huts. Cracks
Are stuffed with rags of cloth and hay. Broken
Windows look to be draped in heavy blackness.
The battered door is closed.

Opening, I see shadows jumping in firelight.
Candles set in sconces on the walls lead off
Down the corridor. But I've only a moment
To see when I hear the shrieking, flapping
Flock stirring overhead. The heavy door slams
Behind me, and the shrieking dies away.

No guide to lead me down the path, not even
Maps left as afterthought. No signs to warn
Against camera and commotion, children un-
attended.

Nothing at all like the zoo's ordered wildlife,
All nature's beauty declawed and tame.
Just the candlelight, and the hall.

The light turns my eyes to dreamers,
Makes them see insect shapes scurrying
Along the wall, across the floor. The dreams
Creep in; affected drowse twists my legs
Around half-seen columns of ants and beetles,
Winding round my drunken steps.

One hand on the wall, tentatively tracing
The way, till I arrive at the first cell.
I see only deep-sea blackness behind
The glass, not a glimmer of shape at first.
When it clears, I cannot tell if it's my
Eyes' widening, or subtle light's reveal.

The cell floor is covered with blankets,
Torn and befouled, littered every which
Way on the cold concrete. Tufts of
Black fur in greasy, matted piles, speckled
With drying blood. I imagine buzzing
Gnats hopping and feasting in bliss.

Six black cats lie in muddled heaps,
Breathing shallowly and licking dried
Wounds of pus and gore. Not a one of
Them with a full coat of fur, only two
With eyes unclouded or intact, not more
Than four whole ears among them.

The sight lasts long enough to put me
In mind of stepladders and shattered
Mirrors, of cracks in the walk and salt
Over shoulders. The light fades, or my

Vision clouds, only the faintest glimmer
Of an amber eye. I move on.

The candlelight does not reach the
Heights of the hallway. I've no
Idea the size of it, but I can feel a
Vast cavern hidden in the rafters, alive
With hanging, leathery shapes. Noses
And ears twitch as I pass below.

Light in the next is a fiery orange, but
The glass is cool to the touch. The same
Pale concrete, steeped in the spirit of
Confinement. But the floor is full of
Writhing life, coiling and slithering
And hissing life, wrapped in rainbow scales.

Frills unfurl at my intrusion,
Fangs bare, tongues make to taste
My sweat on the air. But I can
See the peeling scales spotted rust;
I can see the torn tails and the
Broken teeth and stumbling sways.

Some of the snakes have legs—
Stumpy, half-formed, brittle things
Crooked and broken. They look
Jammed in the serpents' flanks,
Stuck in their sides like sticks
Impaled by children in spiteful glee.

It wasn't by choice that Temptation
Entered the garden. An offer accepted
Led to a life of hugging warmth from
The ground, in a body built without
It. Wickedness incarnate was tacked
On later, by necessity. Such is politics.

It comes to me, as I move down dim
Halls beneath wing-haunted roofs,
That every human evil given face

Has horns or hoofs or snout or fur
Takes flight on night skies or slithers
In the dust, remote or removed.

I find waterlogged rats shivering
In a dampened pit. Itching intensity
Bites into my skin, sends it shivering
At the sight of drooping, dripping
Whiskers. A crier tolls his bell,
Cart wheels splash on puddled cobbles.

Cracked beaks caw frightful in
My ear, crush mouse skulls and
Nuts on a busy street. Clouds of
Shot raises the flock to fury.
I duck beneath a grinning figure
Standing staked and crucified.

Darkness in the final cell fades faster,
Revealing a pauper's terrarium
Of sickly sheened trees and ferns.
Torchlight rushes searching in the brush.
Drums beat, blades clang, feet stamp chant;
The jungle-in-miniature all the more absurd.

I see the animal clinging to a branch,
But I can't name it. Its fur looks as tattered
And torn as the felines in passing, its eyes evil
With yellow. It clings to the branch with
Tiny, immaculate hands. It raises one clawed,
Skeletal digit, and points it straight at me.

Torchlight erupts in the faux-jungle.
Voices tightened with anger scream
To me. The skinned and pinned
Flap like flags overhead, deadfall
Bones crunch beneath my feet.
The air tastes rank and wild.

Nothing will change when I
Leave the Menagerie of the

Persecuted. I'll still think nothing
Of a thousand feral deaths borne
From fear in beastly face. It's all
Beyond my need to care.

Only now I see the terror that
Makes us start at shine in night.
Now I wonder at the scratching
Behind the walls in my home.
Everything I suspect about shadow
And chance might as well wear fur.

If you enjoyed the sample, you need not stop there!

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