

The Magus

by M. F. Sullivan

When at last I went to my father to learn the art of magic, I found him lounging around on a gigantic living seahorse the color of the ocean in the middle of Court, and said, “Pops, I want to talk to you about life.”

“That’s a pretty big subject, kiddo,” he said, rearranging the tassel of his fez to better regard me. “You’re going to have to narrow it down.”

Lightly, I sucked a tooth, crossed my arms and told him, “Well, I’m thinking— I don’t know. I never believed in God or anything, you know, but...”

“Uh-oh! Do we have a religious awakening on our hands? What is it that’s got you thinking about the big ol’ G-d?”

“Well,” with a cautious look at the unfurled tail of the seahorse upon which I lowered myself, “all that with Susan— I’m sure you saw.”

“Of course I did, I see everything.”

I smiled at the thought of my father, who loved to be anything or anyone every time that he could, and whose magic knew no bounds. “I mean,” I licked my lips after a moment of consideration, “I’m not saying that you’re not— I mean you—”

“Well of course I’m God,” he answered blithely, shrugging a little. “I mean, realistically speaking, well— hell, look up,” and I did, just in time to watch the chandelier collection burst into an assortment of umbrellas, most of which appeared to be made of foliage.

“Sure,” I laughed, looking up at the ceiling, “you have godlike *powers*, but that doesn’t mean you’re God, necessarily, right?”

“Why not!” Sitting up so fast he had to rearrange his red smoking jacket, Henry slid down the length of the seahorse until he was inches from my face and I barely had time, space or decorum to lean away. I looked into his eyes and saw with a brief second of fear a kind of gold that was deeper than gold, and more ancient and terrible, and he demanded, “I could turn you into a flock of sparrows

and never back again; totally diminish your consciousness and resign you to nothing but aether. Not even a proper afterlife, really, just floating around in space. Doesn't that make me God? *The God*, you know?"

With an anxious glance around, back and forth at the room which was empty as if he'd been waiting for me, I managed a swallow.

"...No?"

"Damn right!" His expression softened into laughter again and he slapped my arm as he leaned back, then slapping his knee, saying, "Whoo, the look on your face! Oh, man, even after all these years I still got it. You start to worry when you get old, you know, 'Am I getting too soft? Am I losing my touch?' I've gotta be scary sometimes."

"Well, you don't *have* to be."

"Yes I do," he sang, pinching my cheek and then hopping up from the seahorse and arbitrarily producing a Door in the middle of the room. "It's just in my nature—Henry's nature. And there are some things even magic can't change."

Scoffing, I said, "You can turn yourself into a bowl of cereal but you can't change your own nature?"

"Wouldn't want to if I could, it really just kind of changes on its own, you know. Though there are certain basic facts of it that are pretty static. After you," he said, opening the Door, and I said, "Thanks," looking at him as I did so that when I stepped through the threshold and over the edge of a cliff I quite literally did not see it coming but did, however, manage a smooth transition from the 's' of 'Thanks' to the 's' of another word entirely.

"What's the matter?" Henry was there to my left and I could barely register the sound of his voice over the whipping of the air around us. "This is what you wanted, Richard."

"I never asked for this!"

"It's exactly what you asked for! If this isn't what you wanted, you wouldn't have come to me today."

"No!" I clutched at him and swore as he burst into a flock of birds which exploded away into the air, looped around and manifested

somewhere beneath me in the shape of a black star. "Damn it, dad! This isn't what I wanted at all. I wanted to learn about magic!"

"This *is* a lesson in magic," chattered the birds as I plunged through them, managing to grab one which squawked and exploded into angry pink glitter at my audacity. "This is the first step in your journey, kiddo, and deep down inside you knew that this was what was going to happen, or something similar, anyway, so you're welcome."

Wiping feathers and bird matter from my eyes, I managed at last to see the encroaching earth and tried to think if there was any way to survive falling from such an insane height. Trees. Trees, I thought about trees, maybe trees— beneath me there were a few, the beginnings of some foreign forest, and I aimed as best I could for them, turning to the side to maintain a delicate balance between, you know, impaling my own heart and slowing my descent. By some miracle that was just how things happened, and after many feet and a lot of swearing I found myself tangled in the branches of what was possibly a great elm, full of an ancient beauty which I could little appreciate trapped as I was in its boughs.

"See," said Henry from somewhere far beneath me, "you knew you'd be fine."

"This is the last time I ask you for help with anything, Henry," I told him, beginning to make my slow and careful way down from branch to branch, finding the tree generally rather helpful and forgiving. There were ten branches, each rather widely spaced, but not so widely that a bit of stretching and a tight grip wouldn't keep one from falling. By the time I was on the seventh I could see quite a bit better the mossy loam of the forest, and I realized that this tree in which I'd landed was further into the forest than I'd expected it to be; indeed, I'd thought myself on the edge, but really it seemed as if I was halfway into it.

"Were we this far into the forest when I landed in the tree," I asked Henry, looking around for the indistinct source of his voice.

"No, not quite, but it's a good sign."
"Where are you?" Though, as I slid down to the ninth branch, I saw

where I was certain I would find him, a clearing only a few broad trees away from me, and from the tenth branch I strode down to the soft floor and felt thoroughly steady and connected to it somehow, as if I were on drugs. "What's going on?"

"Don't question it, Dick, just ride it along. Come here."

I did, emerging in the clearing and finding it full to the brim with roses and exquisite lilies exploding all around from edge to edge, crawling alongside rich ivy and vivid green grass up the body of a beautiful altar, which Henry had arranged like a sort of store, standing there behind it in his fez and smoking jacket. On its surface sat four things: a silver goblet, a paintbrush, a rapier, and a silver dollar.

"All right," I said, looking at the altar. "So what's going on with this, then?"

"These are the elements that make the world, kind of. Not really, though. You understand? You don't, do you." Like a loon, the old man laughed and swept all four objects from the surface of the altar, leaving me baffled as he climbed upon and then reached out for me. "The importance of this task is something which can't be overemphasized, Richard. You're going on a journey now, a journey to the center of yourself, and you're going to find out some serious truths with a capital 'T' attached to it— and you thought drugs were a trip!" Cackling, he patted my hands and then turned me around the way I'd come, shoving me forward. "You'll never need acid again after I'm through with you."

"So what are the elements that make the world, then? You mean quarks?"

"Quarks are just how we interpret the reality of the situation. A model, you know, the way language is a model for reality. Really there's something more basic even than that, it controls all matter, which is, itself, just energy condensed to a slow vibration. Interpreted."

Just slightly, I pursed my lips and considered what he was talking about, my head lowering. "Okay, fine, that's like that Bill Hicks

principle—but what is it that's condensing the energy to a slow vibration?”

As we moved forward, though we were ostensibly moving in the direction which lead out of the woods, it seemed to my eyes that things were growing darker. “Chaos is the force that runs everything in this world, this universe, technically, although it's orchestrated chaos, you know—directed. You've got a pretty strong force of will in this world, you know, kid; you're one of the most powerful people here, or at least, you have the potential to be that powerful.”

I laughed at first, thinking he was joking, and then touched my chest. “Me, you mean? You really mean me.”

“Of course I mean you, kid. I'm not demented.” The old man gave me a shake and I laughed, wondering whether or not that was an accurate statement, but not saying it.

“So what do you mean, though, about orchestrated chaos.”

“Well, if you look at everything closely enough, there's an order to it. All chaos is orderly, really. That's its conundrum.”

“Where are we going?” Yes, the trees were certainly thinning—so was the ground, it seemed, which was swiftly fading to become as black as the air around us.

“Out,” he said with a dismissive wave of his hand, continuing without missing a beat, “All this world is built on duality, which is paradoxical because of course, really, there's no duality at all. And the very *experience* of duality is inherently dualistic, since we simultaneously wish to experience the things which only come from duality but also endure the keen longing to rid ourselves of it and experience unity.”

“You're really sure you're not on drugs right now, or we're not both on drugs right now.”

Laughing, Henry clapped my shoulder, ignoring entirely my intake of breath as I looked over my shoulder to find nothing at all existed behind us. “Kid, let me tell you, I haven't done drugs in *centuries*. You just don't need to when you're a magician!”

“Not even pot?”

“Nope, not even pot. It has purposes for rituals and all, but really, what do you need regular drugs for, unless for bonding? I mean, holy shit, kiddo, I can do anything at all in this world. I'm fucking magic. Frankly, I can do anything at all in *any* world. That's just the secret nobody tells you—or they do tell it to you out of one side of their mouth, and out of the other side they immediately dismiss it. You do the same thing to yourself and the trick is unifying your mental soundtrack. You've got to take the side of your mouth that's dismissing your potential to do absolutely anything, even the most ridiculous magical stunts you've never dreamed of, and staple it shut.”

Suddenly, we rounded a corner which didn't exist, and again, I gasped to see what came into view—a vast and beautiful white temple, round, with a basin in the middle in which sat a great fire and from which wafted the rich scent of frankincense and many great perfumes. All around us, beyond the edges of the temple, I saw the vast beauty of outer space, with countless exquisite stars quivering and twinkling out their light, but the one nearest to us was a monstrous thing, black and beautiful in the most haunting of ways. Before it, upon the other side of the basin, rested Susan, berobed in a rich red kimono left open and many layers of white fabric and wearing an exquisite headress of blue feathers and Egyptian form. My mouth opened, and I turned to see Henry, only to find him completely gone.

“What are you doing here,” I asked her; she smiled, exquisite, more than I'd ever found her, even in my first life. Carefully, I rounded the basin, and lowered myself by her side. Before her was spread open a great, golden book which I dared not touch for reasons unknown to anything in me but something deeper than language.

“What was your original face,” she asked as I looked upon the pages and found their light cast a violent glare in my eyes, “before I was born.”

“Lazarus loves that koan,” I said, laughing, but she hushed me, smiling as she did, and for whatever reason in that moment I fancied

this was not really Susan at all. But she felt like Susan, and she reached out to touch my cheek, to angle my face in the direction of the fire.

“Everything which you seek is within you, my darling.”

“This sounds more and more like some bullshit hippie vision quest.”

Though laughing, she shushed me again, lightly slapped my cheek and went on to insist, “Find awareness in this fire.”

And, for whatever strange reason, those words so phrased caused me to slip into intense contemplation of the fire, as if I had never truly seen a fire before; had never taken the time to truly notice a fire, and the nature of a fire, a chemical reaction caused as it consumes relentlessly its source of fuel, using it up to its death and disappearing. We say that a fire dies, but the fire is never troubled by dying. Does the fire have a perception, I wondered? Was it all the same fire, being conjured by the ritual of lighting? It was a silly thing to wonder, but many silly thoughts fluttered through my mind, and then, gradually, no thoughts drifted through my mind, and I was entirely, and only, aware of the fire. The form of the fire and the motion of the fire and the color of the fire, all of it blurred into the fire, and then into something beyond the word, beyond the label which fell away and was rendered meaningless like a word repeated in the head or tongue a thousand times. The fire lead me into the depths of a great trance and somewhere in the distance I heard Ishtar speaking through the priestess beside me, the Mother of Mothers saying, “Now I have given you language, Richard; it is my gift to you. But take care never to abuse and confuse it. Never become caught in the snare of it. It is a tool; take time to set it down each day, be of the thing in itself, and remember the veracity of your connection with that exquisite, nameless thing, perfect, separate and yet of the self, and yet not.”

I might have had a smart comment any other time but it just wasn't in me there, in the temple. I opened my mouth just slightly, just because I felt as if I was expected to speak, and asked her, “How long can I stay here?”

"As long as you will," she said.

"Okay," I said, and I'm not sure how long I remained there, with the fire, and with Her, but it seemed to empty me out into such a blissful state that I lost all track of being or reason or sense. I felt as if I could have fallen into the fire, that all that existed was the fire, that I was the fire, and my mind became a blur of impressions, only of the fire, and the white of the floor and the black of the basin; I forgot all the stars, all my friends and family and work and life, and fell into the glorious rapture produced by the glow of the flames, which, it seemed, were all I had ever known. Fire, that perhaps was my original face; but, no. I knew that was a confusion of sorts; that the fire was no more the original face of Richard than Richard was the original face of the fire. What, then? What was this and its significance?

"First principles, Richard," came the voice of a man I had not yet met, but would meet in time, and who I knew there in that place because it was a place removed from all time and space and sense, and so it was Hermes Barca who I found emerging from behind the blue and leaf-covered veil which now hung before the black star, obscuring it, replacing Susan, who had perhaps evaporated as the incense smoke which even still wafted towards the ceiling.

"What is this thing," I asked, watching the fire, rather than the dangerous and besuited man who came to sit beside me. "What is it in and of itself."

"Is this a fire, Richard."

"No," I said, barely able to pull myself away to do him the courtesy of looking over. He only smiled, though, with perfect patience, and patted my hand.

"Here is a place of perfect understanding; all actions are courteous. Watch the fire if you must; don't be so polite that I disrupt your reverie."

"You and your thing about manners," I said with a laugh, watching carefully the basin, and how the flame seemed to grow, and the basin, too. "I mean, I like to think of myself as generally a pretty polite person, but you take it to an entirely new level."

“The opposite of courtesy, Richard, is ferality,” he said, and from the corner of my eye I saw flicker for an instant his form to that of a shadow with great stag horns which clambered to the sky, and though I found that shadow both beautiful and terrible I felt no fear, and at any rate he was back to his usual expression after a few seconds. “Those who are most polite are often those who restrain or suppress the most violent animal urges. At the same time, manners are the building blocks of a sturdy society; graceful social interactions all depend on getting along with one’s neighbor, as does having a successful life. These things follow a logical structure of ordered rules.”

“Like Plato’s forms,” I said, or sort of asked, glancing over now from the fire because I felt free to, felt in discussing the nature of logic that there was again a boundary between ‘Richard’ and ‘fire’, felt again that there *was* a ‘fire’ that could be somehow contained by its word, and so felt safe to look elsewhere. “The perfect things, floating out in space—the perfect marriage, the perfect morning, the perfect set of manners?”

“Better to think of them in archetypical format. Though this may be a magician’s journey, I think perhaps Plato’s perspectives on the ideals of perfection as intra-dimensional forms to be rather too evocative of a mystical concept. Rather consider the blueprints for these perfect things here,” the doctor tapped the side of my head, smiling in that non-smiling sort of way, “in your mind. The archetypical marriage, say, blueprinted in your genetic code through years of evolution; the perfect morning, the perfect set of manners, all known inherently to your unconscious mind, emerging in the form of archetypes you see in your dreams, depict in your art. What have you painted of late, Richard?”

I paused and struggled to come up with suggestions, saying after a time, “Persephone and Ishtar and Isis have been coming up a lot—Cleopatra and Julius Caesar, and I did a painting of Lazarus as Christ recently.”

“Your psyche craves to know the spiritual on a closer level than it currently does. You deny the presence of God, and yet it would seem that He is all around you, would it not?”

My mouth opened and then shut, and I turned to look upon the veil again, frowning slightly at it, trying to remember if it had once been of this pattern, these strange green and burgundy circles allayed upon a luminescent background whose color I for some reason could not perceive amid the countless repetitions of the symbol I recognized vaguely as 'yod'. “I don't know if I see God everywhere, though,” I considered carefully aloud, then adding, “or anywhere.”

“What do you look for, Richard, when you look for God?”

Laughing slightly, I glanced around and then over at the doctor, finding him—different. I saw him now, no doctor, but centuries older, The Heirophant, the picture of radiant calm; so calm he seemed to glow with passive black tranquility like the limitless sky between the stars spilling out wide all around us. “I don't know,” I breathed, glancing over him and feeling awash with his holy might, sensing the sacred radiance which seemed to emanate from him, and this I did not understand entirely because in my second life I had come to fear God more than I had ever hated Him, but now I felt the presence of a great and terrible and wonderful God and found Him to be like the fire; felt that I might immolate in him of my own volition, might do anything at all that He asked and praise His name to the world far and wide.

“Richard,” came a familiar feminine voice, and I leapt slightly and turned to see Evangeline there behind me, living, breathing, looking happy and gentle, and in her dark hair was woven all the stars of the sky, and upon her white gown was the blood of Venus, and I forgot then that light-bringer who was behind me, and found instead my second mother, whose hands I held in mine and kissed and cried over.

“Richard,” she said at last, “are you all right?”

“I don't know,” I told her, lifting one hand away from hers to rest upon my face as I glanced over my shoulder with a shallow breath,

then a deeper one to find that The Heirophant was gone, and out of his presence I remembered with a shock that The Heirophant was no ethereal God but rather man, the teacher connected to God, as it were, and not God himself; but somehow in his presence the veil had lit up to blind me with the light of all those stars, and I had somehow forgotten myself, and him. When I looked back to Evangeline, I recognized that the veil had parted just slightly, and I asked her with an anxious glance into her eyes, "Aren't you mad at me?"

"Oh, sweetheart," she kissed my knuckles and lead me towards the veil, insisting, "I chose this. It's perfectly all right. It's all just a game we play, really— come on, now." Her hands found my shoulders and it seemed to me that she was taller than I was even though that was impossible, and as she gently guided me towards the veil, she suggested, "I think that you could use a little bit of time outside. Maybe ground yourself— spending all this time in your head, sweetheart. It's not healthy."

Lightly, I nodded, and allowed her to guide me through the veil, and it seemed to me perfectly natural that on the other side we should find what we did, and that is to say, her Garden, beautiful and sumptuous and perfect, and I realized that I had been here before—"Susan brought me here," I observed, "once, when I was on a trip."

"This is a very special place," said Evangeline, and I agreed with her, enraptured by the crystal blue creek that blurbled happily down the rolling green hill, a perfectly different sort of blue from the soft sky which stretched on forever, or would have were it not interrupted by mountains, beautiful rolling purple-gray-blue mountains which enclosed us comfortably in the valley as though we were ourselves within a cup. "'Do you know why I brought you here, Richard?"

"To ground me," I repeated, but she only patted my shoulder.

"This place is grounding. But what grounds us, what marks us as 'us', are our markers for how we live our life—our self-identifiers. Like points on a map."

"I'm not sure what you mean, but I think I know what you mean."

“Reality is magical,” she said with a whisper, sitting me down upon a large, mossy stone by the bank of the creek. “Never let anybody tell you otherwise, Richard. Never let anyone talk you out of it. Do you know how important it is to believe?”

“What's the worst that could happen if I don't?”

“Oh,” said Evangeline with a gay little shrug, “well, nothing, of course, not necessarily, but having a belief in something helps to give the universe feedback for what you want, in a way; what is that called,” her fist landed upon her hip, “when people only listen to facts they agree with, anyway..”

“Confirmation bias?”

“Yes, yes! Oh, my smart boy. My Richard.” Her head tilted and her eyes watered with the purse of her lips for just a moment which filled me with a torrent of hot grief I had never before felt, but it passed almost as soon as it had come and she cleared her throat, insisting, “Whatever you believe to begin with, that's usually what your brain chooses to reinforce—so be careful, now. If you believe the universe is cold and cruel it's liable to prove you right.”

I nodded faintly, observing, “Yeah, it seems like that was the case with me. With my life. My first one, I mean.”

Still so gentle and endlessly patient—amazing that she should be so kind to me, after what I did to her!—Evangeline frowned and stroked my hair, and then bent her head to kiss the top of mine. “You've suffered so much, sweetheart.”

“I've brought much suffering to others,” I observed, grimly.

“What we bring upon others, we bring upon ourselves tenfold. Poor little boy,” she said, and I felt terribly small then, felt strangely displaced, as if once again I was only four or five and still relatively adoring of Evangeline, still happy to sit with her on the couch and watch shows. I felt so sad that time had ever gone past that—felt sad, too, that I couldn't experience the same thing with Susan, and longed for her presence with Evangeline, but knew that one mother could not be in the presence of the other, for they were truly the same, and so I was satisfied enough to see Evangeline.

“Will you hold me,” I asked her, and felt crushed, slightly, when she shook her head.

“If I hold you, you'll never ground yourself, sweetheart. You'll lay your head on my heart and doze off for hours, or get lost in a dream counting the stars in my hair. But that's what I'm trying to tell you, why I brought you here— I've brought you to someone else, someone who can hold you, someone who will ground you by holding you.”

And I brightened, then, because I knew just who she meant before I even looked and saw her or smelled her on the air or felt her hand on mine, which was, miraculously, what I felt first, and quickly I whipped around with a cry of joy to see Delilah, who also gave a cry of joy, as if we had not seen one another in centuries, and we fell upon another in a consuming kiss that was hot like fire and cool and fresh as the water which burst through the creek beside us.

“Oh, sweetie,” she cried, hanging from my shoulders, “I'm so excited, so proud of you!”

Laughing, I asked her, “Why?”

“Because look at you, growing! All I've ever wanted was to help you grow.” Her eyes watered and she laughed gaily, falling away from me, totally unaware of her nakedness, as unaware as I was of my own sudden nakedness, leading me on a chase down the bank and calling behind her, “It's so good to see you making the choice to be happy!”

“Is that what this is?”

“Yes! Every day, every second is a choice. Life is a choice—I'm a choice.” She stopped and smiled as I caught her in my arms to kiss her, and her kisses tasted like spun sugar and raspberries and the thunder of blood through veins, and very soon we were upon the generously soft grass which formed for us a kind of large bed, and there we made love for what seemed to be hours, or days, it might have been, because I knew deep in my heart that there was no time in this place, this state of being, whatever it was. The labels of who we were as people fell away entirely and suddenly we were but man and woman, zero and one relating together on the most basic and primal of extraordinarily beautiful levels, and I felt that there was

truly something significant, something deep and real there that I had perhaps not perceived before, had taken for granted and never truly allowed myself to experience, perhaps because it frightened me to so thoroughly experience it. But there in the mystical connection of sex with Her I felt a sort of completeness which I could not quite explain; a vast and broad tranquility which removed me from myself, which dissolved my self in a way that I had not experienced its dissolution before. Not by sex, at any rate. But suddenly there was only the conscious perception of the experience of pleasure, a kind of grandiose curblung that beat the very thotthing of my jumb. Harrowing liftig grig havie can't dritch, until the rattling clears, and then, remodiously, the logic began to come back to me, and the sense of who I was, and where I was, and what I was doing, and there with beautiful Delilah I kissed her brow.

"I don't know if I should stay here all day, baby," I told her, and she laughed and kissed my nose.

"No, silly, of course not. But I can come with you— look," she sat up and began to gather in her hands fistfuls of violet flowers and long grass, swiftly tying them together, and in her hands they became soft fabrics of silk, beautiful garments for the two of us, a red robe for me and a blue one for her, and as she handed me mine I laughed slightly to realize something.

"Wasn't it *your* job to wake me up out of this little lover's trance, my Eve," I asked her, but she only giggled in an elfin way and tugged her dress over her head.

"Silly Morning, it's not my job at all. It's my job to have fun with you and make you excited and show you how wonderful life is!" Throwing her arms in the air and giving a girlish and adorable whoop of delight, Delilah leapt to her feet and shot off, and I laughed to follow her, chasing her again downhill. We slipped slightly then, one after the other, rolling, and when we managed to stumble up we gasped to see a great pair of lions before us, winged, one black and one white, and with a rapturous cry Delilah threw herself upon the white creature, flinging her arms around its rich mane and planting luxurious kisses upon its lucky muzzle. I watched her with a song

lodged in my heart and felt no fear to come upon the black lion with confidence, laying my hand upon its great jet nose and seeing how it bowed with grace before me and then let me rein it with the thongs of cow hide I found in my hands, though on second glance I began to suspect that they were the flesh of man.

“Kiss me,” said Delilah, and I did, and as I did I felt someone else kissing her from inside of myself, and her heart and mine bound together to blossom from a tremendous pink lotus a chariot made of gold and lapis lazuli, a chariot to which the lions lead us willfully, as though it were their idea to start with, and I'd no question at all that it was. We clambered aboard, me first, then reaching down to help lift Delilah in, and the lions took us on great brass wheels down to the city which sprawled in the far distance, a day and a night removed from where we were but visible all the same, for it was great to behold and spread across seven luscious, rolling hills. Before the gates to the city, though, there stood a great and tremendous procession, and in the arms of many there was much, but in the arms of more there was nothing, and I saw it mattered not what they held, for it all fell away from them before they found justice meted out to them; before their heart was weighted on scales poised upon the tip of a sword.

“Is it Anubis,” I half-joked to Delilah, stepping down from the chariot.

“Oh Richard, where are you going?”

“Just coming into the city, are you coming along— anyway, we've gotten where we're going.” I glanced over my shoulder only as long as it took to call, “We don't really need the chariot, now, do we?”

“I guess you're right,” she said, carefully getting down and kissing the black lion, this time, then freeing them both and watching as they turned into melodious birds of maroon which twirled into the sky and were gone, and Delilah and I then came to the scales, because the line, like all things in this land, was an illusion, and it was easy enough here to choose not to play the game if your force of will was strong and your vision properly clear.

"You would enter the city," observed a sourceless voice, and I heard it to be both that of Ishtar and of Hermes together in symphony, and I looked around and up at the great marble walls which reached towards the sky, but not so high that they seemed endless.

"I just thought it made sense to have a look around while we're here," I said with a somewhat cool shrug.

"You've left behind the chariot," said the voices, "and the lions, but what of the girl?"

"Need the girl stay behind," I asked, but the voice thundered, "There are some places to which man must journey alone."

Anxiously, Delilah and I shared a glance, but then a sudden brave look swept across her face and her hand tightened into a fist upon her heart. "I know you can do it, honey," she told me, stroking my hand and then pushing into my mouth a mossy stone of lapis lazuli like that of our chariot, and I laughed, spitting it out just in time for her to kiss me. "It will be dark," she said with a glance to the great gates.

"I know," I told her, and she nodded, stroking my hand and fretting slightly.

"Will you be scared?"

"No," I said. "I'm not afraid of the dark."

"But of being alone."

That, I wasn't sure about. I only squeezed her hand, kissed her once more and then cast her away, and found my way to the city was clear with my hands empty of all but the stone. The gate through which I passed seemed a great mouth into the gullet of some nefarious stone animal, and though the city had seemed vast and open from the hills in the distance this entrance to my mind went on forever; I walked an hour, another, all in the dark, even my keen eyes dismayed to find no form in the ink of the void which suffused them. There seemed to be no sense to it, no logic; before I had entered we had looked upon the gate as only a gate, as merely an entrance, but in trying to enter the city it seemed that I had found myself in a tunnel as great and winding as a black python. Trapped

thus, I began to feel the white panic of claustrophobia and had to pause for a moment in the darkness, though I dared not tarry much longer, but all my daring was taken by the fear. It came upon me like a beast which slithered over my back and laid its claws upon my shoulder; a beast that took me because I was alone, or thought I was alone. And I, feeling lost and alone as I was, was entirely ready to succumb to it; to fall back into it and allow it to teach me to see in the dark, to live in the dark; to robe myself with the fear and turn it upon others, that it might less plague me.

But, then, I remembered the stone in my hands, and remembered my wife, and my heart, and remembered again the city. The thought came upon me, then, to fight the fear, and another beast of fear came upon me from another side and slithered into my ear as if to ask me why I bothered with these things, this goal, this passion, this love, when it was a journey which would come to an end, at any rate? The helplessness of it was very nearly too much to bear and more fears began to mount, and soon I was clutched by a pile of them until, pressed at the bottom, I thought I might never again breathe, nor speak, nor see the light of the moon. Exhausted, I tried to count the fears and found they seemed endless, and every time I tried to count them they doubled in size and changed their shapes and became impossible to comprehend. It would do no good, then, to try to fight or escape the fears; fears were not rational creatures. It seemed to me that if I took the logical approach, I might divest myself of them, and so I began with the smallest fears but found that they offered me no relief. Above me panted the biggest and oldest fears; those that had first come upon me in the darkness of that place, the fear that I was alone, and the fear that my journey was meaningless. The fear that there was indeed no city, and that I had deceived myself, or been deceived by others.

There had been a city. I had been certain that there had been a city, in fact, but here in the darkness it was impossible to see. But I should have been able to see it by then, shouldn't I have? I hadn't gone underground when I passed through the gates which enclosed it; the floor had not sloped a degree, one way or another, despite the

city's nature, spread out across the hills. And, from our approach in the distance, we had been able to note the other side of the wall, and the beginnings of the city within; it had been no dream, of that I was sure, but yet it seemed I could not find it. Why not? Why, by all rights, I should have been in the city that very moment!

But of course—the shock of the realization stilled both I and my fears, and we all shared a glance of incredulity in the darkness before the light of epiphany shooed them and the blackness away, and I found myself indeed already upon the second hill of that most beautiful city where my father lived, and where I found him on the third hill, then, before a great wheel painted in colors so rich and garish that my eye could hardly keep up with them as they twisted around.

“Come one, come all, step right up and try your hand at the Wheel of Fortune—no, not that one, the other one. The real one. Come here, sonny-boy.”

“What's this, then?”

As he reached down to help me clamber upon the stage, offering one slender hand, I watched the wheel come to a stop and turned to him as he said, “Spin it.”

So I did, and I fell back a few steps, watched the colors whirl by and became completely lost in the phantasmagoria, distantly aware of Henry saying something like, “All of our fortune comes from inside, and outside, but the real trick, kiddo, is really learning that there's no difference between the two. That's the real magic of it.”

In that city, I felt somehow more easily grounded—not at all like the temple, where it seemed I would float away at any moment, or the garden, where I had barely retained any sense of my journey. Here, I felt alight with knowledge; too alight, too self-aware, to forget the nature of my task in becoming a magician. “So how, exactly, do I do that, then. Gnosis? Meditation? Self-flagellation?”

“Sh,” said my father, then, taking my face in his hands to direct it, he said, “Watch the wheel,” and we both watched in fascinated silence along with a gathering crowd as the wheel spun, spun, and

stopped, then, at the ten of cups, a luminescent rainbow of streaming beauty.

"Family," cried the old man, spreading his hands. "Aw, now isn't that nice. A good wholesome sign. Isn't family important, Richard—hell, nobody seems to love it more than you do!" With a perverse chortle, he gave me a jostle by the shoulders and said, "But there's good reason for it. It's all symbolic, in a way."

I laughed lightly at that, a weak sort of laugh which came dishonestly from any situation I perceived as painful, but for whatever reason, in the city, the laughter rang more clear and genuine. "I don't know if I would say I love my family," I said. "Think about the way my mother and real father are—think about the types of people they are and the type of person they helped me become."

"Oh, Richard, come on, now. You've got to take a little responsibility." With a disdainful sigh, the old man snapped his fingers and the crowd gasped as my true father appeared upon the wheel, bound and hanging upside down upon it, dead, I thought, or removed deeply from his form. "Look at this man. This man is just a human man, Richard."

Striding over, Henry gave the wheel a vicious spin, and I watched, hypnotized and terrified and pleased to see Julius there, see his form blurred, see him helpless and empty and yes, he was a human man. "That doesn't change his crimes against me," I told the old man. "Or his crimes against my mother—your wife, I'll remind you." This, though she had not yet married him, though I knew somehow in that place and space that she would, that she was always married to him—that it was only natural that Ishtar should make of herself the vessel of my father, that they were really very much the same.

"Sure, there's no denying he's done some terrible things—but it's all part of the game, Richard."

"It's not a *game*," I insisted with increasing upset. "My God, Henry— I'm telling you, Julius raped my mother for years. She was emotionally crippled by the whole thing, it— if it wasn't for all that happened, then—"

“Then you wouldn't have been born at all, kiddo. Those things that happened—they had to happen. There was no other way any of it could have happened. With you, I mean. Sure, there are always choices people have the power to make— but you want to know the secret, kiddo?”

Still watching Julius, I asked, “What?”

“All the world's a stage. All of us, deep down inside—we're all playing out stories. We just don't realize it.”

My mouth opened and shut and I felt trembling beneath my jaw the thought of my original face again, before this man was born, and suddenly I found I was the one hanging upon the wheel, sickened by the force of the appearance there and the vicious speed, and I saw, strangely, myself looking back in shock from beside Henry as I spun around and lost all sense of direction, up or down, all stability completely devastated by the hand of Chaos. I felt all ground fall out from under me, all mass seem to fly from me until I had the sense that I was nothing at all, and I trembled to feel myself falling apart, shattering into an explosion of angry atoms, and with terror I thought of my death which seemed so very soon, seemed now, seemed unavoidable, and I dared not let my eyes close lest I become lost in the blackness behind them, but at the same time I could not help but close my eyes to fight against the majesty of the chromatic nightmare swirling white before my vision. There was no escape and my mind whirled with terror at the thought of death which seemed so imminent and so inescapable and clear, and I longed for but one more beautiful day in the sun with my lover and my friends close at hand, to touch the grass and smell the forest air and weep at the perfection of the sky and wind and rain. And what of them, that lover, those friends? In the wake of my death, what would they do? Why—mourn, of course. Mourn, and then live on. The world continued and I would not, and perhaps for a time Richard would be the subject of conversation, solemn conversation, and then no conversation at all, until, gradually, there would be no Richard, no sense of me or who I was at all, and then? Then? Safer then to die,

to rest in the pit of death and never live at all! Why live at all if it must be imbued with such pain as knowing of one's own death?

But, amid the whirl of the wheel and the depth of the sadness which subsumed my mind, I struggled to keep a grip on rational thought. What did I mean by the thoughts of death which came to me? Wasn't there plenty of time yet? But it was possible there was no time, would never be sufficient time; it was possible I might have an aneurism any second and drop dead and be lost to obscurity. And yet, was not that very fact what made life impossibly precious? Was not the fact that I had once come from nothing, and would eventually be nothing again, sufficient to instill in every second of existence a kind of sublime glory which only monks and priests discuss openly?

Gradually, as I began to think that the emptiness of death as something that was necessary, and grudgingly began to accept the fact that myself was not as important as I had always hoped, no matter what I did, the wheel began to slow to a stop. I had forgotten entirely that I was on the wheel, that I was in the city, or that I was even okay, and somehow even the wheel being stopped did not remind me of that fact immediately.

"Are you all right," were the words I heard someone say, but I saw no source, and opened my eyes to find myself completely alone, now, and the city, it seemed, was gone; razed, every citizen vanished, every building burned.

"Hello?" I lifted my head and found that I was no longer bound to the wheel, which now lay flat upon the ground as if it had fallen, though I had of course no memory of it falling. "Is there anyone here? Dad?"

No response came to me and I, thinking I was alone, rose to my feet in an effort to seek out someone from the city which had once been so fair. In the wake of the destruction I was despondent, and it seemed to me that there could be no way to carry on; perhaps the sensible thing now was to go back to the beginning and see if there was some way out. Or perhaps I might find Delilah and with my lover we could forge some new city in the great field—assuming, of

course, she had not been caught up in the destruction of the city, and I had not lost her forever. But it seemed that she had perhaps already made it through the city while I had been clutched by the wheel; I sensed it in my heart, knew that I had no choice but to hope that I was right, and set my sights forward.

For a day, it seemed, I marched through the ruins, alone, and yet emboldened to be alone, and feeling, somehow, less alone in the company of myself than I had ever before. There was a certain beauty in the destruction which I appreciated, and the sorrow which had settled over everything like a fine smog was, in its own way, somehow exquisite. The further I walked, though, the more tired I became, and the hungrier and thirstier I was, desperate for some sustenance to carry me on a journey which I feared might come to a sad end. A man could not survive on the rubble of a promised land.

But amid that rubble, from time to time, there is something worth taking; the ruins of a door might be found, and in so stepping through we may find ourselves in another sort of place entirely. I crossed through just such a threshold where I saw a table set out with a bottle of wine and two cups, and found with surprise my friend, Barca, stood upon the other side of it.

"Hermes," I cried, and he smiled in that thin but oddly warm way of his, eyes crinkling just barely. "I'm relieved to see you."

"Are you surprised to find me here," he asked, and I considered that with a laugh.

"I guess a little. Though it's less surprising somehow now that it's all burned down."

With a glance around, the man offered a smile to the destruction and said, "I admit, there is something immensely satisfying in such a blasphemy as this. But it's hardly as if it is a tragedy."

"All these homes—the people, too, don't you think it's a little sad, even if it was inevitable?"

"There are many perspectives one might take on such tragedy." He looked into the cups, as did I, and I saw one was of water and one of red wine. "I, personally, find the whole thing to be rather funny. A glorious paradise, splayed across seven hills, devoured by

something small and fleeting as a flame. It had perhaps reached its height, at any rate, and could have used with a culling; this was simply a thorough one."

"So is this some kind of test," I asked him suddenly, looking between the glasses.

Chuckling, Barca lowered his head and said, "You may have whatever pleases you, Richard. The journey is long yet, and since you have found me I shall gladly help you through it, but the fact of the matter is you cannot keep wandering without something in you."

Lips pressed thin at his inability to answer a straight question, I looked into the cups and wondered what this was a symbol for, wondered who set all of this up, at any rate. Did I set it up by going to my father and asking him to learn magic? I wasn't sure, but I had the sense that, somehow, I was responsible for all of this. Like it was a big joke I'd forgotten about, and so I knew the answer to everything I might face, deep down on some level. At the same time, I also knew that these things were not tests per se; they were tests if I made them tests, gave them the significance of tests. Life could be all tests or no tests depending on one's perspective, and at that very moment I wanted no test. What I wanted was something to drink, and something sustaining, and so I plucked up the water and took a few great mouthfuls of it.

"You continue to surprise me," commented Barca, and I, grinning, picked up the wine with my free hand to carry both cups with us as we crossed back through the threshold and continued over the fifth hill.

"Should I? I'm thirsty, you know, sometimes you just want a bit of real water before you start in on the wine." Annoyed to find myself with both hands full, I poured the water into the wine in hopes it might last longer and leave me with one hand free. "Sip?"

"No, thank you." Barca watched the water cup roll away and stepped rather delicately over a large rock, suggesting, "Does this not seem like a particularly long journey to you, Richard?"

"I guess, but it's also like—well, I mean, how long is a magical journey supposed to be? It's not like it can exactly be short, you

know, you've got to endure trials, right? Got to be initiated into the way of doing things."

"I suppose that is true, but does it not seem rather ludicrous that you should be forced to jump through these hoops as you are? Is there not a simpler, better way, perhaps, to learn magic? I'm almost certain there is."

Laughing a little into my cup, I shrugged and said, "Probably, and in all honesty I'd prefer it, but I have no way of knowing what that way is."

"Perhaps it might be logically derived from what you already know," suggested my friend. "It seems to me that the secrets of these things are often hidden in plain sight."

"That's true, but the more you think about these things, the more likely you are to overthink them. That's how you end up a Scientologist."

The man chuckled and patted my shoulder at that, saying, "I suppose that is true—but, then, is the simplest answer not to avoid thinking on it at all?"

"What? Do you mean relax, the way you have to relax your eyes to see what's up with the magic eye puzzles?"

"Perhaps." With a look of thoughtful concentration into the middle-distance, he suggested, "It would seem to me that a great deal of magic is based entirely around one's force of will. One wills something into existence, as Henry wills tears into chickadees, and as a result it comes into existence. But is there more to it than that, I wonder?"

"There's got to be. I can will anything as long as I like and that doesn't necessarily mean it's going to happen. I can will the sky to turn pink and that doesn't mean it will."

"If the statistical odds are high enough, and it be thy True Will," suggested Hermes with a look of frank innocence, as the type found on children and murderers alike, "then the very sky might be set ablaze with the force of thine reckoning. Let no man stand in the way of you and your Will, Richard, least not of all yourself."

This seemed to ring with me in a strange way and I stopped in place, silently assessing the damage around. Hermes watched me, and then, after another few seconds of careful contemplation, he asked, "What tree has ever worried that it may not reach the sky?"

And I, for my part, did not know, and fell back upon my heels, then genuflected to the rubble and selected a perfect round stone which seemed to shimmer even in the darkness and dust as though it were made of something beyond gold and silver, made of stardust, made of light, and as I looked up I found that the destruction had begun to fold together, and to my astonishment, it twisted to the sky in the form of a great tower. As I approached it, I felt no caution, indeed, felt near like a child again, rushing forward towards the steps, and I heard then with a triumphant cry the voice of my love, who poked her head from the highest window and called my name, and I saw upon her head a great brass crown which made me realize my own.

"Wait for me," I told her, but she needed not wait long, for it seemed that I traversed quite quickly through the seven flights of stairs, as if it passed by in a vibrant flash which, in my haste and excitement, made me forget that Hermes, my guide, had yet again disappeared. Instead I was caught up in the reunion with my lover, and as I clutched her to my breast, I found her soft blue gown was woven full of stars and the feathers of snow birds, and in that instant we were married.

"Will we make this our home," she asked, and I looked around and found indeed it to be a luxurious place, sensuous fabrics and beautiful furniture artfully arranged throughout thousands of well-painted and beautiful rooms, all arranged with paintings the likes of which no man has ever envisioned and would for years. And it seemed to me for a flickering moment that this would be fine a home as any, and I wanted to consider it, but had traveled so long and so far that I found myself far too famished to make any such decision.

"Let's eat," I said, waving her towards the dining room, "and we'll talk about it."

This pleased her, and she bounced off with me upon her heels, and there in the dining room I found the places had been set upon the long black table with feasts of fruits and fish and wine, and at the head of the table sat Hermes in His true and most terrible form, His great black horns rising past the length of his chair, and He ate of flesh which rang red as my robe, His black lips stained with the blood of man.

“Would you sup at my table, Richard,” He asked me as I sat, and I considered with caution the plate before me while across from me, my wife ate with ravenous delight.

“And what cost will I find awaiting me in exchange for your meal, my friend?”

“Never any more than one is willing to pay.” With spindled fingers, He reached forward and took from before Him a bright red apple, which He set before me with a thin black smile which reminded me that He was also an angel, and as I took the apple and ate of it, a great trembling overtook the heart of the tower. My wife had gone, and Hermes' second face had replaced itself again, and I saw now that all the food was rotten, all the furniture made of ashes, all light made of shadows, and so I mourned not as the stones fell apart and I with them, hurtling to the ground, and this time, I feared not, only shut closed my eyes and waited to meet the explosive ground, but all that exploded instead was the lid of my third eye, like the blossoming of a lotus flower, and I saw that I was once again adrift in space, surrounded by black and blissful nothing, and then there I saw my little sister and knew her Vision to be great and true, and saw how she glowed radiantly in the depths of night, and how from the clay vessel in her hands she issued forth the white water which made the radiant stars, and I found the very same stuff in the heart of me and wept for love of sheer beauty.

“Aw, kiddo,” said the voice of my father, and I looked and found he was the silver of the moon which glowed like a hand mirror, “what's the matter?”

“It's wonderful,” I said, and I put a hand upon my heart and one upon my cheek and felt the twisting spirals of galaxies an infinity of

time and space away. "Why all of this, though? What is all of this?"

"Look inside yourself, and you'll know exactly why."

And yes, indeed, I did, and found in my heart that same stone again, knew it to be the same stone which had been handed me by my wife, the same stone which had built me the tower, and I held it in my hand and kissed it and saw that it was, after all, not a stone, but a mirror, and looked up to find that my father had shown me his true face, and that the dim light of the moon had fallen apart to the exploding flames of the lapping sun, and it was then that I awoke in my bed, beside my wife, overwhelmed with hot tears which came from noplacel, everyplace, and I was myself again, and I knew I never again could be, because I had remembered my real name.

