

Blackballed

by S.H. Gall

When I was a small child, my father was just barely a man, and he was independently wealthy. So it didn't matter that he was an adolescent inside. There was never any mention of "working." No notion of career. Just the girl he knocked up and the amusing plaything: me, his son. We lived in a mock-chateau full of diversions and mirth.

I had to call him "father" to remind myself that he wasn't actually an overgrown peer. He teased me about it, said I came straight from a Victorian novel. "Father!" he mimicked in a high voice. "Father, come and play!" But we didn't play so much as role-play.

The one concession to adulthood Father made was to his secret society. He'd inherited this membership from his own father. On the third Thursday of each month he disappeared into a world I could only imagine, consisting of long dark robes barely lit by candlelight, a world with its own language. The morning after he always smelled of tallow and incense and an exciting, foreign muskiness.

When I was no longer a small child, medium-sized now, Father abruptly stopped going out on his monthly third Thursdays. His face grew dour and grim, pale and lined, like a face from a Victorian novel. He became cruel to my mother, blaming her for everything that was ruining him, beating her in places on her body that no one but him would ever see.

He had been abandoned by his secret society.

I always knew I was the cause of this disaster. It was only after his excommunication that we began to play in earnest. I would take the

blame, mimicking the high voice of my small years, and Father would lay on the strap or paddle or the flat of his hand. Then we enacted the initiation.

There were times when it came to blood. And to this day, I look at my son and sometimes, I just want to ask him if maybe he'd like to help me become a man.

