Three: A Heavenly Mansion

by W.F. Lantry

I'd barely had time to slice an old baguette and place the crumbly half pieces in the exotic Gallic toaster I kept for just such occasions, barely had time to search through several disordered and disheveled cupboards for the one pristine unopened jar of strawberry jam I knew I had hidden somewhere, not to mention straightening up the more horrific remnants of previous dinners still sitting in half-filled pots in the kitchen sink, when I looked out the screen door and saw her already settled in at the terrace table, using a coffee spoon to dip honey out of the jar she'd found among the flowers in the planter, savoring each taste with an almost unearthly delight. The bees had miraculously disappeared.

I carried the finished product out to her, along with fresh cups of coffee, on a marquetry serving tray. She'd placed herself for convenience with the rising sun behind her, and I sat directly across, so that the golden beams backlit every flaxen strand of her simple but elegant plaits. The setting gave her a kind of ethereal halo, a radiant celestial luminescence, an amber aura hovering behind her.

“I'll need to pack up my tent at some point,” she said between bites of her toast. “Did you make this tray yourself?”

“I have a woodshop in the basement, where I make whatever I need. Last winter, an ice storm knocked down a cherry and a maple on the same night. Even after building new bookshelves, I have enough planks for three seasons. The tray's pattern is meant to represent a unicursal labyrinth, as an aid to morning contemplation.”

“Just looking at it makes me dizzy,” she said. “Do you have any more bread inside?”

And with that she got up and headed straight for the kitchen, before I could say a word. The screen door didn't creak when she

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opened it, nor did it clack shut behind her, as it always did for me. Soon I heard kitchen sounds: drawers opening, cabinets closing, a low whistle as she looked at the sink. The bees took advantage of her absence to reinvade. I stroked them away from the honey jar.

“You're out of coffee,” she said.

“Look in the cabinet next to the *frigo*.”

She didn't ask what I meant. A minute later, I heard the whirr of the grinder, and was glad I was still outside. My ears are too delicate for that sort of thing. I keep sound-reduction headphones on the kitchen window shelf. She didn't seem to mind the noise.

She reappeared with fresh coffee. The bees fled with determined haste.

“Nice house,” she said. “When's the next guided tour?”

“Right now, if you desire it. Unless you'd rather finish your coffee first.”

So we sat there, sipping from ceramic cups, and looking out over the garden. I saw, through her eyes, every fault: how the blue of Cerulean Poppies didn't quite harmonize with the Rose of Sharon, how the quartz stones of the alpine mound were slightly overwhelmed with Saxifrage. I wondered if she paid attention to such things. Her eyes mostly followed songbirds, as they moved from branch to branch. When the coffee was finished, she stood.

“I'll have that tour now,” she said.

And so we went in together, moving from room to room. In the dining room, I wanted to show her the table it had taken me weeks to craft, the smooth cherry surfaces, varnished by hand, the matched chairs in Empire style. She only noticed the walls, the cracks in a few of the corners.

“The house is settling,” she said.

“It's earthquake country, the ground is unstable. With each tiny tremor the beams move apart. For a long time, I patched each crack, but the next quake just opened them up again.”

We moved on, into the living room. I'd left my smoking jacket draped over the couch. There were books scattered everywhere,

papers where I'd scribbled notes piled themselves in small drifts against table legs, against both sides of a wingback.

“The maid must be late today,” she said, kindly assuming the scene was out of character. In my mind, I tried to survey the state of the other rooms, wondering if they looked the same. I decided this must be the worst of them, and suggested we move towards the stairs.

She went up first, I followed, a respectful three paces behind. Now, I know what you're thinking: I was perfectly placed to steal a quick, if innocent, glance, and she would never see. The house is a center hall colonial, and there are no mirrors on the stairs. But I had the impression she would somehow know, and discreetly averted my gaze. She paused on the landing above me, uncertain.

“Left,” I said, already breathless.

The hallway led to three libraries. She selected the Green Tara room. She stood in the middle, amazed by row after row, shelves upon shelves, of books.

“How many libraries do you need?” she said.

“Each has a different theme,” I said. “The room you passed on the right holds nothing but Grimoires. This one is for Eastern Mystics. You know, everything's an illusion, et cetera, fire is the key to all transformations in the world…”

“Most men tell me my physical form is the key to all transformations in the world. What do you think?” And saying that, she twirled, lightly, in the center of the room. She stopped at a turn and a quarter, and looked back at me, across her shoulder.

My gaze held her eyes, or hers held mine. “You are perfection itself,” I said.

“Really?” she said, swaying a little back and forth, like a slender willow in the wind. “Sometimes I think my breasts are too big.”

It took all of my considerable powers of concentration not to look, not to succumb to curiosity, or worse, temptation.

“That statue on the table beside you,” I said, “is an actual casting of an Apsara sculpture from the Mahadeva Temple at Khajuraho. Look, she has exactly your shape. Even your dress is the same.”

She gazed at me a moment, then turned and looked. “They got her sandals wrong,” was all she said.