



TALES OF THE STORAGE SPACE

*The saga of a Brooklyn building, down on its luck, who was once so much more...
Originally told in short, weekly blog posts.*

Copyright © 2019 by Sue Hollister Barr
All rights reserved.

BELOW ARE PARTS (POSTS) 121-150 OF A TOTAL OF 150.



PART 121

The Storage Space was enthralled, simply enthralled. That rude, odious child "Suzy Q" and her mother had...at last...stopped all the shrill screaming about the pregnant teenager's father hitting them and left. Amelia had gone back to singing Puccini.

The only thing left to worry about was that very oddly dressed "Pat" with the crowbar. Why did he keep wandering around places where only the Storage Space knew there were magnificent 19th-century treasures still hidden behind those hideous new metal walls? How did this "Pat" know its secrets?

It simply refused to worry about such things. Really, when all was said and done, people were all perfectly dreadful creatures. A vile disruption of all that was holy. A desecration of any true beauty. Perfect justification for a mass extermination. Still, for now, the Storage Space would content itself with listening to Puccini.

But it couldn't help getting distracted again when a new person, yet another cause for worry, walked in. A blond boy with a "device" he was pecking at in one hand and a suitcase he dragged along behind him with the other...this one even bigger than the ones that other young boy with the rainbow shoes, currently with Fifi, had brought in.

The worst of it was that Amelia, while arranging for this new person to have a storage unit, had to stop singing. And he was odd too, because when that Pat with a crowbar walked by and he asked Amelia why he had a crowbar, he referred to Pat as "they."



PART 122

Imogene like couldn't effin' believe she'd been so effin' bored she'd like actually resorted to Real Life.

She watched The Gray Monster Effin' Uber-Boring Story Teller take one last, shuddering breath. Some alarm went off. But like Imogene didn't care. She turned back to the ceiling, waiting for the next water drop that arrived on schedule to slide down her nose. The effin' ceiling was better than that effin' Gray Monster.

Finally there was some commotion around the door. Imogene yawned. Doctors and nurses came in and went out. Some blond boy she hated on sight rolled a gurney in with a tablet she spotted Minecraft on. He yanked The Gray Monster onto the gurney, propped the tablet up against her feet, cursed about lava and the lack of a diamond pickaxe, remembered at the last minute to jerk the sheet over The Gray Monster's ugly face, and was gone.

Shame he hadn't left the tablet...

But The Gray Monster was gone too. "Def not woke! Dumbest effin' stories I've ever heard!" Imogene told the ceiling.

The ceiling responded with a bull's eye water drop that hit Imogene's right cornea, making the world look...for a moment...as if she were under water.

"Cool!" Imogene told the ceiling. "Better than Real Life."

What had that cray cray Gray Monster said? Something about denial of what's real, no matter how ugly, being your biggest enemy? Def not woke. Imogene was so glad she'd never had a mother to tell her such effin' shit.

With effin' "legendary" accuracy, the ceiling hit her left eye, and it looked like she was under water again. Cool. Except somewhere, deep inside her, something stirred...just a little bit...something about something The Gray Monster had said about truth and finding coral reefs filled with treasure. But Imogene huffed at it. After all The Gray Monster had been so def not woke.



PART 123

Tommy like finally had his diamond pickaxe in Minecraft.

"Tommy, look at the sky!"

Ugly Nurse speaking, thirsty for a BF, like actually ran her ugly little fingers through his golden blond locks once.

"See that cloud? The curvy one? Looks like a heart?"

Tommy had no use for any clouds that weren't square. Had to get back to his pixelated mine. Shoved the gurney with the dead feet propping up his tablet into the elevator without a word. Hell, he wouldn't even fuck with Ugly Nurse on Snapchat.

Morgue. At least the button on the elevator was square. Mine. Had to bring the tablet back to life. Like, what had he needed that diamond pickaxe for? Tablet actually did come back to life. Zayum! Minecraft was like a 100 times better on his tablet now than when he got it six years ago and had to struggle with the camera and blue flowers all the fucking time.

Elevator doors opened. He started to shove the gurney with the dead lady on it out, then realized it wasn't the right floor. Some idiot, probably a visitor, got in. Then he spotted what the visitor was trying to hide under her coat.

"A puppy!" It scrambled out of the coat, jumping right into his arms.

"Sh!" said the visitor. "Don't tell!"

Tommy nuzzled the puppy and laughed. "Tell on a puppy? Never!"

"Thanks," said the visitor. "I knew it would cheer my father up to see it, but it's against the rules."

But he wasn't listening. Instead, he was gazing into the puppy's soft eyes.



PART 124

Karen felt like she was no longer Karen. Even her face, with its now-permanent frown, didn't feel like her face anymore.

Her new roommate started screaming again.

"Shut the fuck up, Lydia," Karen heard herself screaming. "Know why they amputated your leg?"

Lydia stopped screaming just long enough to ask, "Why?"

Karen savored each word of her answer. "Because you deserve it!"

Lydia screamed even louder.

Karen hit the call button, delighted when it was answered by the middle-aged nurse. "Need one of your killer injections," she said, nodding toward Lydia.

The middle-aged nurse looked at Karen. "Sure you won't be needing a little one yourself, Blondie? As long as I'm here? I'm getting to like you, I am, but Lord Jesus Christ you can scream even louder than that Lydia."

Frank! Karen remembered screaming so hard about his death that she didn't think the whole planet full of people could, even if they all screamed at once, scream louder. But...

Frank? A slight twinge tightened her muscles at the thought of his death but...so very oddly...was then gone. She stared at the nurse, who she knew had almost killed her with one of her killer injections. But Karen didn't care. Someone screamed in what was obviously excruciating agony in an adjoining room. She was amazed to find that she didn't care even one little bit about that either. *Fugettaboudit.*

Karen smirked at the nurse. "That was another person, that version of me that used to scream. But she's gone. You were right. I don't have anything to scream about."



PART 125

Grover still rankled at his demotion. Ridiculous. Even if his equally corrupt duty officer had also lost out on his share of what the mob would have paid them if that witness had met with a “most unfortunate accident.” He, Grover, demoted to watching minor perps in a hospital so bad they’d be lucky to survive anyway? Wasn’t his fault if that asshole in witness protection hadn’t accepted his bribe to tell what happened to that bitch the mob wanted offed.

His new partner returned to their hospital corridor with the donuts and coffee, but it wasn't the jelly donut he had requested. Also ridiculous, but Grover thanked him profusely anyway, knowing all too well how important it was for a "bad cop"...such as his illustrious self...to stay on everyone's good side.

His new partner went back to the only thing he was any good at: ogling pretty nurses. "Look at the dreamy eyes on that one! Why I remember her from yesterday."

Grover choked back a bite of something that wasn't even close to being a jelly donut. Whole grain, or some such shit. But he managed a conspiratorial leer. "You're right, there, buddy. I remember her from yesterday too." Why it mattered whether or not the bitch had been there yesterday was beyond him. But he blinked at his new partner with what he hoped looked like admiration. "I'm not good at facial recognition like you are." Then he looked at the only part of that nurse he cared about anyway and wasn't exaggerating in the slightest when he added, "But I never...ever...forget a figure."

Voices. Behind them. Even too far away to make out the words it was easy enough to pick up that self-important but lazily delayed cadence of two people flirting. When they got close enough, their none-too-subtle references to what they'd just done to each other in a utility closet confirmed it.

After a particularly lewd giggle, the woman changed the subject. "So, that crazy blonde in that storage space building didn't really hurt you all that badly with that lil' ole scalpel anyway? I mean, a big strong emergency worker like you?"

That voice! Grover froze. He didn't even listen to whatever the guy said back.

"Fabuloso!" said the woman, just as they walked around Grover's back and came into view. Whatever the emergency worker had said had apparently made her very happy...and very friendly. The guy took advantage of her mood by running his hand down the back of her tight sweater to pinch her butt.

Grover checked out the only part of any woman he cared about, then leapt to his feet with a huge smile.

"What is it, Grover?" asked his new partner. "She's not all that pretty."

Grover was laughing. "Looks like you'll need to find yourself a new partner, buddy!"

"But you just..."

"I'll be going back to my old job."

"How do you know?"

"Trust me."

Just then Ms. Fabuloso turned toward the emergency worker, and Grover saw her face for the first time. Wrong face! His heart sank for a moment. But then he remembered: witness protection. He went back to checking out her body and even his idiot partner joined in when Grover laughed again, long and low. No, that was her all right. The hell with the face. He, Grover, never forgot a figure.



PART 126

The Storage Space was appalled, simply appalled, watching poor Amelia do all the work now that its beloved Karen was gone. Why even Sweater Woman, the supposed "cop" who seemed to have appointed herself Karen's guardian angel, was currently absent.

Still...Amelia sang so sweetly while she worked. Having spent the day with Bellini, she had finally arrived at his most enchanting aria, "Casta Diva" from *Norma*. Even the tinny acoustics from all its corrugated metal walls resonated, a dreamy and thankfully subtle echoing as if she'd been singing in a canyon.

Until the subtle echoing of Amelia's sweet voice suddenly turned into a perfectly dreadful clanging. Why it was that oddly dressed Pat. He'd just ripped a wall open with a crowbar! Oh no! Oh no, no, no! Not *that* wall! How had he known, who could have told him, that was the exact location of the old theatre's most valuable possessions?

Karen... The only person in all these long, lonely years who had ever heard the poor, long-suffering Storage Space share its secrets. She had...she must have...betrayed it.

Amelia...racing toward the source of that horrid, horrid noise...had stopped singing. It wouldn't have mattered. Even her magnificent voice couldn't have reached the Storage Space now.

People. Each and every one of them. Even Amelia. Even the dead ones like Edward and most particularly that rodent Irwin. Even Bellini. Even Puccini. Even Karen... Even...*her*...

Nothing but a most hideous infestation that should have been exterminated immediately. None of them, not a one, should ever have been allowed to draw a single one of their breaths.

It felt a vast, unimaginable cold creep steadily over everything it had once held dear. Why revere the grand old theatre it used to be? It had only been yet another vehicle for the use of...people.



PART 127

Imogene was like watching that blond boy she hated on sight play Minecraft on his tablet rather than clean up after The Gray Monster. Just because she hated him, she used The Gray Monster's words to tell him in what she hoped was a sickening singsong, "Denial of what's real, no matter how ugly, is your biggest enemy!"

"Yo, Preggs, shut the fuck up."

"I am not pregs!"

The Blond Monster actually looked away from Minecraft long enough to look at her, stunned, before laughing so hard he could hardly singsong back to her, "Denial of what's real, no matter how ugly, is your biggest enemy!"

It was Imogene's turn to be stunned. Like, why was he effin' telling her that? She wasn't playing Minecraft instead of changing a bed that was, like, cray cray gross and really needed to be changed. Hopelessly puzzled, she could feel her expression change to what her father had always, like, actually thought was cute and called her puppy face.

At that The Blond Monster's face changed too. He wasn't sneering anymore. Even though she could see and hear that his latest skin on Minecraft had just died, he was still watching her. "Do...do you like Minecraft?"

Not one, but two drops from the ceiling hit the side of her face, making her suddenly furious. "What are you, some kind of noob? Minecraft is so so so def not woke!"

The sneer, and a short snort of laughter were back. "If Minecraft's not woke, what the fuck are you? Woke?" He turned his back on her and went back to Minecraft.



PART 128

Tommy had to respawn a skin because he got distracted by a bitch like that? He'd thought she was cute for a sec, like that puppy in the elevator, but...no.

"I...I...like I need to borrow your tablet."

Enough of this vanilla Minecraft shit; he was going back to mods.

"Like... Please?"

He was too busy installing a mod. That's why the door opening behind him didn't register until it was too late.

"Tommy!"

That fucking nurse. Tommy spun around.

"How long have you been playing with that tablet instead of doing your work?"

Real Life. The same RL where his mother had laughed as she drowned *his* puppy. Tommy's gut tightened. He could feel the sneer deepen on his face, even though he figured he was about to lose his job.

But then the pregs spoke up! "Like, it's not his fault! He was just turning his tablet off after I, like, kept him from cleaning up after The Gray...after the woman who was my roommate...because I kept asking him for...like, all kinds of effin' stuff."

The nurse looked suspicious. She made a point of looking around the empty room. "Like, what kinds of effin' stuff?"

Pregs had it down. "Like, none of your business."

The nurse opened her mouth, then shut it.

Tommy mentally crossed his fingers.

The nurse nailed him with her ruthless RL eyes and slammed her hands around her scrawny little hips. "Well... 'like'... you just better have all your work done by the end of your shift or else." She spun, left, and tried to slam a door that wouldn't really slam.

Tommy almost laughed. "Hey, Pregs, why'd ya' do it?"

"Don't call me that!"

"Okay!" He guessed he owed her that much. "But why?"

"I...I...like really need to borrow your tablet."

"For what?" He was beginning to think she looked kinda' cute again.

"Snapchat."

Hell, he *would* fuck with Pregs on Snapchat.



PART 129

Karen couldn't have cared less about anything. Except it was fun to torment roommate Lydia with...or, Karen smirked, should she say without...the amputated leg.

Soft shadows from the sunlight passing through the leaves outside danced across the floor.

Karen couldn't have cared less.

The plaintive, heartbreaking cry of a child could be heard in the hall.

"Stupid brat!"

Lydia stopped weeping for long enough to ask, "Who are you calling a stupid brat?"

Karen smirked again. "Not you, gimp! At least not this time..."

Some cop came in with a look of absolute disdain for the donut he was eating. "Anyone know where I can get a jelly donut?" Then he gave Karen a sharp look, mumbling something about "the crazy blonde," before he approached with a pasted-on smile. "Good afternoon, young lady, Officer Grover Sanders here, at your service with some very good news for you today."

Karen eyed him suspiciously. Despite the smile, something in his eyes and body language suggested he was there to get something from her rather than give her anything. But she went along while he made his way through some preliminaries like confirming her name and a home address she'd all but forgotten at this point.

"So," continued Officer Grover Moore, "it seems the individual you allegedly assaulted with a scalpel has...suddenly and miraculously, one might add...decided to drop the charges."

What? Why?

"You look puzzled. You..." He trailed off. Karen shivered. Something in the stillness of the air reminded her of a lion about to pounce on its prey. "You don't happen to have a friend named Marie?"



PART 130

Marie couldn't douche long enough, hard enough. That emergency worker had been disgusting. She deserved an Oscar for acting that shouldn't even have been necessary. Instead of handcuffing Karen to her hospital bed for stabbing the prick, they should have awarded her the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Finally Marie stopped douching, leaned back in her tub, rested her head against the wall, and closed her eyes.

Karen... Free... *Fabuloso!*

But it had cost Marie everything...even her own face, altered beyond recognition by witness protection's plastic surgeon after she neutralized the mob connections to Karen's boyfriend Frank.

Marie let her eyes flutter open in the steamy room, then squeezed them shut again, imagining she could still feel the pain from the plastic surgeon's stitches. Her favorite playlist, from the phone she'd plugged into a speaker by the door, would end soon. Good thing she'd set the volume low...

And, speaking of low, all Karen would ever remember was Marie's resorting to the same tactic as she did with the emergency worker to get all the information she needed from Frank. Karen would never know it had been the only way Marie could protect Karen.

Marie thought she heard something in the hall, then laughed at herself...naked in a bathtub. What was this? *Psycho?*

Had it been the only way, sleeping with Frank? That sudden thought hurt worse than Alan Bates stabbing Janet Leigh with the knife. All the others, even those in the mob, she'd slept with, and finally that emergency worker...

What was this, the 19th century, not the 21st? Wasn't there some other way she could have done it all, accomplished it all, other than sleeping with...at least...Frank?

Her gut knotted. Her eyes flickered open again. The douche she'd left on its side drizzled its last remaining liquid over the tub like a garden sprinkler someone had knocked over.

Douching wouldn't help with this. Her gut re-knotted as the next stab of emotional pain came: Had she hidden all her own flaws...including liking to credit herself with everything, an odd self-absorption, and false pride...beneath the supposedly pure altruism of helping her friend?

The shower curtain was yanked aside. Some guy she thought she recognized...some cop from the hospital, though he wasn't in uniform now...clamped a hand over her mouth. Some other guy with him turned the volume up on her least favorite playlist. She couldn't catch all they were whispering, but she knew it had to do with making it look like an accident.

Shit. False pride indeed. She'd thought she could escape the mob.



PART 131

The Storage Space was no longer appalled, simply or otherwise. It no longer cared.

Its newest customer, the blond boy, pummeled a wall that rattled and clattered as he uttered a string of the crudest obscenities...apparently directed toward something he called "vanilla Minecraft."

Amelia called out, "Tommy! Please! There's enough clatter here already from the renovations!"

The Storage Space couldn't possibly imagine the craft of mining vanilla, since vanilla couldn't be mined. Amelia had stopped singing its favorite aria. The supposed "renovations" were only a lie by that oddly dressed Pat so he...or "they" as Tommy would call this strange Pat person...could crowbar his way to all the Storage Space's hidden treasures under Amelia's nose.

But the Storage Space didn't care.

Slithering announced yet another visit from the ghost of Irwin, Le Grand Rat.

The Storage Space didn't care.

Le Grand Rat whispered amid slithers of his hatred for Karen who'd had the effrontery to kill him in self-defense.

Karen... Did not deserve to be thought of ever again. Karen had betrayed the Storage Space.

Elsewhere something akin to sepulchral silence reigned as that other young boy, Fifi's clandestine lover, crept around on his rainbow shoes, using the keys he's stolen from reception long ago to stuff all his empty suitcases with treasures from other people's storage units. Amelia of the beautiful voice...and Karen when she returned...would get in trouble.

The Storage Space didn't care.

Then that even more oddly dressed Pat, crowbarring treasures hidden since the 19th century out from behind the metal walls, freed a pocket of air subtly scented with starched linens, oiled leather, fine cigars, and exquisite perfumes that were no longer available.

Amelia aahed, stroking some freshly exposed wooden paneling.

Pat told even more lies about restoring the old theatre and pocketed a sterling silver snuff box when she wasn't looking.

If the restoration hadn't been a lie...if the grand old theatre was really, truly, going to be returned to its former dignity, its former glory...the Storage Space still wouldn't care.



PART 132

Imogene like couldn't believe it. That Blond Monster Tommy had had to leave and do his work after she'd like lied to keep him out of trouble with that def-not-woke nurse, but...zayum...it was effin' days later but he'd like walked right into her room and handed her his tablet! She looked up at him with effin' tears of gratitude, but he was busy on his phone.

Probably still playing Minecraft.

Imogene clutched the tablet, like sweating all over it as she logged onto Snapchat with shaking hands. There was something funny about the log-in, but she figured it had been so effin' long she'd just forgotten. Anyway it didn't matter: she was in!

WTFwasImogeneCoca: U there?

^URSunPC&proud: wheree the fuck else wud i b

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Where u been? So much 2 tell u!

^URSunPC&proud: tell awayy

Imogene like kept having to blink back effin' tears so she could see the screen. Her fingers like flew as she told ^URS about everyone...even the effin' med peeps...thinking she was pregnant, which was sooooo def-not-woke, since she'd just had the def worst period ever. Vaguely it occurred to her that she hadn't trusted ^URS at times, like how ^URS knew so much about Imogene without ever having met in RL, but she ignored that now, bursting to type faster so she could tell ^URS absolutely everything, including stuff she like hadn't even told herself yet, like that her belly was getting big and that there was something that moved inside her...and she was afraid she had cancer.

And...except for one hot night that for some funny reason she couldn't remember...all about like all the pain, and all the loose teeth, and every time her father ever beat her.

Even Tommy stiffened at that one, but it was probably something that had happened on Minecraft on that phone he was still bent over.

She told ^URS about Tommy...finally...after so effin' long without any device...lending her his tablet.

^URSunPC&proud: is he cutee



PART 133

Tommy like stared at his phone, waiting with bated breath for her response. After all, he thought *she* was cute, especially when she looked like his dead puppy...

Instead of Snapchatting back to ^URSunPC&proud...*the* fucking stupidest name anyone had *ever* used to Snapchat...Imogene looked up at him and stared. Probably hadn't factored in peripheral vision and figured he was too busy on his phone to notice. Fuck! She was researching whether or not he was cute before answering the question! Tommy tried to look busy on his phone, using the lull in their conversation to tweak the hack he'd gotten from his new storage unit that allowed him to masquerade as her Snapchat buddy. But he almost blew it and fucking snapped the connection because what he was really concentrating on was looking cute.

He shifted his weight, nonchalantly showing off the tight jeans he thought were important, but...if his peripheral vision was accurate...she was looking at his face. What the fuck could he do about that? He stiffened his jaw. No...wanted to look tough but not belligerent. He licked his lips. Fuck no! Too obvious! He gave the phone he was still staring at what he thought was a soulful look...but maybe it just looked ridiculous, looking at a fucking phone like that. He remembered an old movie, James Dean, and ran his fingers through his hair, real slow. Squared his shoulders. Flexed a few muscles here and there. Finally he pulled out all the stops and looked up from his phone, trying to rivet her with his eyes.

She finally looked down.

Now what he saw on his phone in his peripheral vision was that she had, at fucking last, answered the question.

But just then, before he could even dart a look at the answer, someone else locked eyes with him.

It was the nurse, standing at the door, who'd almost fired him.



PART 134

Karen climbed over a fence to get to Martin's back yard.

Atta' girl!

Fuck you! was Karen's answer to the ghost of Frank she assumed she was only imagining. She guessed she was supposed to remember when she couldn't even crawl out of her storage unit and feel grateful for the miracles wrought by modern medicine.

But she didn't.

She looked around. The light was soft on a garden that, though now grievously overgrown, was still sweet. She made out primroses; she'd loved Martin's primroses. He'd told her they were as prim and proper as those in his mum's garden in Kent. She guessed she should feel something. A twinge for the long-lost innocence and simplicity of her life? Or even fury at Martin for killing Frank who was, after all, the love of her life?

She didn't feel a thing.

That funny rock. Still there. She lifted it just enough to retrieve the key to Martin's back door underneath. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, a name resonated through her head:

Marie...

Nothing more. Just the name.

Why had that cop who told Karen she was going to get out of the hospital...and that that emergency worker was going to drop the charges for some mysterious reason...asked her so much about Marie, even for her address?

Karen shrugged it aside and tried the key in Martin's back door. At first it didn't work, but wiping off more dirt did the trick. At last she was in, scurrying around till she found that Martin had stashed her suitcase, her purse, and most of the clothing she'd had no time to put back on when she rushed out the back door, in a closet. She dragged it all out, into the middle of the living room floor where she'd left it when she fled to escape Frank, and collapsed into the mustard-colored cushions of one of Martin's vintage Danish Modern armchairs. It had been so very long ago:

Frank cheating on her with her best, friends-forever friend Marie.

Leaving the apartment she'd shared with Frank with only what she could get to that accursed storage unit she'd signed up for with Irwin and this suitcase she'd brought to temporarily move in with her friends-with-benefits Martin.

Frank kicking the door in while she and Martin were exploring their "benefits."

Her fleeing half naked out the back door and running to her storage unit.

Martin and Frank following...

But none of it mattered now. She rifled through her purse...plenty of money...then grabbed her phone for the first time in forever. The battery, of course, was dead. Charger in her suitcase, but what was this: another phone in her suitcase, not hers? She turned it over in her hand. The case said "Jennifer." Then she noted a whole bunch of boxes in the room that hadn't been there before, marked "stuff."



PART 135

Frank couldn't fuckin' fathom how he could be dead and still feel so much pain. Karen... Elegant, fine, pure... Like his grandma's china he'd loved as a kid...but broken.

And now he'd broken Karen too. Fugettaboudit! He'd fuckin' offed *not* her body but...far worse!...her soul. He, Frank, a fuckin' green mist of a ghost whose body had been chainsawed into pieces and put out with the trash, was more alive than this... This soulless fresh-and-blood... This empty Karen still breathing in the apartment of that silly Brit who'd actually managed to off Frank when Frank, in a jealous rage, was trying to off him.

Marie. Karen's best friend who'd started it all by seducing him. But he now knew, as a ghost who could go fuckin' anywhere, that Marie had first given up her face and identity, and then her life, to take care of Karen. Frank had tried to reach Karen's soul, softening her by telling her why Marie had seduced him as she retrieved Martin's key from under that rock, but she hadn't heard anything except the name Marie.

Lately, even when she did hear him clearly, all she had to say was, "Fuck you!"

How could he reach her? How could he bring her back? *Could* he bring her back?

Fucking A!

With his ghost's 360-degree vision, he saw a grandmotherly ghost behind him shake her green finger at him as she passed through Martin's apartment on her way to who-knows-where. Frank had never seen her before, but he figured he knew why she'd shaken that finger at him.

Language.

It's what his grandma with the exquisite china would have done.

He'd only known such language to begin with because her daughter, Frank's mother, had married "so far beneath her." Frank's father was...fugettaboudit...a thug. Frank had grown up caught between his mother's elegance and his father's brutality. He'd thought his father's brutality had won...until he met Karen.

Karen...

He beheld her with his not only 360-degree but, at times, ubiquitous vision. She'd dozed off in Martin's chair, still a little weak despite her newly regained health. Frank caressed her with his gaze, from every possible direction, then he slipped gently into her dreams...

Dead. Dead. Dead. She no longer cared about anything. She wasn't even dreaming. He had to find something still living inside her. Desperately, he tried to remember...

Her grandparents. What had she always talked about? What had she showed him?

Her grandfather's delight in the intricacies of the mechanical toys that had been passed down to him from his own grandfather. Karen showing him a small metal horse on wheels with almost all its paint chipped off, gently turning in over and over in her hands, her face all but exploding with her own delight.

Frank searched her mind for that memory, but her mind was such a barren wasteland now that it was as if all her memories had blown away like dust in a desert. He was consumed with despair. Karen. How the fuck was he supposed to live without Karen? He wasn't even alive anymore and he couldn't stand to be without the Karen that once was, but was no more.

He gave up when slipping back out of her sleeping mind he stumbled haphazardly upon the metal horse. It hadn't been there before. Like a lightbulb about to go out forever, her memory of it flickered on and off.

Frank focused all his attention on the horse, Karen's grandfather, and all the wonderful things she'd told him about him.

Karen didn't respond.

He tried again. And again.

Finally Karen responded.

The words cut through Frank's soul.

Karen said, aloud though talking in her sleep, "Fuck you!"



PART 136

The Storage Space didn't even care when the ghost of that so-long-dead Shakespearean actor returned. Didn't even care enough to ignore it and avoid it as it had done for so many tired years. Therefore, for the first time, it heard Edward's thoughts. He was pining for her, the one both of them grieved, the greatest actress of them all who had fallen to her death so many years ago.

"And just why did she fall to her death?" the Storage Space queried harshly.

But in all those long years only Karen, the one the Storage Space would still bestir itself to ignore, had heard anything it had to say. The ghost of Edward did not. Instead he kept thinking of some letter that was written in Switzerland in 1898. And he directed his yearnings toward the pregnant teenager that was now gone. Because he knew.

Idly the Storage Space watched the pregnant teenager's father, still in Unit 38 sorting through those "data sticks." Frantic, he kept sticking one after another into a "laptop," obviously looking for something he wasn't finding. Each failure resulted in his punching a metal wall.

But the Storage Space didn't care. It didn't even care about the one both it and Edward had grieved all these long years. Even when it knew she had been reincarnated into the baby the pregnant teenager now carried.

No. At long last the Storage Space could only care about one thing: regret that it, along with its once-beloved tea room now gone, hadn't been torn down long ago.



PART 137

Imogene like couldn't wait for that Blond Monster Tommy to return so she could Snapchat ^URS again. Except she was like so effin' grateful to him for lending her that tablet that she really shouldn't call him a monster anymore. Especially since she'd meant what she'd told ^URS about him. She'd had to look at him a bit to like see him in a different light and figure it out, but it was bible. Tommy was cute.

Still, after seeing him leave with that nurse, looking all scared and shy and not even able to look down at the Minecraft on his phone, Imogene wasn't ready for the next time she saw him. It like started before she even saw him: She was looking down at his timed-out tablet that she still had, trying to figure out what other than "Minecraft" or "minecraft" his password could be.

She felt his eyes on her.

Looking up, she saw him coming at her with a big grin and sparkling eyes. "Type in 'thisisnotapuppylove,' all one word."

This is not a puppy love? But Imogene was so mesmerized by how like intense his look was that her fingers froze.

With an even bigger grin, Tommy was behind her in a heartbeat. He wrapped both arms around her, so he could type it in.

She could feel the muscles in his arms and chest dancing as he typed, along with the warmth of his breath on the back of her neck. No one, except the medical peeps, had touched her in a very long time. Caught by surprise, she was startled to discover that it felt good.

Then he jerked himself away and fumbled for his phone.

Imogene like actually felt like slighted or some effin' stupid thing...but then she remembered she was in now and signed into Snapchat.



PART 138

Tommy just barely got the hack right in time to resume masquerading as her Snapchat buddy from his phone.

^URSUNPC&proud: so u think he's cutee

WTFwasImogeneCoca: More.

More? Tommy had to fight to keep his face like neutral and all. Just in case she looked up. Meanwhile all he could think about was what those big breasts would look like all uncovered and shit.

^URSUNPC&proud: moree

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Effin cray cray.

Cray cray? Fucking cray cray could be so hot. Tommy's pants were getting too tight.

^URSUNPC&proud: cray crayy

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Been so long.

Been so long? Since she got some? Couldn't get any in the hospital? All pregs and shit? He'd fix that!

^URSUNPC&proud: been so longg

WTFwasImogeneCoca: U know I never like did it & I never like cudn't remember cuz drunk or some effin thing except 1 nite & that was w/my dad so I cudn't be pregnant. Been so long since my dad beat me. No bruises. No loose teeth. No blood from that effin knife. U know I hate when boys touch me but been so long since my dad beat me that that Tommy touched me & this effin cray cray but it felt good.

Tommy looked up at her. Trying very hard not to cry, she looked like a puppy again. When she choked on a sob, her hospital gown fell down, exposing one breast. He was on her in a minute.

He gently pulled the gown up over her breast, wrapped his arms around her, and kissed her on the top of her head, breathing in the sweet perfume of her. Still, he wasn't like all gentle and tame. He was fucking furious. But not at her.



PART 139

Karen heard a hysterical mother behind her, repeatedly screaming "Suzy Q" just as a little girl brushed past her and ran into the street. A car screeched and swerved all over the place in its attempts to avoid what would most probably be a fatality.

Karen didn't bother to watch the outcome. She was busy on her phone, as boldly as possible offering sex to her old boss if he'd take her back after her very-long unscheduled absence...while dragging her suitcase back to her fuckin' storage unit so she could pick up the rest of her shit.

She heard a thud, suggesting impact.

"Fuck you!"

"What?"

"Not you, sir! So sorry!" Karen tried to think of a lie to cover her outburst, which had been directed toward a jealous ghost of Frank that she'd imagined was protesting her offering her old boss sex. Just then the hysterical mother, now sobbing, pushed past her. "Some fuckin' asshole on the sidewalk just about knocked me over."

"But your language, Karen! I don't ever recall your using such language! Or being so...er...forward."

"That Karen's lost and gone forever, sir! And I think you'll find this one is a whole hell of a lot more fun."

"But you know ours is an ultra-conservative investment banking firm. 'Old sport' and all that. Honestly, my dear, you never before showed the slightest interest in the business itself, let alone any of the 'stuffy' people involved...like me...or the clients. Which is why I had you doing due-diligence number crunching in a back office."

"So you know how demure and discreet I *can* be. Doesn't mean you, and maybe some of our very best clients, wouldn't like to...er...enjoy themselves a bit from time to time."

"Karen!"

"Come on! What's a little unscheduled time off? I remember how you used to look at me. And I've changed. I can still crunch numbers for you, but you'll also see I've learned a whole hell of a lot about things that have nothing to do with crunching numbers. Think about it. I'll call back soon."

Fuck you! But this time she only thought it silently at the now-apparently-apoplectic ghost of Frank as she got off the phone with her old boss. Then she pushed her way through the door to the storage space building, ignoring the siren she heard behind her...probably an ambulance...possibly more accurately referred to as a meat wagon in this case...and totally ignoring the stupid exposed wood carvings around it that she vaguely remembered liking at one point.

She was immediately assaulted by alien thoughts, not her own: *Enter Center Stage: The Consummate Appalling Creature. Whilst I now concur completely about all that appalling old-theatre rubbish, there is one thing in this miserable world that is even more "stupid," and that is you!*

Fugettaboudit! Karen had had enough with her imagined Frank ghost without still imagining she could hear the thoughts of a building. Next she'd be communing with that Irwin she'd killed.

Murderer!

"Fuck you!" Karen had screamed it aloud this time. To a fuckin' building! The smile that had greeted her from that homeless bitch Amelia now wavered.



PART 140

The Champ looked up from pouring through the contents of the remaining data sticks when he heard a woman in reception scream, "Fuck you!" The Champ frowned, knowing he'd heard that voice before but not immediately remembering where/when. But then he shrugged. Whoever she was, he could handle it. He could always handle it, whatever it was, and he always, always came out on top.

Like getting his wife convicted for his beating their pregnant daughter right here in this motherfuckin' storage-space building. And, speaking of mother fucking, he'd had so much fun getting Imogene pregnant. He wondered how soon he could have fun with his grandchild...

Thinking about that got The Champ in the mood and he went back to the data stick he'd been checking through, glad that...in addition to all that election-tampering shit...he'd backed-up at least some of his extensive collection of kiddie porn.

"Excuse me."

Motherfucker, thought The Champ, the hand he'd been using elsewhere jerking toward the Beretta 3032 Tomcat he always, always kept in his pocket. Palm-sized but lethal, and he knew how to use it and had done so many, many times...like that little kid he'd found all alone in a park who hadn't wanted him to have fun. Cops never even got close to figuring that one out.

But then he saw it was only that old bitch, Amelia.

"Didn't mean to disturb you but did want to congratulate you on getting your wife convicted *and* sent off to prison for life. Must have been hard for you, but I for one am so happy to know she'll no longer be a threat to either Imogene or her baby. But you should now get your daughter out of that hospital...right away. I've always heard it was the very worst-imaginable hospital but seeing what it must have done to poor Karen's mind is the ultimate proof."

The Champ rubbed his chin in thought. Kiddie porn could only take him so far. Imogene home? His grandchild on the way? That would really, really be fun.



PART 141

The Storage Space didn't even care when it felt slithers again. If, and only if, it had cared enough to feel anything, it would have welcomed those slithers.

But it was an altogether more elegant ghost, that Shakespearean actor Edward, that was, at present, hogging center stage. Not that elegance was...now...any less tiresome than slithers. The Storage Space would have yawned over the excruciating tedium of it all if only a building could yawn. Better yet, it would have ended the excruciating tedium of it all...without any absurd theatrics such as pistols held to the forehead it didn't have, a simple wrecking ball would do...if only a building could commit suicide. Or commit, or do, anything. Anything at all.

That fiend!

Edward the Ghost. Was that the best Shakespearean descriptive he could muster when reliving, yet again, his rival for *her* affections shoving Edward off a catwalk to his death? No longer even caring enough to exert any effort to ignore him, the Storage Space was surprised to learn that Edward not only blamed his rival for his own death but also blamed him for *hers*...for which, in fact, Edward himself was responsible.

Her... What was *her* full name? Playbills pirouetted through the Storage Space's memory: Charlotte Amelia Booth.

Slither. *Who cares?*

Indeed, agreed the Storage Space though, of course, the ghost of Le Grand Rat didn't hear it.

Slither, slither, slither.

What was Irwin up to? the Storage Space wondered idly.

Then, against its will, it found itself concentrating on the most detestable creature of all, Karen.



PART 142

Imogene like actually smiled at Tommy, not his tablet, when he walked into her room and handed it to her. But then she started to feel all funny, like effin' queasy and her cheeks were on fire, so she clutched the tablet and signed into Snapchat. Still it was like she could feel him breathing or some such stupid shit while he got busy on his phone.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: U there?

^URSUnPC&proud: wheree the fuck else wud i b

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Dunno. MayB playin Minecraft on yr fon like Tommy.

Was it her imagination, or did Tommy freeze for a moment?

^URSUnPC&proud: we shudd both get the fuck off our devices and try real life

WTFwasImogeneCoca: ?????????????? U like always always say this BETTER THAN RL!!!!!!

There was a long pause, long enough for Imogene to worry about the tablet's internet connection.

^URSUnPC&proud: i was wrongg

WTFwasImogeneCoca: ??????????????????????

^URSUnPC&proud: try tommy not mee

WTFwasImogeneCoca: I'd off myself in heartbeat if ever lost U.

Imogene was like a whole effin' lot more than queasy; sobs convulsed her. She heard somebody's footsteps in the hall.

"That's one reason the hospital was supposed to keep you off the internet, lest anything upset you!"

Imogene had to like blink her tears back to see who'd spoken.

A wizened older woman she'd never seen before came into the room and sat down on her bed.
"Anyway, my darling, it is my decided privilege to be the bearer of extremely glad tidings."

Lose ^URS again? Imogene could like hardly listen while the woman introduced herself as a social worker or hospital administrator or some effin' shit.

"Anyway, my darling, I will need to relieve you of that for the time being." She firmly snatched the tablet from Imogene's clutching hands. "But you will have it back all too soon, I fear. You've been cleared for potential release! Still, we'll need to be sure you're prepared to adequately tend to your baby before final approval and..." Here she paused and suddenly looked all effin' melodramatically somber and shit. "I'm afraid I have some truly dreadful news to tell you."



PART 143

Tommy like already had his hand on his tablet, wondering if he should admit that it was his and shit, when Wizeded Woman announced she had “dreadful news” to tell Imogene.

The woman looked down at the tablet she was holding, then turned to look up at him with ruthless RL eyes.

“I’m...” Tommy paused. Would they let Imogene out of this fucked-up excuse for a hospital once they heard that she was still convinced that she wasn’t pregs and shit? He puffed himself up as much as he could. “...her therapist.”

Wrong move! As he both remembered his age and watched the complete disbelief spread across Wizeded Woman’s face, he felt like he’d just died some hideous death in Minecraft with no hope of respawning. Then he factored in that they didn’t know each other, and he wasn’t wearing anything that identified him as staff. “Not really, I know. But for all intents and purposes I am. I’m...” He gave her a warm, conspiratorial smile, choosing his next word carefully. “...family.”

“You should never have given her her tablet!” snapped the woman, though she released it to him.

Tommy stood his ground. Quickly enlarging the font on his tablet to monster-sized, he remembered sneaking a look at Imogene’s chart when no one was in the nurses’ station. “The doctors told me she’s okay now medically and that...” The next words slipped out before he knew what he was saying. “...our baby is safe.”

Wizeded Woman frowned and started like riffling through her paperwork, probably looking for any prior mention of the baby’s father.

Imogene’s eyes, looking past Wizeded Woman to stare at him, had snapped so wide they looked like they were going to pop out. Tommy wondered which of his words had caused the stronger reaction, “baby” or “our.”

As if all this shit wasn’t enough, Tommy thought he caught sight of a green mist seeping in through the window but ignored it. “So,” he continued loudly, hoping Wizeded Woman wouldn’t examine her paperwork too carefully. “Now that the big secret’s out and we’re reunited, Imogene needs to start facing a lot of reality before our baby is born, and the internet was a way to ease into that, right?”

Wizened Woman didn't look like any too convinced and all, but she did turn back to Imogene.

For a sec the room turned...green. Tommy found himself envisioning a 19th century theatre and batting at something that seemed to be swirling around his eyes.

"Anyway, my darling Imogene," the woman was saying, "perhaps I should start by sharing the bad news with you. It's about your mother."

Imogene looked blank.

Tommy remembered she'd not only denied the baby's existence but also her mother's. He started typing on his tablet.

Wizened Woman continued. "I know she was in prison for treating you tremendously, tremendously badly, so I'm not sure this news will fall on the most sympathetic ears, but when her allegation that the guards were repeatedly beating her fell on deaf ears, she managed to hang herself."

Imogene still looked blank. "That's impossible. I don't have a..."

Behind Wizened Woman's back, Tommy was gesturing wildly at the tablet he held up so Imogene could see it. In monster-sized letters, it read: DON'T LET HER NO U NEVER HAD A MOTHERR

Imogene frowned.

Tommy typed a new message.

Wizened Woman asked, "Don't have a what, my darling?"

Tommy held up: OR THEY NEVER LET U OUTT AND PEEPS GET KILLED HEREE

Imogene stammered, "Have a... Have a... I like don't know what I was saying."

"You understand, my darling, that your mother is...most assuredly regrettably no matter what she did or did not do...dead?"

Tommy nodded his head furiously behind the woman's back.

"Yes," said Imogene, but she looked completely undisturbed by this news.

The woman looked at her for a while. "Well, my darling, perhaps, under the circumstances, your reaction...or, should I say, lack of reaction...isn't altogether astonishing. Moving on, though it strikes me as a tad abrupt of me, shall we talk about your baby?"

Tommy was like typing furiously again, despite the return of that fucking green mist: TELL HER WE'LL
NAME BOY EDWARD OR GIRL CHARLOTTE AMELIA



Part 144

Karen could feel something alien in her, something slimy that slithered. Faintly she found herself thinking about playing cards right. Then she felt a different alien presence and found herself thinking about shuddering if only she cared.

She pulled herself up short, finding she'd been rushing through the metal corridors of the storage space without any idea of what she was doing, where she was going, or how she got there.

Thing is, she *did* care.

She heard muffled laughter coming from a unit with its door ajar, followed by louder moans. Sex. Karen took a step closer, thinking it might be fun to watch, but tripped on something. Looking down, she saw a pink dress, skinny jeans, and rainbow sneakers scattered about the hall. They led from a big hole in the wall someone must have pried open. Something shiny sparkled out at her from behind the walls. She felt a slither and drew close.

Thing is, she *did* care.

Just behind the metal wall of the storage space was the original wall, elaborately wood-paneled from the 19th century. She noticed that a section of it that looked lighter and newer than the rest had been pried open too. Behind it was a huge, open cavern filled with a number of things including what looked like human bones.

Slither.

Karen *did* care, as she stepped closer. Clearly the shiny thing was not from the 19th century. It was a gun, with a silencer. She reached in and picked it up, hefted it. She didn't know a lot about guns, but she could tell this one was loaded, new enough to be in good working order, and had the safety clicked off. What would it feel like to actually use it?

Slither. Karen *did* care.

The two voices were moaning faster now, rapidly approaching climax.

Slither. Slither. Karen cared because, she thought with a smile and a deliciously luxuriant shudder, those slithers felt so damn good.



PART 145

Sebastian heard a clank outside in the hall, like someone had dropped something metal, followed by the footsteps of that person leaving. *The gun! Shit!*

“Really!” Fifi was looking up at him, coquettish.

Sebastian clapped a hand over “her” mouth. *God-awful.* That’s what he used to call Fifi all the fucking time. He savored the smells of their latest of so much sex. Why couldn’t he think of her as god-awful anymore?

“Know what?” Fifi asked.

He started sticking his fingers here and there, wondering if he could actually manage to do it one more time. “What?”

“If it weren’t for my boyfriend, we could, you know, maybe move in together. Take action!” Fifi stopped to giggle over what Sebastian was doing with his fingers and get all coquettish again. “And then we could do this...all...day...long! Really!”

Sebastian didn’t answer. He was getting serious again. But when he was finished it occurred to him to worry about whoever was in the hall discovering the gun that phony transgender Pat had found behind the walls. Along with all the other stuff that weirdly dressed Pat had crowbarred through the walls to find hidden back there. Some of that shit really did deserve to be called god-awful! “Wait here, Fifi!”

He squeezed through the mostly closed door into the hall. He was trying to stand up straight when something hard hit him, knocking him back. His skinny legs warbled, about to collapse underneath him. But he managed to look up in time to see the person hovering over him with a smile. It was Imogene’s father.



PART 146

The Storage Space would have yawned, rattling each of its individual storage units, if only a building could yawn.

Karen! Despite every possible inclination to the contrary, the thought of her suddenly intruded...irresistible and totally unavoidable.

Along with that thought came a flood of memories, some not even its own:

Gorgeous wood carvings, when brand new.

Her. Charlotte Amelia Booth. Now in Imogene's belly. But remembered in her finest hour upon the stage. Just before Edward the Ghost, when he wasn't a ghost, and his equally long dead rival joined her from opposite sides of the stage. They'd ignored the marks, indicating where they should have stood, and jostled each other in a battle to see who could get closer to *her*. Edward had failed to notice that it was his foot, not his rival's, that tripped *her* and sent Charlotte Amelia Booth pirouetting off the front of the stage to her death.

Sunsets over the Pacific.

Him. Frank. In his apartment in Sausalito...

What was this connection between The Storage Space and this utterly alien other, this *person* Karen? And why did a connection with another, anything outside of itself, lend everything such poignancy? Such importance? Why did it make the Storage Space not only care, but care so much that the agony of it couldn't be borne?

And just what, pray tell, had over a hundred sentient years of caring *at all* done for the Storage Space, which should have been spared all of this by virtue of having been "merely" a building? Had that squat, cozy 18th century farmhouse across the street...situated so very comfortably amidst its orchards and vegetable gardens...cared one whit when it was torn down and even its extensive grounds were replaced by brownstones? Had the Storage Space's own adjoining tea room cared when it was subjected to the wrecking ball?

No.

Another thought intruded, a question that had echoed about in the stratosphere of its consciousness for over a century, conveniently ignored in the same way it chose to ignore anything that was troubling if it could get away with it. It was like a whisper on a wind one assumes cannot form words: *Why? Of all buildings, why am I sentient?*

The answer had always been there, had it only listened to the question. It was in the conversation it had overheard on its opening night, when its builder had attended a magnificent performance of *Macbeth*. As the brand-new curtain went up, the Storage Space experienced its first thoughts: anxiety over whether it would go up properly.

Its builder leaned over to its owner as they both watched the three witches at the beginning of the play. "You know, a funny thing happened last night while the stage crew was testing that curtain."

"Ummm?" queried its owner.

"One of those witches... That one on the left. Did you know she's not wearing any makeup?"

"Nooo!"

"Yes! She doesn't have to; that's what she really looks like. Anyway she appeared out of the shadows...shadows too small to have concealed her, I might add...and walked over to me. In the light of the cigar I was lighting I found myself looking deep into eyes I'm thoroughly convinced are not human."

"Imagination. You've been working too hard to complete this building on time."

"Believe what you will, but I'll tell you this: When she told me she loved me and that she'd given my new building a gift, I believed her."

"What, supposedly, was the gift?"

"No idea. I couldn't see anything, and the stage crew interrupted just then."

But the Storage Space knew, pulled back as it was to the present when it heard that Sebastian of the Rainbow Sneakers screaming in a way no actor could ever duplicate. It sounded as if someone was literally ripping him limb from limb.

But Karen didn't care. So neither did the Storage Space. After all, what kind of gift was sentience to a building, who...unlike people and whatever that creature was that had given the Storage Space consciousness...couldn't even speak, let alone move to do anything about whatever it became aware of? That gift it had been given so long ago turned out to be...absolutely, positively...no gift at all.



PART 147

Imogene snatched the tablet out of Tommy's hand when he stopped her wheelchair in front of the elevator. But she was like effin' distracted and all when he wrapped his arms around her from behind. Again she was startled, and a little freaked out, because it felt good. She caught herself melting into his arms...and knew he felt it too.

His breath warmed her ear as he whispered, "Don't worry: I lied to the discharge nurse. Your father's *not* waiting for you in the lobby."

At the mention of her father, even his absence, she stiffened and remembered ^URS. This is not a puppy love? She furiously typed Tommy's password, all one word, into his tablet.

As sobs convulsed her, she saw Tommy snatch out his phone to play his Minecraft.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: U there? U there? U there? U there?

^URSunPC&proud: alwaysss alwaysss alwaysss alwaysss

WTFwasImogeneCoca: U said try Tommy not me! Thought U gonna disappear again! Thought U didn't want me anymore!

^URSunPC&proud: always want u want u now but in real life

WTFwasImogeneCoca: But I've never met U in RL.

There was a long pause, long enough for Imogene to worry about the tablet's internet connection. She didn't hear Tommy playing Minecraft behind her either and turned to find him giving her a long, funny look before going back to his phone.

^URSunPC&proud: yes u havee

WTFwasImogeneCoca: ??????????????????????

^URSunPC&proud: not playingg minecraft

WTFwasImogeneCoca: ?

^URSUnPC&proud: not playing

WTFwasImogeneCoca: ?

^URSUnPC&proud: look at me

A wave of warm breath hit the back of her neck. Again she turned to see Tommy looking at her.

^URSUnPC&proud: watch me type always got yr back



PART 148

Tommy knew she knew; he could see it in her eyes. But she went back to their Snapchat.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: But U def not father of my child cuz I'm still not pregs!

Gently he rested a hand on her belly. He could feel the baby moving about.

^URSUNPC&proud: cancer doesnt kick

WTFwasImogeneCoca: But told U only 1 nite I don't remember & was with my father so I'm virgin.

Tommy set his jaw.

^URSUNPC&proud: nitee u dont remember i

WTFwasImogeneCoca: ?

^URSUNPC&proud: i delivered pizza & saw yr father beating uu & kicked his fucking ass

WTFwasImogeneCoca: ?

^URSUNPC&proud: really sorry

WTFwasImogeneCoca: ?

^URSUNPC&proud: u had passed out

WTFwasImogeneCoca: ?

^URSUNPC&proud: really really reallyy sorry

WTFwasImogeneCoca: ?

^URSUNPC&proud: u were so pretty i was gentle but it was really really wrongg

Tommy bit his lip hard. Was telling her he'd raped her, when he'd never seen her before the hospital, really better than the truth about her father?

^URSUnPC&proud: plz plz plz plz forgive mee

WTFwasImogeneCoca: If I'm really pregs my father will kill me.

^URSUnPC&proud: yr father will never see you again

WTFwasImogeneCoca: But where will I go? How will I support myself and a baby??????????

^URSUnPC&proud: my place & i take care of u both & no more sex unless u want it

Tommy watched her like a hawk. Was it too much? Her fingers froze. Was she like totally fucking overloaded?

Finally the elevator arrived.

He didn't know what to do so he found himself typing a really stupid, unimportant detail.

^URSUnPC&proud: we just havee to drop by my storage unit firstt

He wheeled her onto the elevator with her fingers frozen in midair. Finally she typed what looked like two characters.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: OK.

Trembling, clutching her few possessions, she'd never looked more like that frightened puppy his own mother had flushed down the toilet. She handed him the tablet, real fucking slow, and darted a look at him before looking back down at her stuff. Gradually her fingers unclenched and she looked up at his chin. Then, like the dawn of a new day, her eyes rose up to meet his, and she spoke to him directly. "OK. Real Life. You. A baby. But no more RL than that. I def can't take more. And I know."

He couldn't keep back a triumphant smile but asked, "Know what?"

Her eyes did something funny. He didn't fucking understand it, really, but somehow decided it meant that whatever she said next should never be talked about again. "I know you weren't always ^URS."



PART 149

Karen ran her fingers over ancient wooden carvings, which had lost all the finish that once protected them.

The Storage Space! Despite every possible inclination to the contrary, the thought of it suddenly intruded...irresistible and totally unavoidable.

Along with that thought came a flood of memories, some not even her own:

Gorgeous wood carvings, when brand new.

Her. Charlotte Amelia Booth...

Sunsets over the Pacific.

Him. Frank. In his apartment in Sausalito the first time they made love. Looking deep into Frank's eyes and thinking she could see infinity.

What was this connection between her and this utterly alien other, this *building*? And why did a connection with another, anything outside of herself, lend everything such poignancy? Such importance? Why did it make her not only care, but care so much that the agony of it couldn't be borne?

And just what, pray tell, was the use of caring? Caring only moved people to action. Action to do something about whatever they cared about. Karen imagined she felt the storage space shudder with excitement, as if a light had gone off in its head. Then she imagined it was babbling excitedly...something about how some witch had given it a gift after all, and it had finally figured out how to use it. Something about caring...about making Karen care.

Fugettaboudit! Karen would never again allow herself to care about anything...

Suddenly she was seeing the storage space when it was a grand old theatre, dawn lending a sweet apricot hue to the wood of its magnificent new carvings.

...except maybe whatever those delicious slithers might suggest by way of some fun.

Irwin? You were compelled to strike him over the head with one of my old levers when he almost killed you!

So what? I don't care about anything! That was then; this is now. But Karen couldn't believe she was answering a building.

Now she was seeing the 19th century in all its glory, a whole block of magnificently carved buildings with elegantly dressed people strutting about like the most delicately wrought porcelain birds.

A scream interrupted. Karen shook herself hard, to shake herself free of the delusion that she was arguing with a building, yet paid attention to a slither that suggested that it might be fun to watch whatever was causing the screaming. She retraced her steps to where she'd found the gun she still held.

Imogene's father didn't exactly look like *he'd* been the victim of his wife's physical abuse anymore. He stood over Sebastian, that kid with the rainbow sneakers, who looked like it wouldn't take more than another blow to kill him. That Fifi with the pink hair was doing the screaming.

Slither. Karen said, "Allow me." She experimented with aiming the gun at first Sebastian's head then his stomach when she heard a slither about how that would take longer and be more fun.

Imogene's father grinned at her. "Be my guest, Champ!"

A very pregnant-looking Imogene and some blond kid showed up at the other end of the hall with that homeless bitch Amelia behind them.

Karen took aim at Sebastian's stomach. And suddenly she couldn't see.

At first it was images of the 19th century again, but then it was Frank's apartment in Sausalito as the sun set over San Francisco. Frank, making love to her...

"He's dead!" she snapped, momentarily seeing that everyone had frozen while she held the gun pointed at Sebastian, but Imogene's father was beginning to look worried.

Frank, making love to her again, his eyes taking her into infinity again, but this time even more so than had ever happened in real life...while he gradually turned green.

A mere technicality! The building's answer, though desperately urgent, was simultaneously sarcastic, sad, vast and profound. But, most of all, it was gentle.

Now she was seeing Frank's green ghost struggling mightily until he actually moved Irwin's water and French fries close enough for her to reach. Next Frank was protecting her from that oddly dressed Pat,

the man in her hospital room who had tricked her into babbling all kinds of things, even the storage space's secrets, when she was mostly unconscious.

Karen felt her hand holding the gun drop. Then someone took it out of her hand. She opened her eyes.

Imogene's father had the gun. *He* pointed it at Sebastian. Behind him, through a window, Karen saw green mist seeping in; she thought she knew what that was.

Pink wig askew, Fifi jumped in between Sebastian and Imogene's father, trying to look up at him coquettishly despite a face covered with black rivulets from mascara-tinted tears.

Imogene's father readjusted his aim to get Fifi's crotch.

At the other end of the hall Imogene yelled, "No!"

Her father readjusted his aim to get his unborn grandchild.

The blond kid shoved Imogene out of the way.

Imogene's father aimed at the blond kid.

Karen, apparently forgotten, looked at her empty hands. Then the scene disappeared, and she was seeing something hidden beneath the rubble of the open wall, near where the gun had been. Something like that thing from the old stage riggings that she'd used to kill Irwin.

"I know where another weapon is," she said to Imogene's father. "Allow me to get it; after all, you can't cover them all."

Imogene's father didn't look too sure, but muttered, "Go for it, Champ. All the rest of them are shit, but let's see what you're made of."

Karen started to walk past Imogene's father to get to the open wall, but Fifi tripped her and she went sprawling.

"Bitch!" Karen yelled as she slid up against the open wall.

"Bastard," corrected Fifi.

Sebastian came to life just in time to yank Fifi out of the way as Imogene's father fired the first shot, eerily quiet because of the silencer. It sounded like rustling when fired, but there was a clang when the bullet bounced off the metal floor. He spun on Sebastian just as the blond kid, who'd sprinted down the hall, took him out with a flying tackle, knocking the gun out of his hand.

The gun slid down the hall, out of reach of everybody. Imogene's father got up, patting his pocket, and confronted the blond kid. "Who the fuck are you?"

"Name's Tommy."

Imogene's father pulled another gun out of his pocket. "Not for long." Tommy backed down the hall in the opposite direction from where the first gun had slid, past where Karen was now in the space behind the open wall. Imogene's father followed him, clicking off his pocket gun's safety as he too passed Karen.

Karen took a huge swing over her own head with what she'd found behind the wall and smashed Imogene's father's skull wide open.



PART 150

Frank kept tormenting himself, over and over again, with the words his now-dead partner Alex used to use: *How could I?* How could he have let his own hurt feelings allow him to abandon Karen when she'd needed him most, only oozing his green-ghost-mist self back into the storage space in time to see Karen off some fuckin' guy by smashing his skull wide open.

"It's okay. It was understandable. You're forgiven."

Fuckin' *stereo*? Frank would have shuddered if only a ghost could... Where did that thought come from? And why did he feel like he'd been forgiven in harmony, by both a...building...and Karen?

Karen... Frank was afraid to look at her after the way she'd been acting toward him, but...fuhgettaboutit...he finally looked down.

She was looking up at him. She smiled.

Something slithered. Vaguely Frank thought he overheard how nobody played their cards right and how fuckin' with the naked girls in the gym two blocks away was more fun than this before the slithering went away.

Karen went back to caressing the contents of a box in her storage unit. It included the broken friends-forever plague from Marie that Karen was gently attempting to reassemble.

The pregnant teenager, cuddled up in Karen's unit with her, looked up from her phone.

"How's saving the world from domestic violence going?" Karen asked.

"Like it's effin' hard work!" answered the teenager, going back to her phone.

Something clattered in the hall just outside. "Clumsy, Hank, clumsy."

The blond kid scooped up a bottle rolling across the floor. "Here you go, buddy."

"Thanks, Tommy."

The blond ducked his head into Karen's storage unit, grinning at Imogene. "Imogene? Karen? Wall's all sealed up again. What's left of your father, Imogene...not to mention a few other 'loose ends' left around here, all those data sticks, and even that phone of Jennifer's you gave me, Karen...will never be found."

THE END