



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.*

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BELOW ARE PARTS (POSTS) 31-60 OF A TOTAL OF 150.



PART 31

The Storage Space was quite astonished to find itself pondering, of all things, the city of San Francisco. The Storage Space knew it existed, of course, some rough space where an unemployed gold miner...so uncouth that he referred to himself as "Jack" instead of John...fancied himself literary because he told a story about a dog going wild.

Really it was too, too much! All so tiresomely absurd.

But the real question was, why was it even deigning to think of such a muddy camp?

And why, pray tell, was the San Francisco it envisioned no longer muddy?

And why, pray tell, did it somehow find this new San Francisco, of all things...comforting?

Utterly perplexed, the Storage Space concentrated. Windows. Huge windows that covered entire walls. It was envisioning this New San Francisco through windows from across a bay. A simile came to mind, something about the fog marching between its towering spires of glass like fuzzy giants on an old projection TV. But it didn't know what a projection TV was.

Sorry, bad simile.

The Storage Space would have leaped out of its skin, if only a building could leap. If only a building had skin. For those three words about the simile had not been spoken aloud. Nor, as was all too tragically customary in this place, were they the thoughts of a...it was loath to even think of such things...ghost. Nor did they have anything to do with whatever Le Grand Rat was doing in the hall.

But they were from someone alive, alive but who must somehow be very sympathetic to the poor, long-suffering Storage Space, such a profoundly sympathetic soul that it could actually hear...her.

It was that Karen. Perhaps it was hearing her thoughts because she'd been there for so long. Perhaps it was hearing her thoughts because she...unlike the others...had depth.

Do I?

Again the Storage Space would have leaped out of its skin, if only a building could leap. If only a building had... But, never mind. What was this? A horrible, sickening wave of self-recrimination was washing

over it, something about that horrid Martin...naked. The Storage Space would have shuddered, if only a building... But, never mind. Now there was piercing pain, something it had never experienced like this, as if it was some kind of animal with soft skin. And now there were tears, as if it was capable of producing fluid, and a whole torrent of soft, animal-based memories.

The Storage Space would have done its very, very best to think of something else...anything else...but those soft, animal-based memories were delicious. Feeling the sun on an arm. Running fingers over thick velvet. Giggling. Then they were gone.

I betrayed everything I am. I caused someone's death.

The pain was excruciating this time. If only a building could cry out, if only a building could say, *No, you didn't. Everything you are is still inside you.*

Really?

She heard?

"Really?" She asked it aloud this time.

More soft memories. Digging toes into warm sand. The sun setting in...was that the Pacific Ocean?

But suddenly all softness was gone as the door to her storage unit rattled open further. Le Grand Rat!

"Who's in there?"



PART 32

Jennifer was so annoyed. When she remembered what was on that phone she just had to get back from that homeless bitch, it was worse. She was terrified.

People were so unreasonable. Why had that stupid homeless man made her life even more difficult by picking that homeless bitch/phone-stealer up out of the gutter? What could he have been thinking? And why had he then gone on to intentionally torture Jennifer even further by disappearing? Where on earth was he hiding her phone...and the homeless bitch?

Jennifer stood in the middle of the block, stamping her feet so hard, and for so long, that she finally broke off one of the heels of her expensive dress shoes. She screamed aloud in rage. At first she stuffed the broken-off heel in her pocket, assuming she'd repair her shoe later. But then she tore both shoes off that she couldn't walk on that way anyway, and, in a fit of frustration, threw them down in the gutter.

Of what importance were any shoes compared to what was on her phone?

Barefoot now, she looked up and down the block. No one in sight. How could a man carrying a woman disappear so quickly? There hadn't been enough time for him to make it to the end of the block and turn the next corner. So, not so homeless after all, he must have gone into a building. But which one?

She scoured the block.

"Ah, the pain of love lost..."

She spun around. She could have sworn she was alone...had just checked. But not three feet behind her was the most gorgeous man she'd ever seen. Blond. Chiseled cheek bones. Huge, piercing green eyes. But how had he materialized out of nowhere? Out of her fondest imagination?

"And to have lost out to...a homeless old hag?"

She found her voice. "I don't know what you're talking about. And I don't know you, so why are you talking to me anyway?"

The man must have put a hand on her shoulder, but there was something really creepy about the way he moved. Not only was he as silent as a cat, but he'd somehow managed to place a hand on her shoulder entirely out of her range of vision...like some fighter that never telegraphed a punch. "Come,

come. We're both old friends of Alex, who's as mad as a hatter. You needn't worry about his betraying you for that homeless old hag, though. She's just another damaged thing he's picked up, supposedly to fix. Like that bird with the broken wing last week. If there's any worrying to be done, it's on behalf of the homeless old hag."

Jennifer just looked at him. Wall-to-wall shoulders. Classic V-shape. Magnificently muscled. Bronzed from the sun. And a hand on her shoulder. Could he tell she was breathing heavily?

Yet...there was still something eerie about that hand on her shoulder...about him. But then she remembered about her phone with a thud in her gut. "Do you have Alex' address?"



PART 33

Martin woke up screaming from another bloody nightmare. But then he spotted Jennifer's phone and started to laugh. Next he snatched her phone up, typing his own name again when it asked for her password. He wanted to be sure he hadn't just dreamed what he was laughing about too.

He hadn't. There it all was again in her phone's notes. If he made what he'd found public not only was it guaranteed to go viral, but he was quite sure the stupid bitch could be indicted for treason against the United States. Still, the public exposure of the pictures referred to in Jennifer's notes would undoubtedly concern her more. Martin savored each shot in the album. She thought she could blackmail the man with pictures of her naked body splattered with what looked quite literally like shit? While this man did things to her not even the raunchiest porn site could have imagined? Just who did she imagine was in a position to blackmail whom?

Giddy from nightmare-induced sleep deprivation, Martin laughed and laughed. This time that greedy, manipulative bitch had really...as they used to say it...lost the plot.

Even if he hadn't succeeded in framing Jennifer for a murder he'd committed, he was free. Free from a lifetime of picking up her dry cleaning, paying off her collection-agency debts, and...by far the worst of it; he thought he'd puke at the thought of it...getting it up for her.

His doorbell rang, persistently. There was only one person that could be. Okay, the bitch had somehow managed to talk her way out of the murder rap he'd tried to pin on her. Probably all ready to scream at him because the box of her precious "stuff" he'd sent her back for wasn't in the storage space after all. He carefully turned Jennifer's phone off, slipped it into Karen's suitcase...which he'd hidden in a closet, and danced his way to the door as he struggled to suppress a Cheshire-cat grin.

This was going to be fun.

He swung the door open wide.

On the other side was what looked like a whole battalion of cops.



PART 34

Karen quaked. That rodent Irwin had discovered she was all but naked in her storage unit. Her just desserts for whiling away the time till she was strong enough to leave by imagining a conversation with a building.

She'd spoken aloud. To a building... *Idiot*, she reprimanded herself... although she imagined the building unleashing a whole torrent of formal Edwardian English, protesting that she was still too weak to know what she was doing.

Irwin hadn't yet spoken or moved or taken his eyes off her breasts.

San Francisco... Again she imagined seeing it from Frank's apartment across the bay in Sausalito. But...where were the tall buildings? Why was she thinking about mud and Jack London?

Karen tried to shake herself out of what must have been some kind of dream state, so she could deal with Irwin.

Irwin's eyes, as they moved to compensate for the motion of her breasts, widened. He took in a deep breath and exhaled, flooding the tiny storage unit with the stench of rancid oil and cheap cigars.

Karen imagined the building wanting to shudder. *She* wanted to shudder. After all she'd been through, all the sorrow and terror and pain, she'd thought she'd never again have the energy for rage. Yet...oddly...insanely...it was some sleaze staring at her breasts that finally brought a blind fury gushing up from she didn't know where. "Get away from me, you ugly rodent!" Had she actually managed to scream?

Was she still imagining the building was sentient and that it was laughing at Irwin?

But the moment the words left her mouth, she regretted each and every one. She needed Irwin's help. To survive! Now it was too late. She braced herself as best she could for all possible reactions except the one she got.

He looked stunned. Fitful tears erupted. He pouted. Finally...not in his usual unctuous voice but sounding like an irate toddler...he snapped, "I am *not* a rodent!"

Where did that come from? She saw a ray of hope in the ancient hurt she must have channeled. "No, no," she crooned. "How could I have even entertained such a thought?"

Too effective. His leer was back. "Way you shook them titties at me? I know what you want." He grabbed her, clapping a hand over her mouth so roughly she bled. "And screaming at me like that? I know how you deserve to get it."



PART 35

Amelia's eyes were closed, but flickerings of soft, warm light played across her eyelids. Fragrant wood smoke wove its way through the scents of a deliciously savory stew and fresh-baked bread. She could hear the fire crackling.

Something furry warmed her cheek. Amelia nuzzled her face into it, and it started to purr.

Homeless Heaven. She must be dreaming; she didn't dare open her eyes. Instead she listened to the fire crackle.

What had her mother told her about the nunnery she grew up in in Switzerland? Always a crackling fire in her room, a huge "eiderdown" on her bed. Amelia felt the weight of something similar, which smelled of clean, lemon-scented laundry.

Suddenly a soft strain of piano music. Not a recording. Debussy. Softer and dreamier than she'd ever heard. But when she was the surest that it was all a luscious dream, and she was really dead, a huge tongue licked her face.

"Q!"

Her eyes snapped open.

A Rottweiler...so big it looked like it could have swallowed her in a single gulp...cowered in front of her, darting its nervous eyes between her and the man at the piano. Vaguely it came back to Amelia: This man had carried her home. And something about a bird...

"Q, I already tended her wounds!"

She took a peek under the lemon-scented duvet. It was true. Not only were her injuries neatly dressed but she was cleaner than she'd been since she became homeless. All of her. And she was dressed in nothing but an immaculate, white terry cloth bathrobe. She wasn't sure what sent the slight shudder up her spine, the fact that she'd managed to sleep through this or thankfulness that she was no longer young.

He left the piano, appearing at her side to offer a brandy snifter with what smelled like a first-rate cognac. The Rottweiler Q, still seeking reassurance, whined and attempted to settle for licking a

bandage covering an injury on her hand...until the man's look sent the dog scurrying off to a corner near the fire.

The cognac slipped down Amelia's throat like satin. The man served her some stew from a silver food warmer.

She found her voice. "Thank you so very much. For everything. Your kindness..." She couldn't find adequate words to finish her sentence.

He silenced her with a gesture. But even in a room only lit by firelight, she could see the flush of pleasure and the suppressed smile in response to her few words. He adjusted the pillows behind her, which set the cat to purring again, and then sat on the floor at her side.

Amelia tasted the stew. "Exquisite!"

Again, he failed to completely suppress a smile that bordered on the smug. But then his expression turned quite serious and troubled. "Oh Lady of the Melodious Voice, may I tell you something?"

"Of course!" She was anxious to repay his kindness by listening to his woes if she could.

"At the exact moment that I learned that my dearest friend was dead, I also learned that I betrayed him by believing he had betrayed me!" He looked beseechingly at Amelia.

She knew she looked confused.

"You need to understand that we were in business together. A...client...owes us a very large sum of money. I thought my friend had gone to his garden apartment to collect it without telling me because he was going to keep all the money for himself." He choked up, burying his head in his hands. "How could I?"

She sat up and put a hand on his shoulder.

"How could I?" he repeated. "How could I think such a thing? You see, I got worried that night, when I couldn't reach him, and tracked him. That's how I found out he'd gone to the apartment of this guy who owes us a fortune. That's why I thought..." He trailed off, in obvious agony.

She stroked his shoulder.

"How could I? I even went to where this guy that owes us money works, gunning for my friend. But when I finally found my friend dead, I knew the truth."

Amelia put an arm around him. "Which was?" she queried softly.

He took her hand, squeezing it feverishly, having apparently forgotten about her injuries. "Which was that the reason my friend must have gone to collect that money alone was because he knew of the danger I did not...the danger that ended his life."

Amelia took his hand in both of hers, squeezing it back.

"But I found something else in the trash that night too." His sudden grin was so remarkably evil that she snatched her hands back. It was then that she spotted the little box he'd shown her, before she'd gone to sleep, and remembered about the dead bird.



PART 36

The Storage Space would have wept copiously, if only a building could have shed as much as a single tear. To see what was happening to the only human being with whom the poor, long-suffering Storage Space had ever been able to communicate was unbearable!

It wasn't just what was happening but how. It had witnessed people having carnal relations before, but this... The Storage Space wasn't at all sure Karen would even survive what Irwin was doing to her.

Of course the one it couldn't bear to think about was on hand...a swirling green mist of hysteria and Shakespearean profanities...but Irwin was far too intent on what he was doing to even notice when that mist managed to make his attack on Irwin physical.

Finally the screaming stopped when Karen passed out.

Of course that didn't stop Le Grand Rat from continuing with his wretched business.

"Are you there?"

The Storage Space would have jumped, if only a building could...

"I know your talking to me is only in my imagination, but I've never needed anyone more."

It could tell she wasn't talking aloud. Blood and other things were seeping out of her thankfully slack mouth. Her eyes, thankfully, were still closed, her body limp. That horrid, wretched Irwin was still having his way with her.

"Please, I'm begging you, describe something...anything...to me that's...beautiful."

The Storage Space was...for the first time in an existence that spanned centuries...speechless. No one had ever communicated with it before, let alone made a request.

"Please..."

It watched what Irwin was doing to her, then couldn't bear to watch. It would have cleared its throat, had it a throat to clear. "A long time ago when I was the grandest of theatres, there was a woman like you who felt deeply. She was so beautiful that the sun...like a well-trained spotlight...came out from

behind the darkest clouds to shine on her whenever she stepped outdoors. She was so sweet the sweetest sweets were sour in comparison to a single word she spoke or her pure, radiant smile. But I'm no good at this! And Charlotte went abroad...Switzerland I gather...then made the mistake of returning only to be brutally...to be brutally... Well, never mind! Especially just now! Let's just leave it by saying that the poor, long-suffering Charlotte is long gone."

"But the way you describe her she sounds so beautiful. Everything passes; the point is that it *was*. Which is all we have to cling to. You're doing fine."

The Storage Space could feel Karen's anguish threatening to break through a wall she'd constructed, which consisted solely of her...not too inaccurately...imagining Charlotte.

She was begging now. "Please! Please continue!"

It forced itself to remember fully now, images cascading through its consciousness. It described Charlotte scampering about the stage in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. And Charlotte on that frighteningly fragile balcony as Juliet. Until it finally saw Charlotte as the oh-so-tragically-lost Ophelia, and the cascade slowed abruptly to a slither of memories that crawled over every inch of its wood grain like rivulets of tears: Charlotte in love.

A second Ophelia.

Why had the Storage Space started to describe Charlotte to Karen, when that could only lead to having to describe the one it couldn't bear to think about?



PART 37

Jennifer knew she should feel ecstatic. She had been so, so lucky to get the address of the "homeless man." What could be more important than retrieving her phone from the homeless woman he'd carried away...to a snazzy Brooklyn address that included no apartment number?

Instead, Jennifer felt hungry in some weird way she didn't understand. Also, she felt all fidgety. She kept thinking about blond hair, chiseled cheekbones, and piercing green eyes. Instead of being ecstatic over getting the address she needed so, so badly from that weird man, all she could do was pointlessly think, over and over again, about that weird man. Ridiculous. She was being so unreasonable.

She started off toward the address he'd given her again. The birds overhead interrupted this time, singing more beautifully than they ever had in her whole life. Next thing she knew, she was leaning her cheek up against a tree, oddly aware of how the sun warmed it. Ridiculous. Utterly ridiculous.

A small, laughing child ran down the sidewalk stepping on Jennifer's toe and reminding her that she was now barefoot. So unreasonable. So why was she laughing along with the child?

Why wasn't she crying instead for those expensive shoes she'd lost?

What was that...song of some kind?...going through her mind?

Whose laughter was that?

She spun around. Behind her was a woman in a wheelchair. What the hell did she have to laugh about? But there she was, bent over her withered legs because she was laughing so hard. Finally she looked up at Jennifer. "Honey, you've got it baa-aad!"

Jennifer had no idea what she was talking about.



PART 38

Martin stood beside the front door he'd just opened, gazing at an undulating sea of blue uniforms.

Someone screamed, "Bloody! Fucking! Bitch!"

Ever so slowly, while this latest shock ate at him like a fast-acting acid, Martin realized he was the one who had screamed.

The nearest cop spoke. But just then Martin felt something insidious shift inside his mind. What had the cop said? He couldn't hear over a terrible ringing in his ears. All he could do was seethe at the thought of that bloody, fucking Jennifer turning the tables on him and wonder what the even-louder grinding sound was...until he realized it was his teeth.

The nearest cop said something he couldn't understand again. Could his terror and so much nightmare-interrupted sleep prevent him from understanding what was presumably English?

Another cop spoke loudly and very slowly.

"What?" Martin snapped. ID. They probably wanted his ID. He looked down as he fished it out of his pocket and saw the floor beneath him was undulating just like all those blue uniforms. Were those huge insects crawling up his legs? Or were they just shadows and he was really wide awake and...hallucinating?

He looked up and squinted, hoping it would help him to see straight, and for just a moment he was sure he detected something odd about their uniforms. Meanwhile the cop who'd taken his ID shook his head and handed it back quickly. Martin thought he heard someone laugh. Then the first cop started in on what was obviously a canned speech of some sort, though Martin still couldn't understand him. Probably reading him his rights.

Suddenly the ringing in his ears climaxed, and it wasn't Jennifer he was seething over; it was himself. How knackered was he to think for a moment that she wouldn't obnoxious her way out of anything, including a murder rap? Would picking up her dry cleaning and getting it up for her till he'd had the time to work out a viable way to get rid of her...or just discovered what was on her phone, damn it all to hell!...really have been so bad?

Gone, his mind was completely bloody gone! The cop even said something Martin actually picked up vaguely about blessing his soul. Then he shoved some papers in Martin's face.

"It was self defense! If I hadn't killed him, Frank would have killed me!" Martin wiped the foam from the corners of his mouth.

The undulating sea of blue uniforms seemed to jerk to attention at that, then get sparse and start to disappear.

And they were gone. Martin glanced at the papers. Subpoena? Looked like bible quotes and a big-ass old cross at the top.

No matter. He wasn't taking any chances. He grabbed a few things, tripped over the pink monster undulating its way across his vintage atomic-inspired rug, and ran out his back door.



PART 39

Karen came to with a start. She could feel Irwin's arms tighten around her. Somewhere in her mind the thought came that the building would have screamed at the top of its lungs in only a building could scream. Irwin, who was lying next to her smoking a cigarette, jerked her even closer...and rumbled her hair as if she were a kid.

His voice was...soft. "You know, your hair's the exact same color as that puppy I found out back when I was a kid. I had so much fun with that puppy..." He went on; Karen was not surprised to learn that that puppy didn't live long. Then she started, slowly, to remember all the experiences with Irwin that she and that puppy had in common.

"Do not think of such things!" It was the Storage Space, her imaginary playmate, but who was she to question hearing voices at a time like this? "I would torture Le Grand Rat to death slowly, very slowly, if only a building could..." It went on. Briefly, Karen distracted herself from the horror of her situation by wondering how her subconscious came by such extensive knowledge of the 19th century. Then, while both her companions indulged in their respective sentimentality...the real one about all the animals he'd tortured, the imaginary one about tales of 19th-century theatre that it thought would distract her...she took inventory of her new wounds.

Irwin broke off to rumble her hair again. "Hungry? Thirsty?" He sounded like a kid with a guest sleeping over.

Karen suppressed a shudder. "Kind of hungry," she managed in a little-kid voice.

"Gotcha covered! Back in a jiff!" Irwin scooted out of her storage unit like a boy scout out of a pup tent, clattered down the hall, and was gone.

Karen bolted for the hall in the opposite direction, half falling out of her storage unit before she realized, for the second time since she'd taken up residence in her storage unit, that she didn't have the strength to go far. But this time even her imaginary playmate, the building, started replaying the horror of what Irwin had done to her, which succeeded in releasing enough adrenaline to get her halfway down the hall before she passed out again.

She immediately fell into a dark dream filled with a hatred for Irwin that was like no hatred she had ever felt before. Then, once again, despite Frank's appearance in her dream to protest, she saw the light and

moved toward it this time. That voice again, that had gone on so about a summer's day... As she drew closer she could hear it clearly:

"Those lips that Love's own hand did make
Breathed forth the sound that said 'I hate,'
To me that languish'd for her sake:
But when she saw my woeful state,
Straight in her heart did mercy come,
Chiding that tongue that ever sweet
Was used in giving gentle doom,
And taught it thus anew to greet:
'I hate' she alter'd with an end,
That follow'd it as gentle day
Doth follow night, who like a fiend
From heaven to hell is flown away;
'I hate' from hate away she threw,
And saved my life, saying 'not you.'"



PART 40

"Honey, you've got it baa-aad!"

Sam, tailing the twitchy little barefoot bitch, coulda' puked when the woman in a wheelchair told her that. He knew what he was looking at. He'd known since he was a teen that anyone who didn't react that way to him really wasn't interested in men. He wouldn't mind banging her, if he could just cover those thin, twitchy lips with the proverbial paper bag, but she was fucking up government business with all this dawdling.

Oblivious to everything, including the fact that the love of her life wasn't more than ten feet away, she had now stopped to...oh fuck, what a cliché!...smell the roses. Sam rolled the beautiful green eyes with which he'd broken a million hearts. Sure, he could take Alex on without resorting to using this idiot as a distraction. Sam knew how good he was. But he had also seen more than enough special ops to know the one thing even a consummate martial artist such as himself was no match for: complete unmitigated insanity. He had done his homework on Alex; he knew what he was dealing with.

Finally, finally, Ms. Twitch approached Alex' front door...just as a rather hideous female scream could be heard.

So much for the homeless woman...

Ms. Twitch, obviously oblivious to another person's agony...and her own bare feet...straightened her clothes. She looked puzzled when she fished a broken stiletto heel out of one pocket, then shrugged and crammed it back in her pocket.

Not a bad weapon, thought Sam. And you're going to need it.

Ms. Twitch rang the doorbell.

I would have waited till the screaming stopped, he thought. But then he prepared, positioning himself to dart inside when Alex let the seemingly harmless Ms. Twitch in.

The silence that followed the doorbell ringing was...ghastly. Ms. Twitch, predictably, stamped her feet and rang it again. Sam amused himself with visions of Bela Lugosi in some ancient Dracula flick answering.

Alex creaked the door open a sliver. Not enough yet for Sam's purposes.

Ms. Twitch started right in: "That stupid homeless woman you kidnapped...and don't tell me otherwise because I just heard her scream...stole my phone. If you don't give it back to me right now, I'm going to call the cops right this second!"

Sam could tell from Alex' face that they were both wondering with what phone she planned to call the cops "right this second." But Ms. Twitch hadn't exactly *whispered* her demand. He couldn't imagine Alex choosing to continue this conversation out in the open, so he braced himself for what he assumed would follow.

Alex opened the door wide.



PART 41

The Storage Space would have held its breath, if only a building could breathe to begin with. If only Karen could...or would...breathe.

Ah! There it was! A little snippet of a breath to be sure, but a breath nonetheless.

But then there was nothing. For a long time. And that appalling...color.

Shakespeare... The Storage Space could hear it too. Melodic. Seductive. And drawing Karen closer and closer to death.

It tried to accept the inevitable. Yes, this one had been nice to it. Yes, this was the only one who had ever had the common civility, the even most rudimentary sense of social niceties, to speak to it. The Storage Space would have bucked itself up if only a building... If only a building...

That was it! That was the key! All this time! Centuries! The Storage Space, even back when it referred to itself as Le Grand Theatre, had always been apologetic...deferential...because it was *only* a building! But did buildings stain the woodwork with centuries of cigar smoke? Pound the originally exquisite carpet with boots encrusted with horse manure? Brush it threadbare with yard upon yard of skirts and petticoats? Park the pocket knives used to clean perpetually filthy fingernails by stabbing their blades into elegant carvings everywhere? Or stab them into each other? Repeatedly? Until...dead, or maybe not even dead, yet...they had to be hidden, left in little nooks and crannies everywhere to rot? All supposedly justified by some offense or other?

The Storage Space had suffered many, many offenses over its countless years.

That..."building"...constructed next to it when the ancient tea room was torn down, to name just one. An utterly graceless edifice, it had smashed all seven of its deplorably tasteless floors right up against the most elegant side of Le Grand Theatre, crushing exquisite carvings and darkening its windows like death.

"Oh, no!" Even Karen was horrified.

"Oh, no" indeed! *But none of this was done to me by the other building!* It was all done by those horrible, miserable creatures not worth being remotely deferential to! And certainly not worth mourning! And Le Grand Theatre, even in the face of this affront, had never risen a hand to its

neighboring building. So it wasn't "if only a building could raise a hand; if only a building had a hand to raise." It was, thank all that is truly holy that no building ever raised a hand to another building.

"All true, except for one thing..." Karen pointed out.

The Storage Space would have sighed in exasperation if only a building...

"Who built you? Who gave you life?"

The Storage Space brought itself fully out of its reverie and found, to its horror, that it was confronting a version of this Karen that was flickering slowly between the live version and a green mist.



PART 42

Jennifer knew she was finally becoming reasonable again when she saw her threats about calling the cops had worked on that disgusting "homeless" man Alex. He had leaned forward to open his door wide.

She marched in with Alex darting glances sideways as he backed away from the door. At last Jennifer would get her phone back from the homeless woman she'd just heard scream! And stop thinking about that stupid other man who'd given her Alex' name and address. Even though he had the most gorgeous blond hair, green eyes...

Oh no! She must be imagining things! She thought she caught a flash of that gorgeous blond hair in her peripheral vision.

"How could I have?" It was Alex. What was he talking about? He was looking at the place, now behind her as she stomped farther in, where she thought she'd seen the other man with the green eyes. But of course there was no one there.

"Jennifer!" It was the homeless woman. Holding a dead cat that was covered with, and even dripping, blood. Apparently crying over it. "Run!" she continued shrilly, though her voice was still beautiful. "Nothing's safe here! Leave this place!" Of course she wanted Jennifer to leave...so she could keep her phone. People were so unreasonable.

Jennifer marched over to the homeless woman. But the homeless woman suddenly looked behind Jennifer.

Something Jennifer didn't understand...but that set the hairs on the back of her neck on end...happened behind her. She tried to make sense of it...a huge displacement of air, maybe?...as she turned around. Oddly, she found her hand wrapping around the broken stiletto heel in her pocket. But before she could turn all the way around, a hand caught her mouth, and she smelled something very strange.

Suddenly she found herself in a dream. Or was it a memory? No, this had never really happened, had it? She had a sister, and that was impossible because she'd always been an only child. And if the homeless woman had the most beautiful voice she had ever heard, this non-existent sister had the ugliest. She'd come storming into Jennifer's bedroom, yelling at the top of her lungs about how no one would ever allow Jennifer to have anything. Then she grabbed her very best baby doll right out of her

hands and started ripping it to shreds. Jennifer heard herself pleading, "Please, Judy! Not her hair. Not her eyes!" Judy laughed as she gouged an eye out...and actually ate it.

Jennifer screamed and screamed and screamed until she was sure she couldn't possibly scream any more. And then she screamed some more.



PART 43

Martin stumbled through his own back yard, trying to get away as fast as he could from anywhere where the cops could find him.

A sleeping T-rex opened an eye when he stumbled over its tail.

Martin jumped back and saw he'd stepped into a smoldering pit of lava that, oddly, didn't hurt.

How could he run, how could he do anything right, with all these bloody hallucinations? First the dreams, now this. He had no idea chronic worry and sleep deprivation could do all this. Could it do all this?

He checked for his passport as he climbed over the T-rex, ignoring its sinking its teeth into his thigh.

Bollocks! He only came up with those funny religious papers the cops gave him. Passport must be in the other pocket.

Siren. Real or imagined? Martin threw his backpack over one shoulder and struggled over a fence in the opposite direction, just to be sure.

Pounds, no...dollars. Checked his other pocket. Plenty. Plus an ATM card he should use as soon as possible and certainly long before arriving at JFK. But then he couldn't bloody well buy a ticket for international travel without using his real name, could he? Would he have to stay in the States? Could he fly at all?

"Yo, what choo doin' in my yard, chump!"

Real or imagined? Martin looked over his shoulder. Chap running after him looked like he weighed the better part of 200 kilos, with footfalls resonating in the ground as if he were the T-rex. Martin's vault over the fence in front of him was the stuff of the Olympics.

Safe on the sidewalk. So what if it was bright pink and wobbly. He just hoped the ATM he spotted at the corner deli was real.

It felt real, unlike the T-rex's teeth. Martin stumbled through the necessary and tried to empty out his account. Sadly the message telling him he could only take out a max of \$800 turned out to be equally real.

He managed to hail a cab, after he remembered that, yes, the ones in Brooklyn were now green.



PART 44

Karen was again saying "oh no" to her imaginary playmate, the building, as it continued to recite all the terrible things people had done. But all this was distracting her from the bright light she was headed toward and that magnificent voice reciting Shakespeare's sonnets.

She felt so strange. Rather like a light herself, flickering on and off due to faulty wiring.

Off. So much more comfortable. All the pain was gone. The light wasn't warm, but it was peaceful. There was something strange about the Shakespeare, as if she wasn't really hearing it but was only thinking it. But it was beautiful. It felt like she would never, ever have to worry about anything again.

On. Shooting pains from everywhere. Horrible sounds that she was not only really hearing but could feel reverberating through her many wounds. A truck rattled over a pothole. Someone clattered up the stairs. She thought that last might be important but couldn't remember why.

"That's it, my dear, dear Karen! You're no longer green! Stay with me..."

A building talking to her? She may as well go back to the Shakespeare. The light.

"No, Karen, no! Le Grand Rat. He'll put you out back in bags for refuse. Like he did with Frank."

Frank? The name sent a pain shuddering through her that was far more powerful than a truck bouncing over a pothole the size of the Grand Canyon. Frank? A slip. Of her own subconscious. Her imaginary playmate must have meant poor Martin.

"That's it, stay with me. Yours is such a pure heart that I know you won't desert me if I recount again the horror of having my tea room crushed."

"Oh, no!" Karen could feel her own words crashing out of her body, re-splitting her already split lip.

"'Oh, no,' what?" That voice was also real, not her imaginary playmate. Her eyes fluttered open. One was almost swollen shut now, but through the other she could see Irwin leaning over her and smell some French fries. Just as she'd felt herself flickering between off and on, she could see Irwin's face flickering between the monster who'd so brutally raped and beaten her and the innocent little kid who'd run off to get her French fries. "What are you doing here in the hall? Trying to get away?"

Suddenly Karen was completely on, all her flickering gone. Horribly, Martin was dead. Frank was gone. Her own wounds were screaming with pain. But she didn't care. She wanted to live. She wanted...someday, some way, somehow...to once again find beauty. Though it re-split her split lip even more, she smiled. "Get away? From you? No!" She tried her right arm, but it wasn't working so well so she used her left to reach out and put a friendly hand on his shoulder. "I just..."

"Just what?" He was still flickering between psychopath and wounded boy scout.

"Just...my storage unit; it's a mess in more ways than one. I was hoping I could find a bathroom."

He didn't look too sure.

"And then maybe a mop. To help you out some!" she added in her best girl-scout voice.

Irwin still didn't look too sure.



PART 45

Frank felt himself freeze, then laughed at his choice of the word “freeze.” Fuggettaboutit! How much colder could a fuckin' *ghost* get? But what had stopped him in his tracks, though green mists didn't leave fuckin' tracks, was the sight of a woman...one Frank thought he recognized...stabbing a man in the neck with the broken-off stiletto heel of a shoe. Jugular? He knew exactly what that felt like, as he watched the man's green eyes go wide. Vaguely he remembered some other man put something over the woman's nose that closed her eyes, though not fast enough to stop what must have been a reflexive defense mechanism that got the wrong man. But Frank hadn't been paying attention then, and he was still struggling to get used to this 360-degree vision that seemed to see both everything and nothing.

Fucking A!

Now that he concentrated he could see that the man who'd knocked the woman out...with chloroform most likely, knowing his ways...was none other than his crazy partner Alex!

But Frank didn't care. His partner Alex, after all, wasn't the one in danger. Frank...what...flowed?...oozed?...whatever the fuck, but sure as shit didn't *walk* on.

All he gave a shit about was that for one brief moment he'd been startled out of thinking about Karen. But now he paid for it big time as it all came crashing back down on him in an avalanche of pain. Martin. She'd eaten, admittedly by mistake, Frank's life's blood and all she could think about was fuckin' Martin.

Frank had sworn to himself that he would never again flow/ooze/whatever back to Karen in that storage unit. He had sworn to himself that he no longer cared if that Shakespearean ghost lured her into death. Fantasies of *her* ghost...scared, unable to adjust to 360-degree sight, seeking him out only to have him pretend he didn't know she was there...felt so good. At least that's what he kept fuckin' telling himself, while the stomach he no longer had did somersaults.

Where was he? Maybe he could distract himself again by finding some righteous bastard getting the better of some asshole in a fight, or a poor loan shark getting his money back by murdering someone.

That fuckin' storage space building! He could still make it out in the distance. All this time. All this fuckin' time. He could go anywhere: Europe, Asia, the moon. But, no. He'd just been going around and around in circles, in orbit around Karen.



PART 46

The Storage Space would have been quite violently ill if only a building could... No! Those dreadful little filthy vermin *people* could be quite violently ill! It was the very least they deserved, an appallingly inadequate punishment, really! But why would a dignified old building who'd never ruined an exquisite carpet with boots encrusted with horse manure, let alone killed anyone or *anything*...like a charmingly dainty, old tea room...aspire to doing anything *at all* that people could do? The Storage Space determined it would never think like that again. Really it felt quite strongly... Was absolutely adamant...

"I wouldn't blame you!"

Oh... Well... It was that Karen, who'd actually spoken aloud to the poor, long-suffering Storage Unit. She was a bit...different...maybe...after all.

"Wouldn't blame me for what?"

Le Grand Rat had answered her! Must have thought she was talking to him, the fool. But to be fair he was at present cleaning up the nauseatingly disgusting mess that Karen's storage unit had become.

"For anything..."

Karen had jumped when he answered her, but her response was almost loving, flirty. The Storage Space doubted Irwin would notice the slight shudder still in her voice.

"Anything?" Failing to see the look of sheer terror it prompted, that coarse beast put his hand on her *derriere*. When she apparently couldn't suppress a little jerk, he responded with an altogether lewd smile. He must have mistaken her reaction for pleasure.

Karen pulled herself together, managing a weak smile when she turned to look at him. "When we're done with all this and have...a more suitable place for your...anything."

Even Le Grand Rat looked a tad disbelieving in response to that one. Still, he shoved the remaining filth into a garbage bag with his bare hand before using that same hand to grab a handful of the French fries he'd brought for Karen and stuff them in his mouth. Then he poured a bucketful of disinfectant all over the floor, all without noticing that Karen had all but passed out behind him and hadn't helped at all.

But he did notice when she managed to stir herself enough to grab the empty bucket and stash it with what had been salvaged of her possessions. "Hey!"

She jumped, then managed a wink. "In case I can't make it to the ladies' room." Her eyes rolled up as she passed out so completely that her tongue lolled out of her mouth.

"Or my 'anything' means I'll have to get that saw out and clean up another mess."

Karen was oblivious, but the Storage Space remembered all too well how Irwin had disposed of the last dead body.

Irwin grabbed her bosom. That registered, and she forced her eyes open. Wildly, she looked around before producing an innocent child's smile that would have been a credit to the finest actress. "Say, did you get some food and drink we can share first?"

He grabbed the food and moved even closer.



PART 47

Jennifer saw a long, skinny triangle of red flapping about in front of her. It was slightly obstructed by...were those her own little fingers? Yes! Seeing anything clearly was hard, especially with a pounding headache. But when those same fingers flew to her face to wipe away some of the red that had splattered in her eye, she knew.

A strong arm tightened around her, its big hand covering her mouth when she started to scream. Another big hand now obstructed the skinny red triangle, fluttering about it like a bird.

For a moment her vision returned; she was staring into the most beautiful green eyes she'd ever seen. Had that gorgeous man who'd given her this address followed her in? He put a finger to his lips. Then his big hand, shaking, returned to the skinny red triangle Jennifer now realized was the heel of her shoe. It was embedded in his neck.

Just before she again lost consciousness, her senses picked up the sound of the homeless woman pleading and that strange thing she'd smelled before, though a bit fainter this time, as if more distant. Was whatever had been used to make Jennifer pass out now being used on the homeless woman?

Jennifer's eyes fluttered open one last time, leaving her with the impression that she and the man with the green eyes and gorgeous blond hair were lying on some junky old oriental rug. Then she was safely back in her bedroom as a child. Mommy and Daddy had bought her a new toy! No. It was alive. Warm and fuzzy and sweet smelling. A kitten! She remembered what Mommy had said and was very, very gentle. She pet the kitten. The kitten arched its back and purred, looking up at her with big green eyes. She heard the door to her bedroom open and called out happily, "See, Mommy? I remembered what you said! My kitty likes me!"

But there was no answer, just footsteps, approaching softly. Jennifer looked up, expecting Mommy, since she knew Daddy was at work. But what she saw was impossible, since she knew she was an only child. Still, she was staring at an almost exact duplicate of herself, a twin. She even found herself mouthing a name: Judy.

Judy was looking at Jennifer's kitten, literally licking her lips.

"Mommy!" cried Jennifer.

"Out shopping," said Judy.



PART 48

Martin staggered out of the cab that was no longer green but swirling shades of magenta. Overhead huge dragons, flying through the sky, roared.

"Is this JFK?" he asked the cab driver.

The cab driver clapped a hand to his forehead and sped away without a word.

Martin staggered backwards. There was a swooshing hiss, twice, and glass suddenly separated him from the outside world. Inside, everyone was dragging rectangularly shaped animals back and forth.

Red, white, and blue. He squinted hard and could make out the letters: American Airlines. He approached the counter, alternately squinting and widening his eyes in an attempt to see past the hallucinations.

The woman at the counter was...he was proud of himself for picking up such details...flirting with a man dressed in blue. Martin couldn't quite figure out what the man in blue was wearing, some kind of uniform with something gold-colored pinned to it, but he saved his efforts for the woman at the counter, who was the important one. A hard squint even gave him the letters on her name badge: Carol. The man gave him a long look, probably feeling threatened by such a good-looking chap, and seemed to sulk away.

Didn't matter; bloke was gone. Martin dug deep and came up with a prize-winning smile. He also tried hard to purge himself of any American drawl that might have infiltrated a British accent he knew women loved. "Hi, Carol, wondering if you could help me out. Need the best possible price you can give me on a one-way ticket back home to London. For today. Family emergency and all that. Don't mind standing by."

"Passport?"

"Of course," Martin crooned, digging into his pocket. Bollocks! He only came up with those funny religious papers the cops gave him. Passport must be in the other pocket. But all he could find in the other pocket was his ATM card and a whole lot of cash. Hadn't he checked for his passport? Or had he decided against it since he didn't want to travel using his real name?

"A moment, please," he crooned, trying to keep up appearances. "Left in a bit of a hurry." Was London, travelling under his real name, really his best option anyway? Even if he knew a million ways to disappear once there? Or should he travel within the States under a phony name, if that was even possible? Flustered, he started emptying the contents of his pockets onto the counter between them as he continued to search for the passport he just must have brought with him. He started with those funny religious papers the cops gave him.

"Here, let me see if I can assist you, sir," Carol said, looking through the papers, then frowning. "You're not with the Jehovah's Witnesses, are you? I mean I love their new blue uniforms...always been a sucker for a blue uniform...but really!"

"What? No." Martin was hardly paying attention as he dragged every last bill out of his other pocket, and topped the pile with his ATM card, still lost in furious debate over domestic vs. foreign travel. But his pockets were now empty. No passport. It would have to be domestic, if he could even get away with that without ID. He looked up and squinted hard.

Carol's eyes were widening as she looked at the money.

"Change of plans," said Martin, looking around quickly. No one seemed to be near. He shoved all the money over the counter where it would presumably land at her feet. "One-way ticket to...Los Angeles."

Carol darted a quick look at her feet, took a very long pause during which she contemplated the ATM card left on the counter, then tightened her jaw. She seemed to be kicking the bills under the counter while pounding away at her keyboard. "It'll have to be San Francisco. Flight's leaving now. I've given you special pre-clearance. Got the passenger name..."

"Randolph Barclay," he interrupted her, pocketing his ATM card.

Carol gave him a sharp look as she leaned on the backspace key, typed, printed, and handed him his boarding pass. "Enjoy your travel, Mr. Barclay."



PART 49

"Ready for my anything?"

Karen struggled to regain consciousness, only vaguely remembering that she'd passed out while Irwin, who'd just spoken, finished cleaning up her cubicle. But where was she now? And what did he mean by his "anything"? She felt she should know but didn't remember, then felt herself drifting again...something about a summer's day.

"Hmmm?"

Irwin's voice, followed by his laughter, woke her up again. Startled, her hands jerked about, trying to get her bearings. A scent wafted up whenever she hit the floor: disinfectant. Her hand hit the wall, then something sharp that had wedged a fist-sized hole between the wall and floor. Her eyes fluttered open, but she couldn't see anything, just a shine and fresh blood on her hand. Must have been glass...

"Oh there'll be a lot more blood."

Karen, whose eyes had closed again, felt him lick the fresh blood off her hand. Then she heard a long, satisfied sigh. But she didn't care. Oddly, she was sure it was Frank, not Irwin, that was now on top of her. And Frank's whisper in her ear: "Tell him to wait. Tell him you have a surprise for him that'll make it even better. In one of your boxes."

"What'd you say, bitch? A surprise?"

She must have said something aloud. Her boxes, what was in her boxes? She felt some weight shift off her.

"Sexy lingerie for me to tear off? Go ahead. Get it."

Shoved, her head hit something hard, but not as hard as the wall. A box. She opened her eyes. Her hands fluttered over the box, trying to open it. Frank whispered, "Not this box. Friends Forever. Box underneath. This box doesn't have anything."

Anything?

Suddenly Karen was fully conscious, remembering what Irwin had done to her before. Wide open, her eyes took in every detail of her storage unit.

If only a building...

Where did that thought come from? No longer was she seeing her storage unit. Instead, she was seeing what must have been the left-over riggings for an ancient stage below it. A heavy lever was only visible because she wasn't seeing where she'd just cut her hand on the glass that had wedged a gap between her storage unit's wall and floor.

"Your best friend Marie, my...biggest mistake," Frank whispered urgently. "The box underneath!"

Karen's storage unit reappeared. She felt herself shoved from behind.

"Hurry up!" Irwin snapped.

She thought it would kill her outright, but she pushed the top box aside with a great sweep of her arm. It clattered on the metal floor, spilling its contents: The small metal horse on wheels with almost all its paint chipped off that had been her grandfather's. Her parents' high-school yearbook that Karen had dog-eared since her parents' fatal car accident on the way to their high school reunion.

"Box underneath?" Irwin snarled. "Why didn't you just tell me?"

Her grandfather. Her parents. Would they be there, waiting for her, wherever *there* was?

"No!" Frank seemed to yell in her ear.

"Where's the fucking sexy lingerie?" Irwin asked, rifling through the box underneath. "Fuck!" He snatched a hand out, bleeding like Karen's had been. Then he pulled out a huge piece of the broken "friends forever" plaque with which she had hoped to preserve the memory of what had been the greatest friendship of her life, with Marie. It was now a most efficient weapon, smooth on one side so he could hold it easily and wickedly jagged on the other.

Karen, seated in the cramped space, whimpered and scrambled backwards till she cut her hand again on the glass that had gotten wedged between the floor and the wall.

Irwin, on hands and knees, seemed to slither over the tiny space separating them, like a rat closing on its prey. Beady eyes glittering in the gloom, he oozed over her grandfather's metal horse, over her parents' yearbook. Then he reared back and smiled down at her. "You didn't play your cards *quite* right." He raised the broken plaque as high as he could over her, touching the ceiling.

She squirmed, banging her back against the wall, cutting her hand yet again on the glass wedged there till her whole arm slid through the fist-sized gap it had made and she howled in pain.

Irwin laughed, jerking the jagged plague he held over her this way and that such that she kept wiggling about in different directions.

Karen imagined she heard Frank's unremitting scream. Even Irwin seemed to jump at it. But she was starting to pass out again, no matter how hard she fought it. *Grandpa*, she called silently. *Daddy*. *Mommy*.

She knew she was losing consciousness and, with it, the last chance to save her life, when she imagined she saw a green hurricane swirling around Irwin's head, seeming to obscure his vision as he tried to bat it away. Her hand that had slipped between the wall and the floor flopped about a bit, like a dying fish, and came to rest on a fragment of what her caressing fingers could tell was a once-grand wooden carving, loose in the ancient abandoned spaces between the current floors. If only she could escape to that space too. She willed her soul, soon to be released from her body she was sure, to escape there, amidst the gracious elegance of a time long since gone. Finally, she asked her imaginary playmate, the once-grand old building, if it would remember her.

Its answer seemed to be another vision of the left-over riggings for its ancient stage.

"Wake up, bitch!"

Irwin's voice seemed so far away now, but she felt the slap. Her eyes fluttered open, but she knew she was still imagining things when she still saw the green hurricane. Irwin swatted it away from his eyes, but it returned with a vengeance.

Her hand flopped away from the wooden carving and she found her fingers closing around something heavy.

Another slap.

No. It was a simple word, just one, that bubbled up from somewhere deep inside Karen.

A third slap.

Her eyes opened wide as she yanked her arm out of the gap, her hand gripping a heavy lever. She heard a horrible concussion. Then she felt her own head slip back against the wall, and there was blackness. She saw and heard no more.



PART 50

Suzy didn't want to do what Mommy said. Daddy didn't do what Mommy said. So Suzy didn't have to do what Mommy said either.

Mommy was no fun. Mommy didn't like it when Daddy brought home pretty ladies, who gave Suzy candy and laughed a lot. So Suzy didn't like Mommy.

Daddy was fun, even when he stumbled around, and his mouth smelled like the red stuff in funny glasses that Mommy wouldn't let her drink.

"Suzy Q! Where are you, Suzy Q?"

She giggled. That was Mommy. Mommy couldn't find her in this funny, big ole building. Mommy had told her to stay close, but Daddy never stayed close to Mommy, so why should she have to stay close to Mommy? Besides, she had found a great hiding place. Even if there were two grown-ups in it already. One was a man, and the other was a lady, who had fewer clothes on than the pretty ladies Daddy brought home. But they were both asleep.

"Suzy Q! Where are you?"

Uh oh! Mommy was getting closer! She snuggled in closer to the sleeping man and lady. One of them moved, so she put her finger to her lips, just like Daddy did when he was hiding from Mommy.

"Suzy Q, don't you dare hide from me!"

She giggled again, just like Daddy giggled when Mommy said that to Daddy.

"Susan Witherspoon, I'm going to leave you in this fucking storage space if you don't come out this minute!"

She giggled and giggled, snuggling up closer to the sleeping lady. Except...the lady wasn't sleeping anymore. Instead she was staring at the man. Suzy could see the lady's eyes getting bigger and bigger. Then she looked at Suzy. At first Suzy thought she looked like a really nice lady, like one of the ladies Daddy brought home. But then she started to look really scary mean and started whispering about how Suzy better get out of there or she'd do all kinds of really mean things to her.



PART 51

The Storage Space would have moaned... No. It stopped itself, reminding itself that it was done with any desire to be human. So the Storage Space creaked with pleasure when Suzy Witherspoon leaped out of Karen's storage unit and ran screaming over its ancient floorboards to her mother.

"Mommy, Mommy, a lady in a little room said really, really mean things to me!"

"She did? Really, Suzy Q?"

"Yes, Mommy. Really! Over there." That rude, odious child actually pointed.

The Storage Space heard Karen think "uh oh" and agreed with her.

"She said really mean things to you for no reason?"

"No reason, Mommy. No reason at all. I didn't do anything. I just jumped into her little room..."

"To hide from me yet again, Suzy Q?"

"No, Mommy, no! I was just...um...tired."

Mother Witherspoon put her hands on her hips. "Tired, eh? So why, pray tell, would you 'jump' into a storage unit if you were tired?"

"Really, Mommy, really! I just jumped in because the mean lady...only I didn't know she was mean then...and a man were sleeping there so I...um...thought it was the place to go if you needed a nap. Mommy, that lady was really mean to me! Right over there. You should go scold her!"

The Storage Space stopped creaking with pleasure. It could feel that Karen was holding her breath.

Mother Witherspoon took a step towards Karen's storage unit, but then she stopped and turned back toward her daughter. "I suppose I should really report any disreputable people sleeping, and heaven knows what all else, in a storage unit...and frightening a child. But you did jump into the 'mean' lady's unit, didn't you?"

The Storage Space relaxed so suddenly that its southwestern corner, sinking gradually because of a deep underground stream no surveyor had ever spotted, dove a full half inch further into the ground. But it could hear Karen's thoughts: *What am I thinking? I killed Irwin in self-defense! I need help!*

Mother Witherspoon was dragging Suzy Witherspoon to the front door.

Karen opened her mouth to call her back.

Like highlighting the heavy lever that had saved Karen's life, the Storage Space felt it must, again, intervene. It, after all, had the benefit of several centuries of memory. So it flooded Karen with examples of justice miscarrying, particularly those that involved truthful pleas of self-defense resulting in death penalties.

But the matter was resolved when, just as Mother Witherspoon closed the door behind herself and the screeching Suzy, Karen passed out again.



PART 52

Jennifer's kitten. Judy. Jennifer came to screaming, telling herself over and over again that she'd never had a twin sister named Judy. But something was wrong; she couldn't make so much as a single sound. A big hand was clamped over her mouth. Then she realized that it was the homeless woman who was screaming.

A man whispered in Jennifer's ear, "Count to ten slowly. Then go ahead and yell at the top of your lungs." The hand left her mouth. She heard some kind of motion behind her. Of course she had no intention of following his directions. Why should she bother counting to ten slowly just because some idiot told her to? But her headache pounded and it took a moment to catch her breath. Then she opened her eyes.

In front of her the not-homeless man Alex had his fingers wrapped tightly around the homeless woman's throat. She wasn't screaming any more.

Jennifer yelled at the top of her lungs.

Alex dropped the homeless woman and wheeled around to look at her, eyes widening.

She was very sorry that she'd made so much as a single sound.

"How could I? How could I have forgotten about you?" Alex' voice wasn't the same as the voice that had whispered in her ear. He was closing the distance between them, babbling something about how Jennifer was just like some bird, but she didn't know what that meant and wasn't listening anymore. She was thinking about blond hair, chiseled cheekbones, and piercing green eyes. Who had told her to count to ten slowly?

She turned away from Alex to look behind her. Nobody was there. All that was there was the ratty old oriental rug she was lying on, with some kind of big stain on it...maybe red wine. Nobody had told her to count to ten slowly.

Blond hair, chiseled cheekbones, piercing green eyes... Bird... Birds singing beautifully. What was that...song of some kind?...going through her mind? Whose laughter was that?

But there was no man with blond hair, chiseled cheekbones, and piercing green eyes. Just like there was no...and had never been...evil twin Judy. And besides, Jennifer's eyes were closing again.



PART 53

Martin peeled back the sheet so he could run his fingers over Karen's naked hip. She stirred in her sleep, mumbling, "I love you, Martin."

It was then that he knew he was dreaming. His eyes fluttered open: odd lighting, something funny and hard about his bed. But the dream had been so, so sweet, and sleep felt so, so good. He smiled and turned over, settling into a deep and dreamless slumber.

"Time to wake up, Mr. Barclay."

Huh? Bloody hell! Who was Barclay? And who was this strange woman who was shaking Martin, when the chap she wanted awake was named Barclay?

Some canned announcement about commencing a descent into San Francisco.

Bollocks! What was he hallucinating now? He opened his eyes wide, prepared for anything up to and including pink elephants.

"That's better, Mr. Barclay. You were sleeping so soundly I was afraid you'd miss your breakfast."

"My name's not..." Martin trailed off, suddenly remembering with crystal clarity. The woman at the counter at JFK, flirting with the man dressed in blue. He'd bribed her to put him on this flight; he'd told her his name was... "I mean, of course my name's Barclay, but you can call me by my first name, Randolph."

He looked around. He had, in fact, been in a bed of sorts. "Carol" at JFK must have put him in First Class. A pretty girl across the aisle, struggling with her rolling carry-on case, smiled at him. Martin smiled back and, oddly, felt it. Vaguely he remembered something about a stop on the way across the country and a delay of some sort, but he'd slept through it all...a great, wonderful sleep. He felt great, and looked around again.

Nothing was undulating. Except for being in First Class, it all looked normal.

"You didn't have any luggage, not even carry-on, did you...Randolph?"

"That's right," he told the flight attendant, smiling at her too. Then he dove into his pockets. He also didn't have any money.



PART 54

Karen struggled to regain consciousness. Yet again. How long had it been since she ran out of poor, now-dead Martin's back door? Half-naked and leaving all her clothes in the suitcase she'd planned to move in with... Her job! In all this time, however long it was, this was the first time Karen had given it a thought, perhaps at least in part because she rarely gave it a thought anyway. The investment banking firm where she did due-diligence number crunching that involved no contact or concern for other people was hardly...spiritually fulfilling. But Karen hadn't even called in sick, and she did need to pay the rent...

Wait a minute... Pay the rent *where*?

She realized she still wasn't fully conscious, didn't even have her eyes open yet, and was struggling to piece together things that would have been immediately obvious otherwise. Frank...The apartment they shared. It was all over with Frank, who she'd left after finding him in bed with her best friend, which was why she had been at Martin's in the first place.

She didn't even have a place to stay...

Her eyes snapped open.

She didn't even have clothes...

But there was someone with her. Someone who could help her! She shook his shoulder.

He rolled over...completely unnaturally. The mess that was all that was left of his face forced her, with great reluctance, to check the carotid artery in his neck. Nothing.

Irwin. She remembered hitting him with that heavy metal thing, remembered the little girl and her mother, remembered thinking she should ask for help...it was self defense after all...but then remembered a strong warning against doing so from the building she was still imagining was sentient. But that was ridiculous. She had to get out of this fucking storage space and get help! It *was* self defense!

Karen yanked his clothes off him, despite revulsion over Irwin and screams of pain from her own injuries. After struggling into his filthy clothes, she scrambled around her storage unit for whatever little she'd brought from Martin's or anything in her boxes that could be of the least use. She at last made it

out to the hall...on her feet...and started down the hall toward the front door. When the inevitable dizziness struck again, she resolutely clung to a wall and stayed on her feet.

The stairs were a nightmare. She cried from the effort, but she made it down. She could see the front door. She staggered over to it and swung it wide open.

"Finally!"

However appropriate that word was, she didn't think she'd said it aloud. It hadn't even been said in her voice. Blinded by the sunlight, she was confused. Slowly, her vision returned. She saw a teenage girl, who looked even more pathetic than she did, standing in front of her.

"Like, I thought this effin' storage space would never open! I don't, like, have the money to pay you but...please!...I really need my things."



PART 55

Sam needed all his government training to remain conscious with a fucking stiletto heel embedded in his neck. It hurt even more than the TOPS knife some foreign operative he'd failed to frisk properly once stuck in his back. Every instinct had yelled at him to yank that TOPS knife out of his back then, and every instinct yelled at him to yank the damn stiletto heel out of his neck now. But he knew that...as long as the blood wasn't spurting outright and he could still breath...his life could depend on leaving the heel in his neck till he made it to a hospital.

That yell. Had he, only half conscious at the time, imagined it? Sam peered through the crack between the wall and the door he was hiding behind. No. Must have been Ms. Twitch, she who'd stabbed him with the fucking stiletto heel. (Not that he blamed her, half passed-out from Alex' chloroform at the time and undoubtedly aiming for Alex.) And that yell was just in time, judging from the all-but-strangled homeless woman Alex dropped to look up at Ms. Twitch. Sam noted that the homeless woman jerked almost imperceptibly when she hit the floor. A good sign.

But now Ms. Twitch was in trouble. And Alex was distracted by Ms. Twitch and had just walked past the door Sam was hiding behind. Shame he never had a TOPS knife CAT 1095 when needed, but he swung around the door and toppled Alex before Alex even heard him. Too easy. He was about to contain Alex with a full-nelson slam...

But his head spun hard.

Though he dreamed of her incessantly yelling, when he woke up Ms. Twitch was only whimpering and then silent. Her blood was everywhere. Alex, back turned to Sam, was still at work on her.

Only one solution that was fast enough. Biting his lip to avoid screeching in pain, he yanked the stiletto heel out of his neck and sank it into Alex' neck. Whereas Ms. Twitch had missed Sam's jugular, Sam did not miss Alex'.

While a now-helpless Alex spasmed across the floor, Sam could feel the huge clot of blood that spurted out of his own neck. His knees buckled. He fell on top of Ms. Twitch.

Unexpectedly, considering her lips weren't even twitching any more, her eyes fluttered open. Sam was heartened by a reaction to the sight of him that he'd seen often enough to interpret as a healthy female reaction. "You," she said with a sudden smile, "are real!" She looked even less appealing to him than usual, but he did his best to smile back. *I mean, what the fuck.* But then she, like Alex, also spasmed.

"You're real," she said between spasms, "and...I can see my whole life now...everything that was real. You're real...and so was my evil twin Judy." She went limp.

Sam was sweating the protocol of calling 911 for them all, without blowing his cover, while fumbling for his phone.

It slipped out of his hand and slid across the floor, out of reach.

He checked Ms. Twitch's neck and found no pulse anyway. But there was still himself and the homeless woman.

Then it started, like the kind of corny old movie you only watch when you're up in the middle of the night and desperate. His life. Starting with when he used to play secret agent man with the brother that had died in a terrorist attack long before him.



PART 56

The Storage Space was aghast. This was hardly the person it wanted to see again after all that...unpleasantness. Yet here she was, that young girl, and now she was... Well, really, her condition was quite obvious and...

"Finally! I, like, really need my things!"

And she hadn't even looked up at poor Karen who'd opened the door to the street and found her there. Instead she kept her eyes on that idiotic "smartphone," just like she had no matter what Le Grand Rat had done to her the first time she tried getting her things back with no money.

Her fingers flew over the smartphone's screen. Then, eyes still on her phone, she touched a nasty scar on her cheek. The Storage Space would have shuddered if only a building... No, the Storage Space reminded itself that to be human was no honor, especially since it remembered all too well how that nasty scar came into being.

Briefly, as she touched that nasty scar, raw agony twisted her otherwise silly young face, making her seem real as her fingers froze and her eyes, though still on the phone, were obviously no longer seeing it. "I know what you're going to do to me, but it's better than what my parents are doing to me over the things they think I lost but was only hiding from them." Then her eyes snapped into focus, and her fingers resumed their flurry of activity as her face became young and silly again. "Just, like, actually give me my stuff back this time!"

Karen wobbled a bit. How could the Storage Space have all but forgotten her when she had been about to break its poor, long-suffering heart...and, yes, a building could have a heart...by leaving? Karen was the one person in all this long, weary, helpless, heartbreaking time who could actually hear the poor, long-suffering Storage Space. But now she grabbed the carvings surrounding its door, the carvings she'd so lovingly caressed so long ago, as she started to faint again.

Even the young girl...at long last...looked up from her phone. "Like, where's Irwin and who are you? Suh? You look horrible! This is totally cray cray!" With an odd glint of a smile, she started taking pictures of Karen, then looked back at her phone as her fingers again flew over its screen.

Karen, catching her breath, studied the young girl for a long time, her eyes lingering on each scar and bruise, amateurishly concealed by makeup, then lingering on her body long enough to observe her condition. "When are you due?"



PART 57

Imogene looked up at the bitch like blocking her way into the storage space and like keeping her from getting her stuff before her parents killed her like really in Real Life. "Due?" So much for fucking Real Life. Imogene gave a snort of laughter before going back to Snapchatting on her phone.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Like OMG that bitch I just sent pics of thinks I'm pregnant!!!

^URSUNPC&proud: Zayum! Not woke.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Def not woke.

^URSUNPC&proud: < looking @ clothes. He? She? They?

WTFwasImogeneCoca: He clothes. She body. "They" till he/she/they corrects us?

^URSUNPC&proud: < unPC, calling he/she/they "it" cuz it called u pregnant.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Hahaha.

^URSUNPC&proud: < never saw u RL but know u better than RL here. U say u virgin = bible.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: < name not Mary, not from Bthlhm, not pregnant.

^URSUNPC&proud: Hahaha but u gotta go RL & get ur stuff.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Sec.

^URSUNPC&proud: K.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Like OMG!!!

^URSUNPC&proud: ?

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Like its clothes!!! Like OMG, like its clothes are making me like cray cray cray cray for no reason!!!

^URSUnPC&proud: Don't go Draking on me. Must be a reason.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Like no reason!!! Like I don't care if it stole his clothes!!!

^URSUnPC&proud: He? Who he?

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Like no1. Like not important. Sec. Sick 2 my stomach. Maybe puke.

^URSUnPC&proud: But u haven't had anything 2 eat this morning.



PART 58

Martin peeled back the sheet so he could run his fingers over the girl's naked hip. She stirred in her sleep, mumbling, "I love you, Martin."

It was then that he figured he was dreaming and struggled to wake up. But he couldn't. He tried everything. Finally he looked around. Maybe he was conscious, but this was all one big hallucination?

The bed was in a room with a huge bay window. The sky outside was blue. The grass he could see on a steep hill was green. The sidewalk wasn't pink. He heard something roar overhead and spotted not a dragon, but a plane. Nothing was undulating.

Bloody hell! Martin indulged in a long, luxurious stretch. He felt great. All those hallucinations before? Purely his initial reaction to killing Frank...strictly in self defense!...and chronic lack of sleep. He hadn't dared to let himself think about it before, but just about the only elephant, pink or otherwise, that he hadn't acknowledged in the room then was the fear that his father might have been right. No, all those drugs he used to take hadn't doomed him to a life of flashbacks. Brilliant! Life was sweet.

The girl stirred in her sleep again. She wasn't Karen, who haunted his dreams. It was the girl that had smiled at him from across the aisle on the plane, while struggling with her rolling carry-on case. The girl he hadn't even noticed being there until after that stop on the way across country he just barely remembered. Funny, he'd thought it was a nonstop and must have been destroyed to a point approaching death not to have noticed such a pretty girl immediately.

She stirred once more. This time her eyes fluttered open. At first the way she looked at him was sweeter than his sweetest dream of Karen. But then something changed. She looked surprised, then cold. "Really gotta pee...Randolph." She sprang out of bed, a sight to see naked as she stumbled about a bit, apparently still groggy enough not to remember exactly where her own bathroom was.

Martin laughed and felt himself harden, hoping she'd find that bathroom and return soon. In the meantime he looked around a bit more. No, it wasn't a hotel room and looked reasonably convincing as a place she'd lived in for a while but... Something made his spider sense tingle; something about the place looked just a bit staged, its very casualness a bit too perfect, but he couldn't put his finger on it. Too used to seeing pink elephants, he chastised himself.

Anyway he forgot all about it when she finally re-emerged from the bathroom, thankfully still naked.



PART 59

Despite all her own injuries, Karen caught the teenage girl who fell across the threshold of the storage space and into her arms. Every body part screamed, and her head spun violently, but she didn't drop the teenager.

The teenage girl responded by puking all over her, including the clothes from Irwin she was wearing.

"Morning sickness," Karen whispered gently in her ear. "It'll pass."

The girl jerked back from her as if hit by baseball bat. "Like, I'm def not pregnant, like, no matter what you...he...did!"

Karen caught the girl's arms before she fell over backwards, watched this teenager's bowler hat fall off behind her, and then heard something clatter forward across the storage space's floor.

"My phone!" The girl dived for it, but it skated all the way across the dingy floor and disappeared under the reception counter.

Karen made it to the other side of the counter first. Something on its underside must have activated the phone. Its menu blinked up at her, and her heart leapt. She snatched it up, smiling at the possibilities she'd been so long without. She should at least borrow it long enough to call in sick to work!

"Like, that's mine!" The teenager reached over the counter and grabbed it. "And it's fucking broken! Like, you broke it!"

Karen, still behind the counter, leaned on it for support as she looked up at the girl and the still-open door behind her.

The girl wasn't even looking at her anymore, fingers flying over a phone that apparently still worked. Moto jacket slopped over black overalls and a white tee that was sticking out on one side. Karen smiled, remembering a very long time ago when her guide to grunge was whatever they were wearing on *My So-Called Life*.

Clothes... Now she frowned and looked behind the girl at the outside world she hadn't seen in so long. The clothes *she* needed were her work clothes back at poor dead Martin's in a suitcase. How would she

gain access to his apartment? By explaining to the police that he was dead but...and this only occurred to her for the first time...she had no idea where his body was?

She'd passed out just before her husband Frank finished killing Martin. In her storage space. With her, unconscious, the only other person remaining. Who except Irwin, working there, could have reported what he found to the police and gotten the body removed? And she thought she could claim defense against his assault as her only reason for killing Irwin?

Something told her what she'd pieced together wasn't quite right. Still, what would she be risking to return to an investment banking job she hated. She wanted to work with people, not numbers.

"But this is crazy!"

It was only when the girl darted her a quick look that Karen realized she'd spoken aloud. She froze in the act of coming out from behind the counter and heading for the door. Still a gust of fresh air from outside swirled around her nose, teasing her. Trees. Sunlight. All calling to her even if her imaginary friend, the building, had switched into overdrive with all its tales of people wrongly convicted of murder.

But the girl was still looking up at her, now clutching her stomach again. Karen examined that young face and what she could see of her body...fresh bruises, old scars. Scars in places she recognized somehow, shuddering when she remembered what Irwin had done to her. Worse, though, were the girl's eyes: defiant, shut like doors, until a wave of nausea opened them all the way up to the tender, innocent child so carefully hidden inside. Karen remembered holding this teenager in her arms and was determined to help her.

The girl heaved, snatched her bowler hat off the street, gave Karen the finger, and darted off.

"Oh no, don't leave!" Karen called, heart sinking. How could she have failed to help such a poor creature? Again, she was about to come out from behind that counter, despite her need to hold on to it for support, and go after the girl...except she then saw the girl leap into a cab.

Devastated by her own failure, Karen buried her face in her hands and wept more tears than she'd ever shed on her own accord.

"I need your help!"

It was the most exquisitely beautiful voice Karen had ever heard. She looked up.

The girl may have been gone, but in her place stood an elderly homeless woman.



PART 60

Amelia regretted asking the woman behind the counter at the storage space for help the minute she looked up with a face full of her own injuries. What was it about this neighborhood? Amelia had barely survived a mad man who, probably only because he'd let his dog out to pee, had been killed by an extraordinarily handsome young man...who had then died himself.

Amelia considered what she assumed was the storage space's employee behind the counter, then leaned over to brush some blonde hair out of the woman's tears. "I'm truly sorry to trouble you at such a time, but has anyone been asking after a petulant young woman with dark hair and a nervous tic that twitches her lips? Awkwardly, I'm unable to supply her last name, but her first name was Jennifer. I believe she has a storage unit here at your facility, so you should have some record of her?"

The blonde woman wrinkled her brow in confusion, looking for all the world like she'd been so distracted by her own problems that she'd forgotten she worked there. Finally she glanced around, eyes widening at the counter between them as if she'd never seen it before, and appeared to get her bearings. "Why?"

Amelia's heart was heavy. She couldn't help feeling disloyal to poor, dead Jennifer. Nonetheless, Jennifer could no longer be hurt by her now rescinding what she'd originally told the police in an effort to protect Jennifer. "The murder that was reported here..." Amelia looked down at the dingy floor, still unable to shake the irrational feeling that she was being disloyal. "You must know about it, working here and all. I need to speak to someone about Jennifer. I...I may have told the police something about her that wasn't correct, that might get in the way of their tracking down the real killer."

She forced herself to look back up at the woman. Granted, it certainly wasn't a pleasant subject, but she wasn't at all prepared for the look of abject fear on the blonde's face.

NEXT 30 PARTS IN A SEPARATE DOCUMENT