

Best Teacher

by

Carter Nipper

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The Most Grandiloquent Miss Snark
and many, many more Angels Unawares too numerous to mention who have been there for me when I needed them.

Jennifer woke. It was dark. As dark as night. No, darker. As dark as midnight. No, that's not it, either. Darker. As dark as...Uh-oh.

She lay on her back with her hands crossed on her breast. Panic welled up in her, and she flung her hands up, only to hit a hard surface covered by silk and some thin padding. It was only a few inches above her face.

Her screams were deafening, and her fingernails bent and snapped as she clawed frantically at the coffin lid that trapped her. She tried to kick, as well, but her knees could not bend far enough to give her feet any leverage. The lining and padding were soon shredded and hung down in her face as she clawed at the lead that lined her casket. Her mind gave up its tenuous grasp on reality.

"I always joked that I would be late to my own funeral" was her last rational thought. She had been too late by far. The late Jennifer Morgan lay quietly in her grave. For a time.



"Join me, and we will live forever."

At first, Jennifer thought he was speaking figuratively--just the kind of thing guys say in the throes of passion. Those that talk at all, that is. Then all thought vanished, a fart in the wind, swept away in a firestorm of lovemaking. She was so deeply immersed in the depth of her pleasure that she didn't notice the fire in his eyes or the pin-pricks on her neck.

As they floated in the afterglow, she thought she could love Richard. He certainly intrigued her. His dark skin, eyes, and hair and his very precise and carefully enunciated English marked him as being a foreigner and gave him an air of mystery. Her very Northern European cool blonde, blue-eyed elegance contrasted with his Southern European air of danger and intrigue to make them a striking couple.

"I love you." She hadn't meant to say it out loud. Not yet. Fear overwhelmed her, fear that he would run away, that she was pushing too hard.

He rose up on one elbow and looked at her. "If you love me, be mine for eternity."

"OK." She thought he was kidding. He wasn't.

She wore scarves for a few days to hide the hickey on her neck and thought nothing of it. The heavy, tired feeling wore off after a few days, too.

That was the first.



This time, Jen woke gradually and had time to consider her situation. Though still shocked, she realized that this is what she should have expected. After all, if you give yourself to a vampire, you should expect to die and be buried. If you wake up, then that only means that you're a vampire now, as well. She ran her tongue around the inside of her mouth, feeling the long canines protruding from her gums as confirmation.

But now what? How was she going to get out? She lifted her hands and felt the top of the casket. It was solid,

really solid. Well, at least she didn't have to worry about dying in here. She giggled a little at the thought and heard the hollow echoing sound of it. She sobered quickly as she realized that she was getting hungry. She would get uncomfortable pretty quickly. She suddenly understood that there were fates worse than death. Far worse.

She had to get out. The earth above the casket would still be soft. Maybe she could just push the lid up and claw her way out? Weren't vampires supposed to have some kind of superhuman strength?

She pushed as hard as she could and the lid didn't move. Nothing, not even a budge. Nervous worms writhed in her belly.

Jen realized with a shock that she could see a little. She made out the strings and streamers of silk hanging down from her first escape attempt. She couldn't see the color. All she could see was gray. Seeing in the dark! Now that would be a definite advantage! If she could get out.

She focused her attention on the roof of her tomb and concentrated. She realized that she was seeing through it. She could make out the separate clods of dirt and clay and the stones and roots and bits of sod mixed in with them. She concentrated harder and her consciousness moved upward through the soil until it rose out of the ground entirely, and she saw the world above.

It was night, of course. The full moon hung in the sky, nearing its zenith, so it must be near midnight. She only saw in shades of gray, a minor limitation on a pretty amazing ability, but she saw clearly, even into heavily shadowed areas. She saw her surroundings all the way around, as if she had three hundred and sixty degrees of

vision simultaneously. She knew that the crickets were chirping, but she heard nothing.

She gathered her consciousness back into her body and thought for a few moments. If she could send her mind out, maybe she could send her body the same way? Others had done it, otherwise there would be no vampires roaming the night -- they would all be trapped in their graves forever. She shuddered at the thought. What would it be like when the hunger became overwhelming, and she could not satisfy it? What would it be like to feel that burning, consuming pain forever and ever and ever?

"Hell," she thought. "That's what Hell is."



"God, Terri, I feel awful!" Jen held the phone to her ear with her shoulder while she fumbled with the aspirin bottle. "Goddamn childproof caps!"

Terri's voice made soothing noises in her ear as she spilled three caplets into her hand and gulped them down dry. The third one stuck. She gagged briefly and choked it back up. She spit it out over the side of the bed.

"I can't imagine why I've got such a hangover today. I didn't drink that much last night." Terri's voice burbled in her ear again.

"Well, yeah we did...great, as always, fantastic...He left another hickey on my neck. Second time...Yeah, he has this fantasy about being a vampire. You know, only goes out after dark, never eats or drinks, the whole deal...Yeah, but

the sex is so-o-o-o great! I can live with a little neurosis for sex like this!"

Jen listened for a moment, then laughed.

"Yeah, maybe he's trying to make me one, too. 'Do you want to live forever?', he asked. I told him 'Yeah. So far, so good.'"

She held the phone away from her ear and grimaced until the laughter subsided. She shook another caplet from the bottle and swallowed it.

"Well, I've got to go...Have fun this afternoon; I'm going back to bed...Love you, too...Bye."

Jen racked the receiver carefully and held her head in her hands. It felt like it was full of cotton balls, but still weighed too much for her to hold it up.

That was the second; three's a charm.



Jen closed her eyes and concentrated. She visualized herself rising from the padding underneath her. Her mind kept wandering, and she had to wrench it back onto its task. She focused harder, harder than she ever had. She began to see in her mind as clearly as she saw through her eyes.

It worked! She felt air moving underneath her as she rose. Her breasts bumped against the coffin lid, breaking her concentration, and she fell back. It worked!

Jen gathered her strength, and started again, this time going for broke. She focused on the surface, filling her mind with the sight of her surroundings. A small white church stood off to her right. She recognized it as the Joshua Creek

Baptist Church. Her family had been members for generations, though she had stopped going to services a couple of years ago.

At the periphery of her consciousness, she was aware of rocks and dirt, worms and beetles. She focused on the fresh sod covering her grave. She did not yet have any headstone or marker. Oh well, her parents would get around to it soon enough, she guessed.

Jen realized that her viewpoint had shifted back to a unidirectional awareness. She felt grass on her back, damp and tickling. She sat up and found herself sitting on her own grave. The night breeze was cool on her skin.

She looked down and confirmed her suspicion. Apparently, clothes could not pass through solid ground as easily as she could. She was jay-bird naked, sitting in the middle of a cemetery. At least she'd had the sense to die in the summertime.

A quick glance at the sky told her that she had a bigger problem. The moon was setting, growing large and orange as it neared the horizon. She needed shelter before sunrise. Jen did not want to be a crispy critter on the first day of her new "unlife".

She stood and looked around. The church was definitely out, for obvious reasons. She giggled at the sudden vision of a naked vampire cowering in the corner of the sanctuary. What a sensation! What a scandal! Her parents would never live it down.

Her parents! Tears sprang up in her eyes as she understood that she was dead to her parents, family, and friends. Dead. So final. Her parents loved her deeply. So did Terri and Wanda and her brother Derrick, the little dork.

The hole that her death left would never, could never, be filled.

Jen sobbed. Tears ran down her cheeks. She wiped them away, and her fingers came away dark and sticky. She sniffed them. Blood. She was hungry. She sucked her fingers; the blood was rancid and wretched. She gagged. She had to get moving, find clothes, find food, find shelter. Quickly. She didn't know where to start.

She took a step forward, just to be moving, and bounced off an invisible wall. It felt like walking into a mass of Jell-O. Puzzled, she reached forward, her hands sinking into the wall slightly. She pushed harder, but could not make any further impression. She tried to move to her right and met the same wall. Same to her left. She couldn't even back up. What now?

She noticed a strange glow on the monument ahead of her. Focusing, she saw a cross shining an evil red against the white stone. A cross! Fear stirred in her belly. She looked around, noticing ominous red glows all around. Trapped. Trapped between Hell-fire and damnation. Time was running out, and she was helpless.

A bat swooped by, squeaking. Bats! She could turn into a bat! Couldn't she? That's what all the stories said. She had to take the chance; it might be the only one she had. If she could fly, she could not only go high and see a place to hide, but she could also get to it quickly. She only had to change. Only.

The moon rested on the tops of the pine trees. She had no more time to think. She needed action if she was going to survive her first night.

Jen sat on the ground cross-legged. She was glad she had practiced Zen meditation. Slowing her breathing, she imagined her mind as a blackboard. As thoughts wrote themselves, she erased them. She quickly fell into the state of non-being, then she began to concentrate. Long, leathery wings, small furry body, large ears. She willed herself into bat-ness, feeling her body change into its new reality.

The bat opened its eyes and shook itself. It spread its wings and took off, squeaking and bouncing off a couple of the Jell-O walls as it took flight. It lurched from side to side, unstable and unsure. A sudden, strong echo sounded a strident alarm in its ears, and it veered to one side, fluttering toward the ground beside the tree trunk that had almost been its nemesis. It hit the ground hard and lay stunned for a moment. It scanned its surroundings with its sonar, regrouping, then took off and rose into the night sky, getting its flight under control as it got practice.

Jen struggled to maintain her dual identity. She needed to let her bat-self take care of the flying, while she looked for shelter. She scanned the landscape unrolling underneath her. She struggled to focus, aware that the moonlight was fading. The sun would rise in a few minutes. If she didn't find cover before then, she would be Jen-toast.

She forced that thought away and tried to orient herself. She saw a half-finished house ahead and knew where she was. The new subdivision lay just ahead. Either a lucky break or an unconscious thought had saved her. Rising higher, she let her consciousness wander out over the raw land and piles of building materials.

There! She focused on one particular house. It looked finished. They had even put in some shrubbery around the

underpinning. Underpinning meant crawl space. Shrubbery meant construction was finished, nobody crawling under the house to disturb her rest. She hoped.

She glanced to the west. The moon was gone. Only a fading glow on the western horizon marked the place where it had vanished. Eastward, the horizon glowed a baleful yellow. Panicked, she dove for the house. She misjudged her landing and crashed into a spirea bush.

Squeaking curses, she struggled to free herself. As she lost her concentration, she quickly regained her human form and tumbled out onto the red clay. Her skin Itched and burned, but the scratches healed in moments. She had to find the access door, and fast! She saw the wooden hatch to her left. She scrambled to it and snatched at the padlock. It crumpled in her fist like tinfoil.

Jen paused to regain her composure. It wouldn't do to rip the hatch off. That would bring attention and certain death. She carefully opened the hatch and crawled into the sweet darkness, pulling the door closed behind her. A shaft of light through a vent showed her which side faced east. She thought for a moment, then crawled to the north end of the house. No sunlight would reach her there.

She trembled as she curled into a ball against one of the cinder-block pillars. She was tired, dead tired, and hungry. Her muscles burned, and a blast furnace roared in her stomach. She drifted toward darkness as the light increased. She knew she would have to feed soon. Another problem for another day. Jen let her eyes close and fell into dreams of blood and death, fire and pain, Hell and resurrection.

And the evening and the morning were the first day.



Jen gasped and raised her hips to meet his. Pleasure rolled up through her body. Each time their bodies met was the crest of a new wave.

"Be mine, Jennifer. My love, my light, be mine forever."

She moaned in response to his whisper. "Forever", she gasped, "Yes, Richard, yes. Forever."

Through her half-open eyes, she saw him smile, mouth open, saw the fangs, knew the truth. Acceptance was easy. She thought she had always known.

"Oh God! Yes, Richard." She rolled her head to the side, offering him her throat.

He lowered himself onto her, into her. She pressed up against him, wanting to sink into the very heart of him as he sank deeply into her. A tidal wave swept her away, and she barely felt the pain. Higher and higher, she rode the coruscating wave, screaming helplessly, lost between death and Heaven. As the pleasure rose, darkness descended. For an eternity, for a moment, she shuddered, exploding, then relaxed, sinking sodden onto the bed, sinking into darkness.

"Forever, my love." His final whisper followed her down, down, into warm velvet death.



Jen didn't want to wake up. She felt his warmth and weight, his comfort and strength. "Richard," she whispered and reached to embrace him. Cool, dusty air filled her arms, and she jerked awake. "Richard."

Where was he? Where in the name of Hell was he? Shouldn't he be here helping her? Damn it all, she needed him now more than ever. Damn him! "Richard, where are you?" Her whisper wandered lost in dust and darkness.

Dusk eased into night. Her night vision began to take effect, and the world turned gray. She had a chunk of magma in her stomach and liquid fire ran in her blood. Weakness trembled in her knees and hands. She had to eat. Soon.

She scanned the crawl space, but saw no movement, no signs of life. Apparently, it was too soon even for the rats to move in. Expanding her awareness, she scanned her surroundings. Small warm things roamed in the woods, too small to satisfy her needs. She sought further afield.

There! Movement! Headlights slowly approaching. She saw an old pickup truck moving up the street toward her shelter. Blood flowed in the truck's cab, a powerful presence. Richard? Why would he be driving a truck? She focused closer, and the presence separated into halves, a girl and a boy. She snuggled against his side as he steered.

The truck slowed even more, turned into the driveway, pulled into the newly-finished garage. Jen heard murmurs and giggles as the engine noise stopped, but did not try to make out what they were saying.

Blood filled her eyes with hazy red, her mind with fever. Blood! With an effort, she stopped herself from

charging out of the crawl space in full attack. Patience. She needed to know what they were up to.

The truck's door slammed, and footsteps crunched around the side of the house. "How are we going to get in?" The girl spoke softly. Her voice trembled ever so slightly. "Mark said he left the window unlocked back here." The boy was confident and reassuring.

The footsteps stopped near where Jen crouched under the house. A window slid open. "See? Put your foot up here; I'll give you a boost." After some grunting and slithering, their bodies thumped onto the floor above Jen's head. More giggling and slithering followed. The giggles soon turned into slurps and soft groans, followed by gasps and the sound of skin slapping and sliding against skin.

Wild, red need filled Jen. Without even thinking, she let her consciousness rise through the floor and reincorporated her body next to the couple writhing together on the carpet. The sudden apparition of a naked woman crouching next to them shocked them into stillness.

Jen acted with supernatural speed, growling deep in her throat with feral bloodlust. She grabbed the boy by the back of his neck. She stood, snapped his neck with a quick squeeze, and flung the body across the room. Before the corpse even hit the wall, she dropped onto the naked girl, sinking her fangs into her throat even as the girl drew in her breath to scream.

Jen sucked at the soft throat under her mouth, but got nothing. The girl's scream split the night, her fear and pain twisting into a cloth of sound, filling the empty house and echoing into the silent world outside. Jen rose up and struck

again, searching for the blood that felt like a rope under the girl's skin. She missed again.

Reason fled as want and need overwhelmed her. Consumed in an inferno of bloodlust, she roared her frustration and roughly restrained the shrieking, wriggling thing under her. She tore at the thing's throat ferociously, slashing, tearing, biting. At last, a geyser of blood erupted, splashing warm and rich across Jen's face and soaking the wall and floor around them. She clamped her mouth over the fountain and drank greedily, gulping and slurping, grunting like a pig at the trough as the blood slid down her throat and cooled her thirst.

After only a few moments, the flow stopped, and the body underneath her went flaccid. Jen grunted and slurped and sucked at the wound, wanting more, weeping with her hunger and need, but her prey was dead, its heart stopped. No more blood would flow through this body ever again. Jen collapsed across the cooling flesh and sobbed with frustration and relief. Her hunger was not completely sated, but it no longer controlled her.

She pushed herself up and looked around, actually seeing the scene for the first time. The boy lay propped against the far wall, his eyes open. His head lay so far over that his ear rested on his shoulder. He looked overcome with surprise. He looked about sixteen.

A young girl lay before her with a face out of the depths of Hell. Her eyes were wide, her mouth open and twisted into a rictus of agony and horror. Her arms and legs splayed limply on the floor. Her skin was so white it glowed in the darkness. The ragged wound was a black obscenity against her throat. Her long, light-colored hair was twisted

and tangled on the floor and across her face. To Jen, she appeared about fifteen, still developing.

Children. Though Jen was, had been, only twenty, the gulf of years and experience that separated her from these two young people was immeasurable.

Dark smears and large spatter patterns soaked the floor and stained the wall. Some of the blood had shot several feet across the room. Around and behind Jen, clothes littered the floor, a random roadmap of youthful lust.

Jen squatted next to the girl's body. She wrapped her arms around her knees and rocked back and forth. Dark, sticky tears trickled down her face. A tear trickled into her mouth. It tasted sweet and coppery. Her stomach churned.

Jen wept. She wept for young lives ended before they had really begun. She wept for innocence lost. She wept for somebody's daughter, somebody's son. She wept for knowledge gained at a terrible price. She wept because of grief, because of guilt, because of forever. She did not grieve long -- she couldn't afford the time just then -- before she wiped her eyes and thought about immediate necessities.

Clothes. She sifted through the pieces lying on the floor. That bra was most definitely not a C cup. She would just have to hang loose for now. She tried on the boy's jeans. They were tight in the hips, but otherwise passable. They would have to do. His short-sleeved shirt was also big enough to at least provide decency. His boots were too big, her sneakers too small. By using their socks as padding, she was able to get the boots to fit well enough.

While she dressed, she considered her options. Leaving them here like this was not an option. Too many

questions. She could bury them either under the house or out in the woods, but there was no way to clean up all the blood. Again, too many questions.

The lump in the boy's shirt pocket sparked an idea. Cigarettes and a lighter. Fire would help. A hot enough blaze would destroy a lot of evidence and at least give her a head start. The pickup was in the garage. With gas in the tank. She hoped he was like most teenagers and didn't always have money for gas. Luck smiled on Jen. The gas can and length of garden hose she found in the truck bed did the trick.

"Damn you, Richard! Where are you?" As she watched the flames jitterbug atop the house, her voice was no longer wistful or longing. It had an edge to it, a hard edge that promised an answer to her question, and the Hellish glow in her eyes was not just a reflection of the burning house.

She turned away and vanished silently into the woods.



"Hello, Richard." Jen spoke so softly that only he could hear. Human ears would be overwhelmed by the loud music.

Richard was good. He did not respond immediately. Jen did not know how many years or centuries he had played this game, but he was very good at it. He sat at the bar talking to a young human. Blonde, Jen noticed, with large breasts. Apparently, Richard had a weakness in that direction.

After a few moments, he glanced around casually. He did not react, and she saw no recognition in his face. She stepped forward and gripped his elbow. "We have to talk. Privately." She squeezed, and his eyes widened just a fraction of an inch.

He spoke to the human over his shoulder, making an excuse, and rose from the stool. She guided him to the door, keeping her grip firm so he would have no choice but to follow. Either that or make a scene, and she knew he would never draw that kind of attention to himself.

Outside, she drew her former lover around the corner into a dark alley. She had taken care of the light beforehand. They didn't need it, and the darkness gave cover from unwelcome eyes. As they passed a dumpster, she threw Richard against the wall, so they were hidden from the street.

"Jennifer Morgan." Her voice was a tiger's growl.
"Ring any bells?"

Apparently it did. He opened his arms as if he would hug her. "Jennifer!"

She shoved him back against the wall, planted her hand against his sternum and pressed. He hissed as the bone compressed. "You left me, Richard. You left me to die. No not to die, to live in Hell forever and ever and ever. Why did you do that, Richard?" She pressed a little more, forcing more air from his lungs, then eased off so he could speak.

He drew a deep breath. "That's the way this life is, Jennifer. Survival of the fittest. There is no room for the weak in our world." He spoke quickly, aware of her anger, making his case. "The danger to our kind is too great. Only

those strong enough and resourceful enough to survive on their own can be allowed to walk the streets. One weakling dooms us all."

Jen had expected something of the sort. She had thought about this very carefully and thoroughly over the weeks as she tracked him down. She moved on to her next question.

"How many? How many women -- maybe men, too, I don't know -- how many have you doomed to burn in hunger and madness until the end of time? How many, Richard?" She had to restrain herself from crushing his chest. Though he would heal quickly enough, he might be unwilling to talk any more.

"How would I know? I do not keep score. I find willing subjects and change the ones I think will have a chance. After that, they are on their own. I am not my sisters' keeper."

"I loved you, Richard. I loved you, and you betrayed me. How could you? How could you be so cruel? You said you loved me. Why did you lie?"

Richard shrugged. "It is the way I am. I must move quickly through the world and leave no tracks. Sometimes people get left behind."

He tried to step forward; she shoved him back. "Jennifer, you must accept that you are different now. Your world has changed; you are no longer human. Love is not an option for us. Attachments are deadly. We are more than human. You must rise above such petty human emotions. Eternal life, Jennifer. Eternal! Under the shadow of eternal life, we revel in our superiority. We cast off the past, the dirty human parts that clogged our souls for so

long. We rise into a new race, better, stronger than those we use for food."

"Was that all I was to you, Richard? Food?" Jen was trembling. Her rage flamed white-hot.

"You were human. I made you better. Do you not see that?"

"I see what you did. I see what you are." She pushed. Hard. She heard a sharp crack as his sternum broke in half. Her hand sank through his chest until she felt his spine. She drew her hand back and let him collapse to the ground.

"I know exactly what you are." She reached into the dumpster and pulled out the sharpened piece of board she had stashed there.

Richard rose to his knees, bent over and groaning. His chest slowly pushed back out to a normal shape. Bones and cartilage crackled as they warped back into shape. He lifted himself upright but remained kneeling. He tried to speak, but could only gasp.

Jen bent over and spoke softly. "You are evil, Richard. Evil. You are a disease. Vermin. Worse than the rats that surround us."

Richard's eyes widened. He struggled to get to his feet, but she knocked him back down. He sat up and held his hands out in front of him. "It is the only way," he gasped. "Do you not see that? The only way."

Jen's rage had cooled into a cold blue crystal, sharp and hard. She drove the stake forward with both hands, piercing his body and his heart. The sharp point ripped through his back and shattered on the brick wall behind him. His shriek filled the night with pain. Within moments there was nothing but more filth on the pavement.

"Lousy bastard," Jen muttered. She heard footsteps approaching. Within seconds, only rats, grime, and two piles of clothing remained, an enigma for humans to ponder.

THE END

Special Bonus Feature

“Windows to the Soul”

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"Come on, Sarah! It'll be fun!"

She clasped her hands around her coffee cup, savoring its warmth, not wanting to see the adventurous gleam in his eyes, that famous irresistible grin.

"I don't know, Todd," she said, "I'm not sure this is a good idea."

She tightened her grip, knowing that he would tease her unmercifully if he knew how nervous she was.

"Don't be such a spoilsport. It's just hocus-pocus. Like a Ouija board for adults."

She shivered as she remembered the Ouija board she'd had when she was younger. That night the planchette had started to move by itself...

"I just think some things are better left alone, that's all. C'mon, Todd, let it go, huh?"

"You don't really believe in this stuff, do you? Hell, Sarah, if magic were real, we'd see it every day. It's just some old crap in a book. Somebody probably just made it up to see if they could get somebody else to believe it."

That damned book! She'd known it was trouble when he first downloaded it. She knew it was hopeless. Once Todd got fired up like this about something, he would never let it go. She sighed.

As soon as she looked up, she knew she had made a mistake. Todd's hair was a rumpled copper mess. Pillow hair. With his thin, freckled face and innocent green eyes, he was irresistibly childlike. She stopped her hand from patting him on the cheek. She knew she would have to marry him. Soon. Only a couple of months until graduation...

She snatched her attention back to the present.

"Okay, okay. But I still don't like it."

"Thanks, Sarah! It'll be fun. You'll see!"

"You owe me, Todd. Big time."

But he was already out of his chair and moving.

Sarah twirled a strand of her long, straight hair, absently watching the way the morning sunlight enhanced its natural gold. The smell of coffee tickled her nose. Suddenly she felt queasy.



When Sarah got home, Todd had supper almost ready.

"How'd it go today?"

She growled, slung her keys onto the desk by the back door.

"I hate stupid people! I can't wait until I can find a real job! Goddamn Wal-Mart! It's not like they actually pay me enough to do this!"

"Service Desk again, huh?"

She grinned.

"Yeah. But I'm feeling much better now!"

They both laughed.

She walked over to the stove and put her arms around him from behind.

"I always feel better when I get home."

He leaned back against her but kept the spoon moving.

"Stir-fry's almost done. You better get washed up.

"I've got everything together in the living room. We can get started after supper."

Damn! She had managed to forget about that! Oh well, better to just get it over with.



She was covered with goose bumps and wished it could just be over. There was a draft coming from somewhere. If only they didn't have to be naked.

Todd's voice rose and fell with the rhythm of the words he was reading.

"Wherefore do I command thee, Azkideran, to appear, and I conjure thee by the Holy Name of..."

Her throat hurt just hearing those sounds come out of his mouth. What was that? Sumerian or something?

"...to obey my summons and make thy presence known."

He had explained it all before they started. Solomon and a Key and a Gate, or something. She didn't really care. Just let him get it out of his system.

Her arms were getting tired of holding up the candles. Why couldn't they just use electric lights?

And that chalk all over the floor! If they didn't get it up, Mr. Lewis would shit, and there goes the security deposit.

Todd's voice rose, getting louder and higher with excitement. As he turned to make gestures in different directions, she saw that he had an erection.

"Jeez!" she thought, "That's just weird!" But she felt a little tingle "down there", too.

All those thoughts vanished like a fart in the wind as Todd spread his arms wide and shouted a word that seemed to take on a physical presence in the air above them.

A cloud of mist erupted inside the small pentagram outside their protective circle.

"Holy Shit!" was the only thought available to her. She thought she was going to faint. The look on Todd's face showed that he agreed wholeheartedly.

The mist congealed into a...form. Some...thing...was standing in their living room. It was short, about three feet tall, and lumpy. Its scaly skin was covered in warts and tumors ranging in color from greenish gray to yellow to purple to black. Its face was so wrinkled that she could hardly make out its eyes and mouth, its nose and ears, if it had any, were completely hidden. Its legs were thick stumps, its arms long and skinny, like tree limbs.

"Yes, Mahstah?" Its voice was a dead-on imitation of Igor in Young Frankenstein.

Sarah almost giggled but forced it back down. If she started, she would get completely hysterical.

"It worked!" Todd's voice was shaky.

"Well, duh!" she thought.

"Well, duh!" The things voice was incongruously deep.

She struggled to keep the laughter down. Her arms trembled with the effort, and a drop of wax landed on her arm. That helped.

"What'cha want?" The thing started tapping its foot.

"Are you...are you Azkideran?" Todd was getting his voice under control.

"Ya called me, dincha? So here I am. Either ask me something or let me go. I got things to do."

"Uh. Okay." He was obviously fishing for something to ask.

"How about...how about money?"

"Sure. Just get a job. Whadda ya think I am, the First National Bank of the Lazy? Get real, shit-fer-brains."

"Uh, well, uh, what can you do for me...us?"

"You in on this too, Blondie?"

She nodded. She didn't trust herself to speak. Hysteria still lurked close by.

"Arright. Here's a deal for ya. If I give ya a present, will ya let me go?"

"What kind of present?"

"Ah, Hell! I ain't got time for this shit! Ya want in or not?"

Todd and Sarah looked at each other.

"I don't know Todd," she whispered. "We better not trust him...it."

"Yeah. Maybe we better just let it go."

"Oh, please! Get it out of here! Let's just forget this ever happened."

She didn't promise not to say "I told you so", because she was pretty sure that she would say it. More than once.

Todd began to chant again.

"I banish thee, Azkideran, in the name of..."

There was that name again.

Azkideran grinned. Suddenly Sarah felt very cold indeed. The demon walked out of the pentagram, into their circle, and stood in front of them with its arms on its, well, where its hips would have been if it had any.

Todd gurgled. His face was as red as a baboon's butt.

Sarah tried to step back, but her feet wouldn't move. Neither would her arms. Neither would her mouth. The scream that was building up inside her had nowhere to go.

"Ya shouldn't fuck around with things ya don't understand, pencil-dick. Ya interrupted some very important business of mine. That pisses me off. Ya shouldn't'a pissed me off."

The demon grabbed Sarah by the elbows. Its hands were cold and rough. It picked her up, turned her, and set her down facing Todd. The candles that she held aloft were burning his hands, but she couldn't move them.

Tears began to leak out of Todd's eyes. The scream in her head built up more pressure. She thought her head was going to explode.

"Ya really love this turd, don't ya, sweetie?"

She felt its hand patting her butt. Her bladder emptied onto the floor, and warm piss splashed up her legs.

"Yeah, I can see ya do. Good. That'll make this that much better."

Todd began to shiver. His eyes opened wide, wider, impossibly wide. She could see the muscles attached to the sides of his eyeballs. Blood began to leak from his nose. The shivering increased in intensity.

She wanted to close her eyes, desperate, wanted to get away, make it stop, scream. She was helpless, trapped in her own body, a prisoner in her own mind. The pressure grew. An incandescent spike drove itself through her head.

Todd's hair stood out from his head like flames. The blood was now hosing from his nostrils, washing down his belly. His body was trembling violently. Smoke leaked from the corners of his eyes. Suddenly they literally popped out

of their sockets. She felt them hit her chest. She was losing her grip on her mind.

His eyes slid down her breasts, leaving twin slug-trails twining among the tiny droplets of sweat. Her nipples stood erect at their caress, their involuntary betrayal twisting her horror to a level she didn't know was possible. His eyes paused, as if for one last look, a final kiss, then plopped to the floor, ejaculating onto her toes.

She stared helplessly into the dim, smoky caverns that had been her lover's eyes, vacant spaces uninhabited by any save the damned. She thought she heard her name, a long, draw-out wail, echoing from far down the corridors of Hell.

"Saaarrrrrrraaaaaaaahhhhhhhh..."

She felt a rough hand on her butt again. It squeezed, hard. Azkideran's voice was low, intimate.

"I got to go now, but I'll come back, sugar. I'll come back just for you. With turd-face out of the way, we can have us a real good time."

Its rough hand slid between her legs, gripped her thigh so hard, its sharp fingers punched holes through the skin. She felt a warm trickle down her leg.

"Yeah, it'll be real nice. I'll just leave the door open when I go so I can get back in."

Her eyes were still open as she slowly melted into a puddle on the cold floor, her unvoiced shriek mingling with screeching demonic laughter to form a hideous madrigal that filled the unhallowed cathedral that had once housed her mind.



Sarah's eyes are as clear and bright and blue as a mid-spring sky, as beautiful and majestic and fragile as a stained glass window, and what they see she does not say.

Most who know Sarah are beguiled by her apparent innocence, but those who look closer see the watchfulness and wariness. Some think they know what she is watching for and watch her in turn, watching for the warning that they pray will never come.

Sarah eats when she is fed, bathes when she is bathed. Her blond hair is cut short for easy maintenance. She sleeps sometimes, but not as much or as often as most, and her dreams are uneasy. Sarah waits with a patience beyond hope and watches with eyes that see beyond the edge of the world, beyond the Rainbow Bridge, beyond eternity. Sarah waits and Sarah watches, and what she sees, she does not say. And, perhaps, we should be glad.

THE END