

6. flights of FANcy

The beating of wings.

A Cyclops eye.

A pistol spinning around the gangbanger's finger (just like the movies).

Then, swooping out of the darkness, a face. A man's face. No, a woman's. A harpie.
Eyes, bright red. Canines, sharp. Snarling.

A Krazee Boy screams. In the next instant, his face is shredded into strips, chin to scalp.
Down the ragged slices rush streams of blood.

Gunshots.

Bam.

Bam.

Bam.

He opens his eyes, yet he is not awake. No, not yet.

Light flashes through the window.

On.

Off.

On.

Off.

Above his mattress hangs a poster featuring a skeleton with a Mohawk bent over a devil's pitchfork as if it were a guitar. The poster is promoting the concert given by De Dedmen at The Orpheum. When Johnny looks at the poster, the skeleton strums the guitar.

Is he dreaming?

No. He sees now: a light outside the window is flashing onto the poster, making the skeleton appear to move, that is all.

More gunshots.

Not that unusual in Hollywood. Lots of gunshots here.

He turns over, pulls up the blanket – a pair of red eyes glides toward his face –

He yanks off the blanket, jerks upright, heart pounding.

Gone.

A dream. Just a dream.

No. What is it? A bird flapping its wings? Is he dreaming still? Have the ghosts come to visit? No, no. He does not sense them here. However, he clearly hears the flapping of wings. Have the creatures of his dreams escaped into his waking reality?

Somewhere, a bird flips its wings. Somewhere. Nearby. He is sure of that.

He is awake, too. He is sure of that; at least, he is as sure as you can be. No, he is awake. Definitely awake. A bird is flapping its wings.

His wristwatch reads 3:33.

He grabs the flashlight next to his mattress and casts its beam over the room. His room does not appear any more disturbed than usual.

Naked, he gets up from the mattress on the floor and tiptoes across the room to check the lock on the door. The bolt is pulled back. How could he have forgotten to lock it? He has never made such a stupid mistake. This is Hollywood. He is always careful, always methodical. The key to survival is to be aware. Always. He shuts the door and turns the heavy bolt.

When he turns from the door, he notices that the bottom sash of the window has been thrown open.

He knows he did not open it. He avoids windows. He's afraid of heights. Afraid of the fall.

His apartment is on the top floor, the fourth. Even when the temperature rises into the hundreds, he never opens the window more than a few inches.

Across the street looms a monstrous brick hodgepodge, the Church of Self-Inquiry. The building began its life in the nineteen-twenties as a mental hospital for the rich and celebrated, those newly crowned royalty of the latest sensation, the flickers. At that time, it was called Our Lady of the Angels. By the sixties, the rich and celebrated had long departed, and the hospital was converted into a hotel for the impoverished, the addled, and the unknown. Then, ten years ago, the Church of Self-Inquiry bought the derelict building and saved it from the wrecking ball. The church's minions renovated every square inch, scrubbed every brick, replaced every window pane, and, after years of labor, restored the building to its former glory. It is now their international headquarters, the Vatican of vacuousness.

On the roof of the church, across a thirty-foot grillwork of struts and braces, a red neon eyeball burns against the night sky. Beneath the eye, spelled out in two-foot red neon letters, are the words

To Find What You Seek,

And when the eye blinks, the words change to

Seek Within.

Johnny cautiously places his hands on the sill – very cautiously – and leans out the window.

A flutter of wings.

He shines his flashlight along the decorative concrete ledge below his window. The ledge, not more than a foot wide, wraps around all four sides of *El Jardin*. Near the corner of the building stands a thin woman, perched there as calmly as if she's waiting for a bus on the Walk of Stars, studying the city below. Leisurely she lifts her face toward him.

“Yell-o.”

“Where did you come from?” Johnny asks.

Anne shakes her head. “Not from here, that’s for sure.”

“I mean, how did you get *here*, on this ledge?”

“Through the window.”

“This window?”

“I knocked on your door, but you didn’t hear me.”

Not hear her? He didn’t hear the thick bolt being turned (not even considering that the door should have been locked)? Not the creaky hinges? Not her stepping across the rotten floorboards? Not the jammed window being pried open? How could he not hear her?

And out of all the decrepit apartment buildings in Hollywood, how did she know he lived in this particular room?

And yet, here she is.

“You said you wanted to talk,” she says.

“Yes....”

“Well...?”

“You mean you want to talk out *here*?”

She smiles, gazes up at the sky. “Look at all the stars.”

He cranes his head upward. There are no stars. As always, a dome of smog obscures the heavens, reflecting the lights of the city onto itself.

He steps back from the window into the relative safety of his room. She is right about one thing: she is not from here.

The world becomes very still then, absolutely quiet. He has two choices: he can step through the window frame and join this woman on the ledge, or he can return to bed. When he wakes, this dream will have ended, and she will be gone. Disappeared. With such a decision to be made, he is surprised he is neither frightened nor anxious. Has he not been asleep for most of his life?

And so, taking a deep breath, he sets down the flashlight, grabs either side of the window frame and hoists himself onto the sill, pausing there at the threshold, then steps through, the concrete ledge cool and damp beneath his bare foot, waking into the world at last.

Anne is wearing the same black mini-skirt and platform shoes, but her torn pantyhose and greasy parka are gone, and she has reapplied her mascara. Johnny sidles along the ledge toward her, his back to the wall, the bricks scratching his bare ass. Don't look down, another key to survival. Instead, he looks out over Hollywood, the parade of glowing billboards marching along Sunset Boulevard like a picket line, the galaxy of lights twinkling amid the dark rolling hills.

Watching the naked young man making his way so slowly and carefully toward her, Anne puts her hand over her mouth to prevent herself from laughing. "I shouldn't laugh," she says, then bursts out with loud guffaws.

"Heights don't bother you?" he asks.

"Why should they?"

"Because, for one, you can fall to your death."

"Whatever doesn't kill you –"

"– fucking hurts."

She shakes her head. "I can fly."

"In the air?"

"No. In the mud."

"You mean, like you can fly an airplane?"

"No. I can fly. Don't you believe me?"

“Yes, yes, of course I believe you.”

“Can’t you fly?”

“That depends on what you mean by ‘fly’.”

“Fly!”

He has no idea what she is talking about, but he doesn’t want to get into an argument, especially an argument about flying while tottering on a narrow concrete ledge four stories above the sidewalk.

He glances down at the street, at the cars parked along the curb, at the rows of palm trees trooping beside the sidewalks, at the Hollywood sign glowing upon the hill. Two months ago, a young woman leapt from the roof of *El Jardin*. Hearing the crash, Johnny forced himself to look out his window and saw her body spread-eagled atop the crumpled roof of a car, her hair spread about her skull like a spidery halo. Johnny collapsed, for hours unable to pick himself up from the floor. The tenants of *El Jardin* evacuated for a few days until the police went away.

“To fly,” Johnny says, “you need wings.”

“Here, this will help you,” she says and pulls her dress to her thigh, revealing a glass flask strapped there.

Johnny shakes his head. “This is crazy.”

“Of course it is.”

“What’s in the flask?”

“Courage.”

“Oh, yes, I need that.”

Holding the flask at arm’s length, she steps towards him, her platform shoes clicking against the concrete ledge. He takes the flask and holds it before his eyes so that it is pierced by the electric sign of the church behind it: the red-hot neon flashes through the emerald green solution within the flask: **To Find What You Seek, Seek Within.**

He unscrews the cap and sniffs. Licorice? He carefully tilts back his head – any sudden movement could send him pitching off the ledge – and sips.

The liquor trickles over his lips and swathes his tongue in a warm sugary syrup, but as it flows down his throat, it snaps so cold and tart that he shivers.

“Feeling better?” she asks.

He exhales and licks his lips. “Yes. Much.”

The flask is wrapped in a silver holster. He squints to make out the letters engraved on the side, a pair of initials in an Old English font: *A.C.*

“Don't worry,” she says, smiling, “none of this is really happening.” Her smile fades. “So you never really flew?”

“Sometimes I dream I'm flying.” He hands back the flask.

“You *dream* you're flying?”

“But then, maybe I'm only falling. Slowly. I once knew a girl who flew. At least, that's what she told me. But she only flew while she slept.”

“Are you awake now?”

“I'm not sure.”

She holds the flask above her mouth to catch the last green drops on her tongue. “Oh, sorry. I forgot to ask if you wanted any more.” She tosses the flask over the side. “Oops.” Then she asks, “Are you brave yet?”

The warmth of the liquor spreads from his stomach to his chest, then to his legs and arms. “Braver, I suppose.”

“All right.”

“All right?”

“Let's do it.”

“Okay,” says Johnny with a smile, “let's.” He has misunderstood her; he thinks she has finally succumbed to his beauty. Then he has another thought. “Wait. Do what?”

“Fly.”

He looks up at the sky. This time he sees the stars.

His eyes open. They have been there all along, the stars, bright embers illuminating the great cathedral of night, and about those stars revolve the planets, and about those planets revolve moons, orbits within orbits, circles without end, indivisible, forever, and just as a circle leads back to itself, so does perfection. The lights of the houses on the dark Hollywood hills mimic the celestial dome above. All part of the same. Stars in heaven, stars on earth. Everything united, everything forever, everything driven by the divine spark revealed within the stars.

And so now when he looks at Anne (with eyes open), he sees the stars in her eyes, sparks of green light whirling within vortexes of absolute darkness. And he sees that her hair is black, not blonde. For every soul on earth, a star in heaven.

By the light of those stars, he sees all that has been hidden behind the veil. He holds up his hand and traces with his finger the veins running from his wrists, webs of fluorescent green silk.

And when he turns back at Anne, he sees a pair of deep purple wings attached to her shoulders, vast leathery sails rising above and beyond. His knees buckle, his feet kick out, and he slides down the wall, smacking his tailbone on the hard ledge.

“Do you want to fly or not?” she asks.

But just as a light too bright can blind, the illumination of belief can likewise induce darkness. His mind leaps from thought to thought – there is no time to reflect – but somewhere within all the whirl and clamor, a voice deep within speaks, *If you step off this ledge, you will die.*

“Not tonight,” he says.

“All right,” she says, “I’ll fly. By myself.”

Though he is still blind, he sees she no longer has wings. He grips the side of the ledge to steady himself. “No! Don’t!”

“Don’t?”

Her voice, too, flows like licorice, cool and sweet, her words sprayed from her lips in puffs of green mist. “You told me you could fly? Did you make that up?”

He can’t answer. The truth is, in his present state, even simple questions demand too much concentration to respond. Instead, he focuses on the neon sign across the street.

To Find What You Seek, Seek Within.

To Find What You Seek...

Then, over the side of the building, the girl without wings flies into the abyss.

And yet she is standing on the ledge. How could she have jumped if she remains beside him?

No, no. He sees now. She flung her dress over the ledge. *She* is still on the ledge, leaning over, watching her black dress flutter to the ground like a stricken crow.

Next, she unties her shoes and kicks them over the edge. She's now wearing only her black bra and panties. And the dog collar. "If I'm going to fly, I don't want to be weighed down."

Standing on tiptoe, she teeters on the edge, arms held up from her sides, palms skyward, head thrown back, shoulders back, breasts jutting forward, blonde hair cascading to her butt. She is thin enough to fly, that is for sure, with skin so pale it glows in the night. She gazes into the dome of crystal stars.

He pulls his knees against his chest. Somehow, he must get to his feet. He must save her.

Toes curled about the edge of the dripstone, she bends her trembling legs and raises her arms behind her, poised to leap into eternity.

His legs have been disconnected from his brain. His body is unplugged. He will have to do what he can lying there on the ledge, paralyzed, jaws numb, mind whirling, a mess.

"Flying south for the winter?"

She remains in her diving position, ready to leap. Can she even hear what he is saying? He isn't sure because he can't hear himself speak. Is he now both paralyzed *and* deaf?

She peers over her shoulder at him, a green tear streaking down her cheek, blackening the mascara around her eyes. "Oh...my wings...my wings..."

"I want to fly with you, I do, but not tonight. Tonight I was hoping..." He pauses, peering over the ledge. "Tonight I was hoping we could stay here. And talk. I mean it. That's all. *Inside.*"

It doesn't make any difference what he is saying, he simply must keep talking, keep making words, produce sound, develop a patter. Magicians know words are distractions to the truth. Words obscure the truth.

She holds up her arms, straightens her back, more intent than ever to fly. She wipes her tears with the back of her hand, smearing the mascara into her hairline. "It's all so fucked."

"Some things are fucked in life. Okay, a lot of things are fucked. But not you."

She shakes her head, looks over the streets once more. He fears he is again losing his audience. With what is left of his strength, he says, "You are the most beautiful girl I have ever seen."

"Does that mean you want to screw me?"

“No.”

“No?”

“Well, yes, but it also means you’re different –”

“Yeah, as different as the hundreds of girls on the streets just like me. The thousands of girls like me. The millions –”

“No, no, you are the only one.”

“You don't mean –”

“I mean it,” he says fiercely. “There's no one like you.”

The green specks of light whirling within her black bandit mask give him the strength to find his legs and raise himself to his feet. Eyes locked on hers, he steps forward, one foot after another, until he stands before her, not too close but close enough to lean forward and kiss away her tears. They taste of...yes, of anisette.

She lifts her chin and returns his stare with a puzzled expression. Dizzy from the effort of rising to his feet, exhausted, he cannot speak.

Her head drops. “What am I doing here?” she moans. “I shouldn't be here. I’m not what you think I am.”

“No. You’re *exactly* what I think you are.”

It is then, in the profound silence between them, when even the hum of traffic dies away, when even the whirl of the police copters grows still, that he hears a delicate, metallic *plink*. A frozen teardrop, a green splinter, a falling star, strikes the concrete ledge. It bounces, hits the ledge again, then blips into the abyss below.

Anne holds up her hand, eyes wide in amazement. The ring has vanished from her finger. “But it can't come off,” she says.

“Don’t worry,” he says. “I’ll find it –”

“But it can't come off!”

“I’ll find it.”

“No, no!” she cries. Pausing, she whispers, “It’s gone. It’s gone....”

She continues to stare at her finger as if still not convinced the ring is really gone, then, turning her gaze to Johnny, steps toward him, out of breath, tears rolling down her cheeks, closing once and for all the infinite distance between them, sealing their fates.

Hesitating, catching her breath, she kisses him, her lips cool, her breath licorice-sweet.
Closing his eyes, he sees. At last, at last, he is awake.

Anne. Anisette. Enchantment.

