

St. George Finally Meets His Match

By Andrej Krasnansky

The dead girl had been in my trunk for about a week. Steve and I still didn't know what we'd do with her.

A week after our senior year had ended, Steve called me around noon, probably right after he woke up. He arrived, zipped out of his mom's Chevy Cavalier and slid into my FourRunner. He wanted me to take the eighth with him right there in the driveway, but I told him to go ahead without me; I had to drive.

We stopped in a mud patch well within the Grover Woods. Going "herbal" was always Steve's idea. "C'mon, George, it's the only way to get really out of yourself. Besides, what's there to experience in Haddock, anyway? 'Ooh, look at the elementary school kids, their coats are swirling. Boring. You just have to love the woods for these affairs."

I ate my share of the shrooms. I normally don't like them. I try to stay away from stuff stronger than pot, but I figured, hey, I'd just graduated, I'd had to listen to the principal for far too long, and my life was all ahead of me.

Three hours later, my shoes were off to better commune with the mud puddles. Tripping right after a rainstorm is weird. The sky feels like it swallows itself into you. Wetness is all around, so you think you're drowning. Occasionally I had to remind myself I was still alive and on the surface.

"The trees are moving again," Steve giggled. There wasn't any wind, of course. I threw a pebble at him and I swear I felt the impact. Steve and I had only been close since that whole Angelica fiasco about six months ago. I had been her best friend, and so I heard all about Steve's drugged sexual exploits before I had said a first word to him. Then Angel decided it would be funny to dump him right when he started on an acid trip and watch what he did. She hadn't really thought about it. She called me up that night.

"George?"

"Yeah, Angel?" I had been sitting up in my room eating Frosted Flakes and watching late night reruns of Rocky and Bullwinkle.

"I-" she giggled, then tried a couple of other times, then said with real fear pulsing in her voice, "I think you should come over. Now. Please."

I was at her basement in twenty minutes less time than physically possible. Steve was snarling. One of his demons had hold of him. He was trying to bite through the door to the

bathroom that Angelica was behind. After tumbling around, I had him held by the throat. I screamed through the partially gnawed door,

"Angel! How far along is he?"

She whimpered a little wetly, like she had a bloody nose. I wondered if her parents were gone, asleep, or just afraid to hear what they were hearing. (It was the 'Latter, I'm convinced.) Finally, after Steve had almost nipped my fingers off with his convulsing jaws, she answered me. "Not far at all."

After I found out what had happened, I dropped my "Angel" like a rotten sack of potatoes. Steve and I became fast friends because he got talky after I took him to my place to come down. We had a lot in common, I thought.

Thinking all of this, I selected several propeller seeds and blew them away, watching the tracers and, more importantly, feeling myself expand and follow them, like the seeds took a chunk of my awareness with them. I always liked picking up things when shrooming. I can almost "become part of" the seed or branch or bird's nest (that one was weird, like I could see through the bird's eyes and feel feathers on my skin), and then throwing whatever it was away. I had left several parts of myself in many different directions before we found her.

Steve saw her first. Rule one with Steve is, he likes to escape reality. So usually the stuff that comes out of his mouth has no basis in fact. That's the way he likes it.

"Yeah right, Steve, there's really somebody down there, like the time the spaceship came out of the..." I didn't finish my thought because there really was a girl down in the gully down the hill. I could only see one eye and most of her hair, which was either red or brown, the color of the dried leaves covering her.

Steve went a little catatonic, but then I began to climb down to her. "Stop!" he yelled in my ear.

"What?"

"The flames."

"Get off me."

"The flames, they're all around her."

"Look, she obviously needs help."

He changed moods like a flash. "It's like the joke about the two Scotsmen and the dead Englishwoman--oh, wait, I told it wrong..." And he trailed off. Then he snapped back to paranoia mode. "Look yourself, we can't help her. Fucking boy scout." He continued to mutter, but he came down with me.

I think I am pretty good at sobering up when I need to, but to this day I don't know what was really going on when I touched her. I heard a crackle and then another. Before I knew it, the leaves had burned away, leaving her exposed. She was certainly dead; the slightly open, glassy look told me right away.

"Is she really...?"

"She's dead." I picked an eyelash off my cheek and put it in front of her nose and mouth. I held perfectly still for at least five minutes, and the eyelash held as well. No heartbeat, either. If there had been, I would (in that state) have felt it through the ground. I swear she was still warm, though.

Steve said what I was thinking in my pores. "Let's go, George. No saving this one."

It took a long time to get to the car. It was one of those walks that you can't wait to be over. I felt safe enough to drive, even though red flashes were flexing on the sides of my face and in the corners of my eyes. It was later than I had thought. Steve lit up a joint and I knew he'd probably want to crash at my place.

We walked in as quietly as possible. My sis saw us and cast disapproving looks from her heavily eyeshadowed sockets.

"Goodnight, Martha."

"Goodnight, George Washington. Call me Marta or I'll tell mom and dad what you were doing all day with the resident loser here. " (Marta sounded less "American, " it had been explained to me.)

"Goodnight, " I said sweetly and followed Steve to my room, where we feasted on garlic bread and my treasure trove of saltwater taffy.

Two days went by, and I didn't hear a thing from Steve. I had managed to convince myself that I couldn't have seen a dead girl in the woods. That doesn't happen in Haddock Hills. Maybe in Justin Creek, where all the rich people had lived before it became filled with dreck and white trash and gangs of sharp-toothed midgets. Then the rich came here, or went to Kensington, both of which are supposed to have no crime.

So Steve called me, told me I had to come back to the woods to see the girl. He told me to meet him at the regular spot at around 8:30 that night. When Steve gets an idea into his head, you just kind of have to go with it.

When I got there, Steve was hopping out of his car. He didn't look stoned, but he acted like he was. You gotta see it, you have to see it, you gotta see it, I can't explain it, just come and see it, over and over as we walked.

We had to use the flashlights before long and I marveled at how well Steve knew the route. Then I recognized the hill. A pit opened up in my stomach. We went over the hill, and I shined my flashlight down into the gully. Naked as the day she was born, she was still, as if locked into a deep sleep of some kind. Her face looked as if she were summoning concentration.

Steve bade me sit down a good distance away from her, then lit up his indiglo watch. He started a countdown. I told him to shut up. Finally, he said, "Now, watch."

As if lifted by a wind that wasn't there, her right arm drifted up. It began to glow yellow. My mouth dropped when it burst into flame.

"10:38, on the pixel. It lasts for twenty-two minutes, or until eleven." His face was glowing with a pride of some kind. I felt it my responsibility to slap him back to earth.

"Are you kidding me? You think this is funny? This shit is just plain WEIRD! Some girl dies, and we have to find her, and you bring me back to watch her arm catch on fire?"

Behind him I saw the fire rise in the night air, shedding color after color down the sides, becoming a pillar ten feet tall. I stopped my tirade. Steve nodded at me.

At 11:01 we both looked at each other like, "Well dumbass? what now? 'Cause we're probably both screwed anyway."

After about a week of nightly excursions to the woods, it dawned on us that she wasn't deteriorating. Against my better judgment, I moved the body. It was still warm to the touch, amazingly. And I knew something had to be going on when I found she was still flexible. No rigor mortis, no worms coming out her eyes, nothing at all that the horror movies had taught me to expect. After a while, though, I knew we couldn't keep excusing ourselves to the woods every night and getting home really late. Mom had been complaining about never seeing "her only son," now that school was out and I was sleeping all day. Something kept calling us back, though, so I decided we move her.

Of course, we argued about moving her. I didn't want to notify anyone. It seemed wrong to let the police in on this, like they wouldn't know how to respond to it. I was convinced that it was something special, something that only we could understand. Besides, what were we going to say about all the nights and days we had wasted coming back. "Oh, officer, you should have seen her arm at around 10:30! It was great. Really something."

Steve didn't take much convincing, but where to was the source of real contention. Steve wanted to take her back to his house. I bit my tongue, but I was worried that he might do something crazy if he had a bad trip or something. I suggested the trunk of my car as a joke, but it turned out to be the only thing Steve would agree to. After eleven, we dragged her to the car, which, mercifully, we had parked much closer this time.

Two things bothered me about putting her in the trunk. One was that she might have parents, friends, and the police looking for her. I decided to check the web for missing persons,

sometime or another. The other thing was that, even though I was sure I'd seen a bramble rake across her stomach, and though there was a red smear on the place, her skin was completely unbroken.

That night I had a dream. You knew it was coming, didn't you? It was her, but she was younger. Maybe not even ten years old, she wore a frilly nightgown of some sort. With her right hand she offered me a meat cleaver. I took it, and then she laid her hand down on a chopping block. The dream was silent, I suppose. I refused. She begged me. I couldn't. I was sorry. Her eyes said she was sorry, too, but what could be done? Swords of fire consumed us both.

I woke up, sweat rolling out of me. I called Steve. His mom answered. I could smell how drunk she was from the slurs of her words.

"Hello?"

"Hi Ms. Hayes. I wanted to talk to Steve?"

"Yeah, sure. Lemme getim. Youre, you're a nice boy, Georgs, real nice to Steve."

"Yes ma'am."

It turned out Steve had had a dream, too, but couldn't remember anything about it to tell me. We agreed to drive out to the lake (much closer than the woods) the next night together.

Steve had brought clothes for her. It was kind of silly, but I felt better driving around with a clothed dead girl than with a naked one. One of Steve's T-shirts, sleeves ripped off (so they wouldn't catch on fire), and a pair of his mother's jeans.

Every night we'd go out to the lake, lay her on a tarp, and wait for the show. Once Steve lit his joint with the fire. I was a bit horrified by that.

We talked about the dreams, mostly. His involved some childhood memory of a lullaby, something his mother sang him once, but this time it was a woman's voice, not his mother's, accompanied by a strange male-ish voice in the background. He also dreamed of being in a swamp, walking alone, and suddenly exploding into flame.

Mine were even more surreal. I'm sure Steve thought it was the weed talking; I almost did myself. I remembered a gun cut in two by a cleaver and pinwheels of fire in the sky. A woman with only one breast and a handprint in place of the other; she tried to talk to me but all I could hear was a rushing sound. An ambulance sped down a highway and all of a sudden froze, like stopped time or a still frame in a movie. In another segment of that dream I saw the patient in the ambulance, apparently a burn victim, but the doctors and the driver were singed as well. They were looking at the patient, burned almost unrecognizably, and they smiled like everything was suddenly all right.

Steve didn't believe this next one. I was fighting a monster with seven heads and tentacles for fingers on each hand. Suddenly its tail tripped me. It was pulling me into its stomach before I knew it. I scratched, clawed, head-butted, but nothing seemed to work. I fought more and more, harder and harder, and my frustration just fueled me on. At the end, when I was sure that if I stopped thrashing I would die, I felt a red-hot hand on my shoulder. I looked into the dead girl's face, and she smiled at me. I woke up gently, which is not normal for me. I went to the bathroom and saw that there was a red mark on my shoulder, in the shape of a hand.

"Show me."

"Steve, I'm telling you, it was there. Have I ever lied to you? How could I make stuff like that up?"

Steve looked away into the flame, which for some reason had been green for the past two nights.

"I'm hungry, " he said. "Maybe we should bring marshmallows tomorrow. "

The next day Mom and Dad got on their frantic theme about college. Steve is going to Brown, what are you going to do, what kind of example is this for your sister, et cetera. Then they brought it up, like they'd been dying to. Dad said, "What would Billy think?"

I stared at him silently in mock disbelief. Then I said, from the black bottom of my heart, "I don't think you should bring Billy up. " Then I left the table, something that is strictly prohibited before discussion is closed. Like I thought, they didn't dare yell at me.

In order not to think about my dead brother, I called Steve and suggested we move the girl.

There was on the property an old barn that my family had never had a use for. It had become my hideout when Billy had been electrocuted. It was two acres from our house, and the high- peaked roof and red siding wouldn't let any light in (or out), so I figured no flames would be spotted by my family or any other. Steve was, quite frankly, jealous. He said his basement was safe enough. I mentioned that, if the fire got too high, the house might burn, whereas the barn was three stories or so and besides had easy access to the outdoors. And I pulled the mother card on him.

"Steve, listen. If your mother finds a dead girl on your couch, then regardless of what pill combination she's on at the time she's going to think you've gone over the edge. Forget it. It's too dangerous." I went on about the safety of my shed and how much my parents wanted to give me space, so they would never walk in on me, ever.

Steve pouted all the way from the car to the shed. When we put the body down, he said coyly, "Could I spend the night here? With her?"

My neck and shoulders raised. "No, I think tonight I should keep watch. Later this week you can."

"Okay," he said with a low, intense stare at the figure on the ground. He said his good-byes and hurried out the door.

I was drinking some of my mom's herbal tea at around four in the morning when the dead girl sat up and asked me for some. I poured it out of my thermos and rested the metal cap in her palm. The liquid began to boil, so she switched hands.

"You know," she began, "since I've been dead this right hand thing has been a problem. I mean, there's no controlling it.

There wasn't any control before, of course, but at least it wasn't a real constant thing."

She took a sip, looked at her clothes, and sighed. "I look like a slob after death. Great. I look like a freakin' stoner, that's what I look like."

"Sorry," I apologized, "that's Steve for you."

"Steve. What a name for a toker. 'Hey Steve, got any pot?' 'Steve, man, that acid was MESSED UP!' Well, thank goodness he didn't try to smoke me. Who knows what I would have done to his system? I might've turned him into a monkey or something."

She set the cup down, got up, and walked around. She stretched out her arms, then her legs. "Would you crack my back?" she asked me. I bit my tongue, then shook my head quickly, giving her a confused look.

She sighed, walked up to me, her face right in mine, her eyes wide and penetrating. She smiled, sat down. She drank the rest of her tea and thanked me. Then she said something that scared the shit out of me.

"George, we tend to hold on to pain that is our own. It makes us feel alive. It gives us a stability, a post in our lives to cling to. With pain, we can remember ourselves." She laid herself back down onto the floor and closed her eyes. "When you were a baby, say a toddler, or in the terrible twos. When you touched something hot, you dropped it, shrank back, clenched your hand between your baby teeth. Fire teaches us to let go. Always has."

With that, she became a corpse again.

I didn't tell Steve why I didn't want him over the next night. I didn't really know why I kept him away. Maybe I wanted to have it all for myself. Or maybe I didn't want his experience to filter my own. Mostly I was scared that him being there would prove that it hadn't been a dream. I slept all day, so I'd be awake til dawn. I wanted to be sure I wasn't hallucinating this whole thing up. I hoped to God it was all my imagination.

10:38 came and this time her whole body seemed to radiate heat. I had to leave the barn, so hot was the air. In fact, I was soon blown forwards into the pine needles.

"Over here, my dear," called a voice from the cherry tree. I brushed myself off, looked up and saw the dead girl climbing from branch to branch.

"There has already been a fire here, sort of." She jumped down to meet me on the ground. I noticed the heat had ceased, but I was unable to look at her hand and forearm. They were encased in white fire. She smiled and pushed her hand into my face. "Look," she commanded.

Upon her palm I saw the scene that had plagued me for six years. Spring yardwork. My brother, a chainsaw, and a power cable. He screamed to me, to my father, for help, and then, nothing. I tried to look away, but she replayed it for me. I was unable to move.

This time I watched my father's face as he held me back. As he held me back he watched his oldest son burn to a crisp. As he held me back.

I was crying when she carried me into the shed. She pulled my jacket over me and kissed my cheek goodnight. She started to sing. I heard her voice as it arose from her lips. It rose up to the sky. Mingled in was the voice of a desert, of a jewel, of a man who is not a man but something much more powerful. The song petrified me. But in its frightening aspect was a sense of great power, a magnificent terror, an awe that was both wonder itself and awe-inspiring in its listeners.

The song that lulled me to sleep that night possessed no words.

For two weeks, nothing happened. I told Steve what had been going on. He started to tackle me when he learned I'd kept it from him, but he controlled himself. He wanted to be there every night from then on. For two weeks, sometimes I stayed with him and the girl, sometimes I just stayed in bed, but I felt nothing happening at all. Neither did he. I chalked it up to anticipation. A watched pot.

Then one night I was watching TV when Steve slammed in the door. I turned off "Night Man" and started to go with him, but he pushed me back. "She's singing to me," he said, smiling. I looked at the clock. It was 11:11. "Well, she was. She sat up and smiled at me and was singing all kinds of stuff, things I only half remembered from my childhood. Then her voice got really soft and the other voice, not from her, took over. It was a song my father had made up for me." Tears formed on his face.

"Steve, do you--"

"NO! No, I'm all right. Don't come with me. I want to wait for her to sing again all by myself. I have to be there alone." He smiled through bloodshot eyes. I smelled drugs on him, but I let him alone.

I had trouble going to sleep though. After four hours I must have dozed off, because before I knew it I was sitting on a strange bed, a child's bed with Mickey Mouses running all over it. The walls were covered with rabbit wallpaper, and a couple of doll sets housed little plastic people. The dead woman was there.

"If I were chosen for death by a lottery in a village," she began, "or if I were swooning in a castle for lack of water, would you rescue me? Would you, George? Would you ride through the countryside, face death, convert thousands with your bravery, and ride off with me into the storybook sunset?" She ran her fingers along the headboard of the bed I was sitting on and looked out the window musingly.

"When I was young, living in this room, I had a dream. He told me my father was going to kill me and my mother and then himself. I cut off his hand with this--" a meat cleaver appeared in her hand, "--and, after that, my hand had the power to cleave.

"Did you know, George, that 'to cleave' means opposite things?" She leaned closer to me, this time looking into my eyes. I was too scared to move. "To cleave an object to another object is to join them, but to cleave can also mean to separate utterly. Both ways of cleaving are usually done with great heat.

"Would you go through fire for me, George?" Her cheek was a breath's distance from mine. Both her breath and her stare scorched the left side of my face.

"Of course you would. Would you go for yourself? To join yourself with something, or to cut something away from yourself? If your right hand were causing you evil, George, would you cut it off, cast it away?"

"You're a virgin, aren't you, George?" I nodded yes nervously. "So no one has been 'Riding Saint George' with you? You know that's the most assured way to give birth to a bishop. In the twelfth century, at least. It goes like this," and she put one leg up and straddled me, shoving me down onto the bed.

"Do you know about bishops, George? Would you believe that I don't, either?" Her lips toyed with the air above mine and her body pressed against mine. "That I've never been kissed? Not once. Would you kiss a girl whose touch would burn? But what if I told you I am about to be kissed right now, and not by you? And it's against my will? That it's foul? Tainted? And that I cannot act against it--?"

I woke and grabbed my helmet and shield. My lance was useless, since I had no steed at hand, so my cudgel and Sword would have to do in the fight with the monster. In seconds I was at the barn. My traitorous friend had the woman I s pants almost off. I knocked him back with my cudgel and drew my sword. I saw he was possessed and did not know what he was about. I offered a short prayer up to God for both our souls, and then we fought. We fought in long and thunderous hexameter. At last I saw the beast give up my fellow. I followed, ready to pounce on the black and chittering thing, but it skittered down the hole it came from before I could send it back to Hell.

... George?" said a shaken but otherwise unharmed Steve.

My mind dropped whatever it had been carrying. All I knew was that Steve had been about to do something awful. I grabbed him by the hair and was about to dash him against the wall (for some reason), but he seemed extremely aghast; terrified, even. He pointed, eyes and mouth open wide, behind me.

A faceless man hovered above the half-naked body. He held a staff of flame in his right hand and a winged animal in the other. Right before he disappeared, he seemed about to let the winged and feathered thing go.

Steve knelt once beside the girl, bowed his head, then ran away, faster than I'd ever seen him run before.

The girl was suddenly up and about, pulling up her pants. "Thank you, George, for helping me." She blushed a bit. "You are quite amazing with that cudgel and sword. Always were, from what I hear. You've got talent, George. But it hurts you."

She waved her hand in front of my face. She wiggled her fingers. "Take it," she offered.

I took it in my own. For once, it was a normal temperature. It was an ordinary hand.

"When I was alive..." and then she stopped. "Funny way to start a story, isn't it? So melodramatic. Ah, well, when I was alive my hand never looked like this." She took a pensive pause. I squeezed her hand, and she smiled and continued.

"It hurts to heal. I don't know why. And I think you have to hurt before you can heal yourself." She took her hand back.

"Now give me your hand." She said it with a tone that said also, You know what that means.

I felt a pinwheel of fire within me, swirling around and mixing dread with hope and hope with dread. I extended my hand. She held it in her left. In her right, it looked as if she had cupped a handful of liquid fire, shimmering and dripping off her knuckles. Her hand became a sword of flame, and-- "NO! "

I must have looked as surprised as she did. But I had said it. I couldn't go through with it yet.

She let go of my hand, her fire out for the moment. "Perhaps I was too eager, " she started. Then she wheeled on me, casting me to the floor. "You were given an incredible chance...!"

She began to float above me. "I will see you again. And you will be thirsty for my touch. And you will be satisfied, at last, when my flame will eat you, licking away at your nerves, consuming all of your pain, and making you stronger. She became something too bright to look at, with wings of immense proportion. The faceless man appeared beside her; then they were gone.

I caught word of Steve. He began to roam the country, trying to gain followers for his Church of Our Lady of the Flame. As for myself, I tore my robes and went into the desert of my life.