

R. Michael Burns
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e-mail: Cearb@aol.com
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Celia

by

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It was only fitting that it should end here, after so many years, after so very many miles. Only right, somehow, that it should all finish up in this seedy-dark place, where it had begun.

The Green Man was still as dingy as it had been then, still as crowded with greasy shadows and stale odors, still inhabited by the lurking rabble he remembered from those days. The names were probably different, but the faces hadn't changed -- mohawked punkers with studded leather clothes unaware their day had died long ago, goth nymphets with pale corpseflesh and diaphanous black skirts that kept few secrets, hollow-eyed smack heads dragging themselves

through the empty places between fixes lubricated by cheap pisswarm beer. In the Green Man, no one talked -- they muttered, they grunted, they mumbled and hissed sometimes, but it was nothing like the airy decent-bloke chatter you'd hear in any of those west-end pubs. This place was buried away like some grim catacomb beneath an anonymous soot-faced building in the east-end section that'd once been known as Whitechapel, and it was only fitting: a place like this had no business being exposed to daylight, the dwellers here would scurry away to darkness like bugs under a suddenly-overtaken stone.

All this Adam Singleman knew just looking at the place, watching the silhouettes shift and skulk beyond the neon signs in the street-level windows. He knew it so well, even after such a long time -- Christ, how could he forget?

Still, he hesitated a moment, lingered there in the chill London drizzle, feeling the vast black city at his back, the vague gray future before him. Would he really find her here, at last, at last? There'd been so many false leads down the winding labyrinth of years, so many lies and

deceptions, fool's errands and cruel games. But she would be here this time -- he sensed it in the back of his skull, in the gooseflesh crawling up his arms. He would walk down those stairs, push through the heavy door and through the milling crowd, and somewhere in the haze of smoke and sour ale, he'd find her: Celia. She of the inscrutable eyes, the enigmatic smile. And that beauty, that staggering, breath-stealing, heart-grasping beauty, that dazzling beauty which somehow transcended all physicality. He would discover her, in that sordid place, as moths always discover flames, and then he would ask for his soul back.

She hadn't taken it whole, of course. He supposed if she'd done that he'd have been no more than a puppet with its strings all clipped, a blank-eyed shell of himself wandering zombie-like through his daily routines, unthinking, unfeeling, unalive, and surely unable to follow her so far, for so long. No, she'd taken only a piece of him, a sliver, a fragment. Just enough to leave him hollow, lost, and restless. He'd never really understood that word before Celia.

But it would all stop here, in two minutes, or five. He'd crossed distances of miles and years and now the circle was closing, and as he started down the stairs toward the end, he thought again, inevitably, of the beginning.

* * *

He'd been eighteen, then, and thought he knew a little something about the world, about women. He'd had his share, he figured -- at least one girlfriend every year since he'd been thirteen. Val was the first one he'd kissed; Kim was the first who'd let him grope her in the dark. Kate had been his first lay at fifteen, Nikki his second a year later. Lainie had been the best of them, so far; Emma sufficed until something better came along. Something better had been called Angela, always perfumed with clove cigarettes. They never seemed to last, these affairs, these flings, even when sometimes he wanted them to. But why worry? The world was full of cute little birds who'd spread their legs for a decent looking bloke like Adam Singleman, and where was the great advantage in being shackled for long to any one, when there were so many others to experience? So he told himself, and so he often believed, particularly with a half-yard of some cheap bitter to bolster his confidence.

And then he'd seen her, and the world stopped spinning on its axis and day no longer followed night and clouds fell out of the sky.

She sat alone in a gloom-draped corner booth, sipping some dark wine from a long-stemmed glass, the sort that dangled bat-like from the wooden racks behind the bar and gathered only dust in a place like the Green Man. But he hardly noticed the unusually demure drink in its unusually demure glass. His whole attention was on the woman cradling that glass in her slender, delicate fingers. She was -- devastating. Beautiful beyond any woman in all the world, surely. From his stool he could snatch just a glimpse of leg beneath the table, revealing itself below the high hem of her emerald-shimmer skirt, a pale and perfectly curved calf, like not even the greatest of sculptors could shape. And her waist, narrow, superbly tapered into her ideal hips, flawlessly disclosed by her sheer bodice. She was silk-naked under that splendid dress -- he could read her nudity in the drape and hang of the shimmering green lamé, could see her fine nipples tantalizingly shadowed in delicate folds of metallic fabric, raw sensuality just contained within a

sheath of crepe-thin fabric. Even unsupported her breasts had just the right lift and shape, neither childishly small nor disproportionately large, just the sort his hands ached to stroke, explore, tease. Yet even that utterly perfect cleavage couldn't hold his attention, but wafted his gaze upward like ash on a heat draft, up over her fine slender shoulders, up along her graceful, elegant throat, up again, to her face.

That face. It was ethereal, angelic, surely God's favorite dream. High cheekbones, button-nose, silk-ribbon lips, hair like embers spun into silk, eyes the precise color of her emerald dress -- no such words said nearly enough, none even approached the truth of her beauty. It wasn't just in her, it was around her, an aura of sheer loveliness, radiant, something not confined to the mere perfection of her flesh, the petty splendor of her chemise. It rippled about her like a cool-air mirage, yet when he blinked, shifted, and stared once more, it hadn't flickered or faded in the least. She was...what? Magnificent was too pale a word.

"Who is that?" he asked the barman. He was certain beyond certainty he'd never seen her in here before. That girl he would've remembered.

The barman shrugged meaty shoulders. "Don't know, ain't seen 'er before. Quite the looker though, eh? Christ a'bleedin' mighty."

"Stay away from 'er, lad. That witch is trouble. Believe me."

Adam gazed down the length of the bar at the chap who'd had the audacity to interrupt the perfect flow of his fantasy, of his sly hunting preparations.

The man might've been young, once, might've been in the scene, might've been a player, but you'd never've known it looking at him. The youth was burned from his face, the virility smothered from his eyes. He slouched against the bar like a bag of clothes that'd been left for the dustman to collect.

"What would you know about it?" Adam asked, grinning snidely at the barman like they were old mates sharing the irony. How could that rubbish-heap man imagine he understood Aphrodite herself?

The man gave a limp wave of his hand.

"Just ... believe me, mate," he said, as if that were all he had energy to say, and went back to embalming himself in Scotch.

Adam offered the man a yeah, right smirk and slipped off his stool, foam-laced mug in hand, and sauntered through the milling drifter crowd toward that shaded corner booth and the radiant woman sitting there, sipping her merlot or whatever it was. The loudmouth gave a worn out, resigned shrug, and turned his attentions back to getting soused.

Adam managed a few paces more before the cold gooseflesh broke out across his arms and neck, before the sweat started to shine on his brow. Christ, he'd done this a hundred times, at least,

approached some cute bird, already undressing her with his eyes and wondering if she'd be a squirmer or a screamer when they finally did the deed. He was cool as an arctic breeze, a real player, not like that sad bastard drowning yesterday's feeble glories in stale dregs. But he'd never approached a woman like this one -- hell, he'd never imagined such a woman, not in his fondest wet-dreams.

For a moment, he faltered, nearly veered off, vanished into the lav to hide his pathetic little failure. He dangled an instant between flirt and flight, then swallowed a gulp of lukewarm liquid courage and drifted on toward her, putting on his most becoming smile, adjusting the wattage just so, hoping against all logic it would work. He'd been shot down before -- what bloke hadn't? -- but never by a being so celestial, so perfect. To feel even the slightest touch of scorn from her, the mildest flutter of rejection, would be unbearable, shattering. He'd crumble like a pillar of ashes. Oh, but it was worth the risk, worth daring his manhood, his pride -- hell, his life -- for even a few minutes with her, for even the chance of touching her, kissing her....

She looked up at him a split second before he arrived beside her table, looked up not with her face, just with her eyes, those perfect emerald eyes, just the color of her dazzling little dress. It was a look of cold assessment, nothing more, the kind of gaze the ancient gods of the underworld might've used to judge a soul's worth. Adam shivered under it, despite himself.

A tiny smile touched her lips; she cocked her head just so. An invitation? No, not yet.

"You ... you're beautiful..." he stammered, the words trembling over his lips unbidden. He sounded inexcusably stupid and clumsy in his own ears, like some chickenshit kid falling all over himself with buzzing nerves. He took another swallow of beer and managed to recover himself, some. "Er ... mind if I join you?"

She gave the slightest wave of her hand, scarcely more than a twitch of two long lovely fingers -- the invitation he yearned for, deeply eloquent in its subtlety. He slid into the booth opposite her, eyes dancing over those tantalizing breasts a moment before sliding up again to that angelic face.

"You're so beautiful..." he said again, blushing at his fawning, simpering childishness and still unable to stop himself, "my God...."

"You're very kind," she answered, and her voice was smoky, musical, like sly jazz. There was some subtle suggestion of an accent in it -- French, perhaps? American? Italian? All of those and none; he couldn't place it anywhere in the geography of his memory.

"I'm ... Adam...." He managed it somehow, despite palpitating heart, pinwheeling thoughts, that ache of need building in his belly.

"Celia," she said, with a coy smile that thrust that dagger of want deeper yet.

He struggled for anything to say, anything clever and beguiling, anything flip and casual, but all bravado, all easy banter had dried up in his mouth.

"I ... I want...."

"I know," she said, gently, eyes alight. "All men want."

He felt the blood speed double-fast through hot veins, eager, desperate.

"And ... do you...?"

"Oh yes," she answered, with the slightest of nods, "I also want. I also need. More than you can dream."

A damnfool grin broke across his face, contorted his features in a wretched expression of naked lust. He wanted to claw it away and apologize, but his nerves weren't responding a wit and it wouldn't have undone his humiliation in any case.

She obviously read the thought in the twisted lines of his face, and brightened her smile ever so slightly to let him know she'd seen it, and it pleased her.

Celia reached across the table slowly, slowly, her hand coming toward him like an asp across the dry sands; she wrapped her long delicate fingers around his short thick ones. Her touch was cool, rose petal soft.

"Come," she said.

He went.

She led him down the narrow brick corridor and up the stairs, into the dirty lobby of the ten-pounds-a-night hotel which occupied the upper eight floors of the soot-painted building, glided past the night clerk without rousing his least interest. She moved like a dancer, a shade, seemed scarcely to touch the floor as she walked, all grace, all poise, past the lift, up the winding, frayed-carpet stairs to the first floor, down a long hall lined with leprous wallpaper and faceless black doors, around another corner. She produced a key, from where he couldn't see or guess, and led him into a small room, full of the perfume of mildew and decay. She bolted the door behind them but didn't bother with the lights; the sepia street-lamp haze and the ruddy glow of the hotel sign cast subtle light and deep shadows over walls, beds, ceiling, floor, like some image stolen from an old film noir. It seemed to fit her idiom precisely, as if it were not around her but of her, all a part of that sparkling, shimmering aura of strange beauty.

She paused a moment to gaze out at the night street, then turned, cocked her weight onto one hip, planted a hand there, ran long fingers through the dazzling fire cascade of her hair.

"Do you want?" she asked -- very quietly, yet her voice carried to him as clearly and sonorously as a long sly saxophone note.

"Yes," he said. Hardly a gasp, but here where no one else might be watching, bravado no longer seemed to matter. Just this strange, dreadful, wonderful moment, and the next, and the next....

"Then come," Celia whispered, opening her arms to him, closing her eyes, "come and kiss me...."

He crossed the room, stumbling, clumsy, heart pounding, throbbing with anticipation, almost fell into Celia's outspread arms.

Her embrace was autumn-cool, gentle, light as gauze, the softness of her body against his desperately alluring, maddening, God, to slip those tiny straps from her shoulders, to slide that shimmering lamé dress down her wonderful curves, to see her as the gods had made her, to touch, explore....

Celia closed her eyes and tilted her head and awaited his kiss.

He caught his breath -- that odor of damp decay again -- and held it an instant, savoring this pulse-pounding anticipation as he'd never savored any such sensual moment before. Then he bent his neck to hers, and their lips met, so soft, cool, and he was lost in that kiss, reeling, spinning, whirling with vast mad vertigo, tumbling over and over in a void where there was nothing, nothing, nothing other than her kiss, this deep smothering endless kiss, and he vaguely sensed something being taken from him, drawn out from somewhere deep in the secret core of him, drained away as a leech drains blood, and didn't care, nothing mattered other than Celia's unearthly kiss...

When next he opened his eyes, he was stretched out across the lumpy single bed, and Celia was gone with whatever she'd stolen from him.

He sat up with a start, groping at his pockets, his wrists, as if it might've been his wallet she'd vanished with, or his watch. But of course those trinkets were right where they belonged, and, somewhere deep in the secret core of him, Adam Singleman knew that what she'd slipped into the night with was nothing so cheap or common, nothing he could report to the police or replace in some pawn shop. He slouched across the bed, tired springs prodding his back, and stared blankly at the stain-ringed ceiling. He felt -- nothing. Blank, empty. No exhilaration, no fear, no anger. Nothing. He remembered the kiss -- how it'd begun, anyway; remembered that it had been like no kiss ever, something vastly deeper than lust or passion. Yet there was no thrill to the recollection, not even a vague ghost of that arousal. There was nothing, simply nothing.

After awhile, he rose, walked out of the tiny room not much caring whether the door shut behind him or not. He meandered back down to the pub, maybe looking for Celia, maybe looking for the loudmouth, but neither were there, and the thick-shouldered barman was gruffly calling, "Time, gentlemen! Time!" and hustling them all up the cobblestone stairs and out. Adam went with them and for some time wandered the fog shrouded streets as if looking for something and not remembering what, and not finding it.

At some point, he'd ended up at Connor's place and crashed on the sofa and slept there until the afternoon sun was slanting in across his slack face.

It was then that he began to suspect what she'd taken, and as the days, the weeks slunk and slithered past in a haze of drinking and smoking and fucking and all of it flavorless and senseless and bland, that he began to understand, to really understand.

The thing was, he couldn't dream anymore. That was how he knew for sure, how he understood it beyond a doubt. When he'd been young -- younger -- he'd dreamed vividly, brilliantly, more than once a night, knew it'd happened even when he couldn't recall a single saturated image. As a teen, full of strange appetites, he remembered fewer dreams but knew they still came, an endless progression of fears and hopes and base desires (these were best) and mundane anxieties, and those he could summon up again on waking were vibrant and fantastic, the little mind-trips he took and secretly relished in lieu of most of the substances out there in the streets.

Now, gone. All of them. Not just the memories, he was sure, but the dreams themselves had been plucked from his gray matter, along with whatever intangible element of himself she'd spirited away. Spirited away, wasn't that rich? He couldn't even smirk at it.

For a time after Celia had vanished into the labyrinth that was London, Adam wandered the streets and alleys, looking for nothing, finding nothing, a dead man who hadn't the good sense to lie down and rot. A zombie. Restless, in that new and terrible sense of the word. Restless.

He couldn't taste food, not really. Couldn't find any laughter in himself, or any tears. Couldn't enjoy sex, what little he stumbled into. Could scarcely even sleep. And never dreamed. Restless.

Then one day, in his waking somnambulism, his aimless meanderings around the vast gray city, he realized that he was looking for her, that he had nothing else to do, except perhaps for taking that final dive in the Thames. He heard himself asking questions about her, describing her in bungling words that couldn't begin to convey her beauty, found himself following vague whispers, chasing unsubstantiated gossip from unreliable sources. It wasn't much, but it was a purpose in a world that'd held none, that'd been leached of its color and robbed of all texture, a world in which all the drives that had moved and carried him had ground to a shattered-gear halt.

So he'd searched for her, pursuing lies and innuendoes, tracking rumors, across the city and across the Channel. He'd thumbed and hoofed his way to the City of Lights and sought her out on the Champs Elysees and in a hundred seedier Parisian rues, until the talk pointed him south, and he found himself broke and vaguely hungry in Milan where they muttered the word "strega" when he said her name, and some men crossed themselves. And still he looked, listened,

lived for this one purpose, this impossible-odds hope against hope. In Bern, a vacant-eyed Swiss man said in broken shards of English that he'd overheard talk of an impossibly beautiful Seylia, gone off to Munich, and the next day Adam was conning his way onto a train bound northeast.

He begged, borrowed, stole and suckered his way through Germany, followed a dozen different pronunciations and inflections of her name through Prague and Budapest where the men he talked to whispered "strigoi" and cast their glances away. He followed her into the crumbling mess of the former Soviet Empire and through long, long stretches of emptiness and silence. He found himself in obscure jails on the backside of civilization, but at least a cell was a place to

sleep for a night and eat a little and he hardly cared about the quality of the lodgings. He stowed away to Africa and drifted on breezes of gossip to all the ugliest, darkest ports of Asia. He stumbled like an old drunk through the ravenous sex traffic of Bangkok, where a withered flesh peddler suggested an indescribable beauty called Seerah had made her way to Los Angeles, eight months ago. It was only then that Adam realized he'd been following her -- no, not her but stories of her -- for nearly six years now. All that time, living in alleys and doorways, picking pockets and doing odd-jobs for whatever pimp or pusher would pay him, devoted to this futile goal and only dimly imagining what might happen in the impossible event he actually found her.

But he kept at it, because there was nothing else, no other life, no dreams.

He made his way to the City of Angels, languished in Hollywood for an endless summer, selling himself to lonely men and voracious matrons and wandering in circles. Then someone suggested the radiant girl had crossed the desert to Sin City, so he'd made his way across the parched emptiness to Vegas, baked in its neon glow, its decadence. He managed to come into a little more cash there, through cleverness and hard-won guile. From there he chased Celia's gaunt myth to Denver, Dallas, New Orleans, finding other wasted, spiritless men with those dead-empty eyes, a string of victims with gnawed and gnarled souls and desiccated lives, who couldn't quite find in themselves regrets or anger, who didn't care enough to chase that angelic enchantress across the vast and friendless world. He lost himself in Chicago, Detroit, and then at last in the Big Apple, where more talk had led him in a deepening spiral into the depths of the city's wormy underside, and someone suggested that the sly beautiful thief had made her way across the sea. So he followed -- Godthaab, Reykjavik, Dublin.

And now, the greater, the worse part of a tired decade later, back here, back to London. Back to the Green Man. As if all those intervening years, all those dark transient cities, all those tangled languages, had been merely an interlude, an afterthought. He was exhausted -- as well a corpse might be -- after the long long search, terribly tired. And still so restless.

With a dull shiver, Adam Singleman descended the stone stairs and pushed into the grim pub, drifted through the same old crowd, the usual suspects, the throwaway blokes who didn't even know he'd been gone, his head full of their stale smells and their dull mutterings. Then he emerged from the haze of smoke and mumbling and hunched silhouettes, and there she sat, just as he'd pictured her a hundred thousand times in a hundred thousand other dives.

If she'd changed in even the slightest detail, Adam couldn't spot it. The legs, the lips, the hips, breasts, hair, all of it was as perfect now as then. Age hadn't touched her at all, hadn't written its legacy in even the subtlest of lines on her flawless porcelain face, hadn't slackened her shape, hadn't dimmed the copper-forge fire of her hair, not in the least. Even the dress was the same, or an identical twin, that maddeningly alluring, tantalizingly thin sheath of emerald lamé, just the color of her eyes.

She looked up at him, with only the slightest shift of her entrancing gaze, and offered that almost imperceptible flicker of a smile once again.

He opened his mouth to say whatever it was he'd followed her around the whole circumference of the globe to say, to demand she return what she'd stolen, weave that scrap of soul back into the frayed fabric of himself, give him back his dreams. But instead of any righteous plea, he heard himself say, again, "I want -- "

Celia, Thief of Spirits, Stealer of Lives, nodded, gently.

"I know. I also want."

He could see it in her eyes, somehow, the subtlest glimmer of what she'd taken from him, and who knew how many other men, and perhaps women too, all around the world? It was still there, still in her, waiting for him to reclaim it, to reclaim it at last.

"Come," she instructed, sliding weightlessly from that same corner booth he'd first seen her in a whole lifetime ago and gliding toward that back corridor.

He went.

He followed her now as then, up the winding narrow stairs, through the lobby, past the indifferent desk clerk, up the main staircase, to the first floor hallway, past two dozen doors with their numbers dangling or gone, and into that same tiny room where he'd once known the world's most perfect, most terrible kiss.

Now, as then, she locked the door but left the lights off. Now, as then, she stood by the neon shimmering window, looking beautiful beyond reckoning, composed all of supple shadow and flickering liquid highlights, sparks of rare emerald from her gown and her eyes.

"You've come a very long way for me," she said, with a coquettish smile.

He took a step toward her, drew up short.

"You ... took something from me...." It was meant as an accusation, perhaps, but had the strength of neither wrath nor indignation behind it.

"You gave it, of your own desire," Celia answered, very quietly. Her eyes were really quite radiant.

Adam shook his head, as if to dislodge the fog that seemed to be clouding his purpose. He couldn't be slipped or shaken off, not now, after so many years devoted to nothing else.

"I ... I can't dream anymore," he explained limply.

"You've been living your dream," she said, voice like satin and smoke.

"It's been a bloody nightmare," Adam said thinly, staring at her, still lost in her beauty, and whispered it again, to himself, "a nightmare...."

"It's your dream, Adam," Celia told him, very, very quietly -- he might only have imagined she'd spoken at all.

He looked at her, gazed deep, deeper, deepest, into those perfect emerald eyes. There blazed the fragments of a thousand, ten-thousand, fifty-thousand other people's lives, all stolen, all consumed, all invested in her, making her young and flawless and devastatingly desirable, eternally. She smiled, a fraction more broadly now, a shade more gently now. And he understood. For the first time in all these homeless, dreamless, restless years, he understood what he'd truly been chasing after, what he truly desired.

"Do you want?" she asked again.

"Yes." It was a whisper, a sigh, lost in the noise of the city beyond the hotel walls.

Celia opened her arms and received him into her embrace once more, and he held her so very tight and loved the soft slightly cool firmness of her shape against his, her each curve cradling and fitting his just so. His lips closed on hers and he kissed her again, at last, and kissed her, and kissed her, for a very long time, until all the world dissolved to black and there was only whatever was here inside this union, and she took from him, and took a little something more, and more yet. And he gave it all willingly, joyfully, with immense and devastating gratitude. He'd wanted this for so many years -- not to reclaim that missing fragment of himself but to give up all the rest, give himself over to her fully and completely and finally and at last, at last, at last....

Through a haze of sleep-like twilight, he distantly sensed himself lowered onto the bed, heard the impossibly far-off mouse-squeak of the tired bedsprings, felt the strange subtle weight of Celia on top of him -- now there, now gone -- and sank, lower, lower, into that gently enveloping dark. And was that a voice, calling from somewhere deeper inside the shadows, or hers somewhere outside of him, whispering tender nonsense as he drifted into this strange slumber? Perhaps he was dreaming....

The End