

The world of Faery traditionally intersects the human domain in two ways. Sometimes, as we saw earlier this issue in Carrie Vaughn's story, there is a portal which transports mortals into other lands. And sometimes, as in our next tale, the denizens of that realm appear unexpectedly in the mundane world.

"The ford in this story is actually two and a half miles further south, in Elwood," Sean McMullen confesses. "But otherwise all the background locations and details are real, including the billionth scale model of the solar system. Fitzroy Street can be seriously weird. I once saw a naked girl walking amid the crowds with two guys in black hoodies and a girl in motorcycle leathers, so I decided that Echo, the Coranians, and Epona had come to Melbourne."

The Washer from the Ford

By Sean McMullen

I WAS ON MY SUNDAY NIGHT run when I saw the murder. I run along the foreshore and was on the walking track in Lighthouse Nature Reserve when the woman was stabbed. The guy fled when a couple of other joggers yelled at him, vanishing into the bushes as I called Emergency Services. His victim was wearing a white Tweety Bird T-shirt, and little packets of foil were scattered about, suggesting a drug deal gone wrong. Perhaps she couldn't pay her supplier and had been knifed as a warning to others.

We tried compression on the wound, but help was still a siren in the distance when her pulse failed. Thirty seconds later, the ambulance pulled into the nearby marina's car park and the paramedics came running with bags of medical kit and lamps. They did what they could, but she had lost too much blood. I gave a statement to the police, but I have a job, a Ph.D., and a clean record, so I was written up as an innocent bystander who tried to help.

The unit where I live is beside Albert Creek, a narrow streak of manicured wilderness meandering through half a mile of inner suburbia.

It actually has a ford, a nineteenth-century relic on the National Trust Register. Here, the mathematically precise bitumen of York Street gives way to cobblestones and the street dips beneath the water. There is a footbridge for pedestrians, but cars have to get their wheels wet.

I had showered and changed and was setting off for the laundromat with my bloody jogging gear wrapped in a towel when I saw a woman in an overcoat wading through the ford. In the three years I had lived in York Street, I had never seen anyone wade across. The water is only inches deep and she was wearing hiking boots, so I doubt she even got wet feet. Still, who wades through a ford when there's a perfectly good footbridge beside it? There was a dog with her, slinking along in a very un-doggy manner, like a cat stalking a bird.

The Fitzroy Street laundromat was deserted, yet nearly all the washing machines were in use. Nobody wants to waste Sunday night on washing clothes, so people set the machines working before dinner, then there's a rush three or four hours later, just before the electric door lock kicks in. For now, I had the place to myself, and I was putting my gear into the only vacant machine when the woman from the ford entered.

Just think about it. You walk into a laundromat and see someone putting a bloody tracksuit into a machine. I could not have looked more suspicious if I had entered a bank wearing a hoodie and waving a handgun.

"Don't worry, it's not how it looks," I babbled. "I was helping an ambulance crew with a stabbing victim. It's probably on the news by now."

She stared at me for a moment. The pupils of her eyes were very large, but not fearful. I would have put her age at around thirty. Beneath her coat she was wearing jeans and a flannel shirt. She had a strong, earthy look, like she worked on a farm.

"I heard. It was in Lighthouse Reserve, on the foreshore track."

She was not going to back out and phone for a SWAT team, so that was a relief. You say silly things when you are relieved. I did.

"Er, there's only this machine vacant, but I don't mind sharing."

"That's very kind of you. I don't have much."

Her accent was from somewhere between Yorkshire and the Scottish Lowlands. In Melbourne, it definitely stood out. I moved aside as she put

the clothes she was carrying into my machine. In went a quilted parka, yoga pants, frilly pink panties, white gym socks, and a bra for someone with breasts several sizes smaller than hers. *Daughter's*, I thought, and then I saw the white Tweety Bird T-shirt, soaked in blood, with a gash where a blade had plunged through. She pushed the door closed.

With my mind on autopilot, I put coins into the machine and started the wash cycle. What I had just seen was impossible. By now, the dead woman's clothes would be in an evidence bag, locked away and under guard. The police never, never release a murder victim's clothes within an hour of the death.

I glanced to the security camera and wondered if it had recorded what I had just seen. Next, I wondered if it was recording the fox that was sitting beside the magazine table, its bushy tail curled neatly around its paws. I see the occasional urban fox while jogging at night. They're generally raiding garbage skips or scavenging on the beach. They never enter brightly lit laundromats.

"You have three questions," she said.

"Well...shouldn't your washing be with the police?"

"I'm the washer."

That was a reply, not an answer.

"But there was a murder. It's evidence."

Instead of responding, she waved me toward a chair. I sat down. She stood before me with her arms folded.

"Tell me who you think you are," she said.

I'm thirty-four and she was probably younger than me, yet there was authority in her voice that reached right into my soul. Suddenly, I was talking to my mother, and one does not lie to Mother. Mother knows the truth already. Mother only asks questions to check if you are lying.

"I'm Peter, and I'm in computers — very large systems. I've got a Ph.D. in random number theory."

"You're fey."

What does a very mundane engineer say to something like that? A brief but firm denial seemed best.

"Afraid not."

She shook her head.

"Only those whose clothes I'm about to wash can see me, and I only

wash for those about to die. Melody saw me carrying her clothes this evening. They were soaked in blood, but she didn't heed my warning and go home. People never do."

"Are you undercover police?" I asked, grasping for a bit of reality.

She shook her head again. "Be aware that you have asked two of your three questions and squandered both. You may ask only one more."

I did not understand any of this. Was she proposing sex? By the sound of it, no. Apparently, she knew the murder victim. Perhaps she was another drug dealer.

"I don't do drugs," felt safe.

"I know."

We appeared to be playing some sort of game, with unexplained rules. This was the story of my life, and it was annoying.

"Then I don't understand," I admitted.

"You saw me carrying Melody's bloodstained clothes, and that's not possible. You can see me now, and that's not possible, either. You're special."

The surest way known to get someone on your side is to say they're special. *Red alert*, I thought. *Incoming request for spare change*.

"I'm not special."

"Yes, you are. Nobody has ever offered to help with my washing until tonight. For that, I'll help with your third question. You have been cursed. That's why you have great talent and achieve a lot but get nowhere. I can't lift the curse, but I can help you to live with it."

"Who would put a curse — "

"Don't ask that question!" she said sharply. "Better to ask how to get free of the curse, but heed my warning. There was once a man cursed with excessive interest in sex. He drew the attention of a Russian ifrit called Albastor."

I opened my mouth to ask what an ifrit was, but she was too quick.

"It's not quite a demon, not quite a fairy. Albastor punishes those who are obsessed with sex, but the man pleaded that he had been cursed with those inclinations. Albastor took pity on him and lifted the curse, but it turned out that the curse was really a blessing."

She was warning me to ask my final question with extreme care. I thought carefully, then asked.

"Well, can you tell me what my curse is?" seemed fairly harmless.

Without another word, the washer straddled me on the chair, then unbuttoned her shirt and pressed an erect nipple between my lips as I sat paralyzed with alarm and astonishment. This was an inner suburban laundromat late on Sunday night. Yes, the place was deserted, but no, it would not be deserted for long. She squeezed her breast, and I tasted milk.

I SHOOK MY HEAD and struggled out of that state where you are not quite awake, so reality still feels like a dream. My jogging gear was on the chair beside me, warm from the dryer and neatly wrapped in my towel.

Other people were in the laundromat, collecting their laundry or putting wet clothes into dryers to pick up in the morning. The washer was gone, but there was a lingering taste of milk in my mouth. I watched a collection of silent conversations between people unloading their washing and scrambling for vacant dryers.

Scabby old leech, he's got the hots for me. That was a girl who was pulling her washing out of a dryer.

Hello, Petal, you're new here, was on the face of the older guy who fancied her.

Only dropkicks use laundromats, was displayed by a woman of about my age who had just walked through the door with an empty basket.

I stood up and left before I saw any more faces. When I got home, Jilly Jackson was on her unit's balcony, having a smoke. She was a lean, blond twentysomething who did waitressing in Fitzroy Street cafés.

"Hey, Peter, hear about the stabbing where you jog?" she called.

"I phoned for the ambulance."

"No shit? Amazing!" she exclaimed, but her face said a lot more. *Should ask him up for a coffee and get the full story, that would really boost me on Facebook and Twitter. No, he might get ideas about having a screw, but he's too old and that's icky.*

Icky? My self-esteem dropped several notches.

"Drug deal gone bad, I'd say."

"Bet that's put you off jogging at night."

"No, it's safer than jogging in the sun and risking skin cancer. I'd better keep moving, got work tomorrow."

"Bye," she said, smiling and wagging her fingers. Her face said,

Arsehole, why didn't he make a move on me? Self-righteous prick, it's because he does all that jogging, and I smoke, so he thinks he's superior.

Being confronted with people's true agendas and impressions is seriously unpleasant; it's like having a conversation with someone who keeps punching you in the face. I closed the door of my unit, leaned against it for a moment, then stared at the tightly folded bundle that was my towel and tracksuit. It was physical proof that the washer existed, because I could never have done a fold like that.

The following morning, I caught the tram in Fitzroy Street, and once again people's faces silently spoke all around me. I was beginning to find it interesting.

Creep!

Cute, but not cute enough.

Restructure today. Am I for the chop?

Why does he ignore me?

Piles are hurting.

She's staring at my crotch. I should make a move on her.

He's staring at my boobs. I should move away.

That dork's jeans are a size too short. Hasn't he heard of style?

Suddenly, I also realized that nobody noticed *me*. I was in a social vacuum; people stared through me without a thought unless there was a good reason to say something.

The data center where I work is part of the university. We run big computers, from high-volume data servers to a petaflop-class supercomputer. I share an open-plan office with nine other people, writing and running scripts, checking for intrusions, unclogging bottlenecks, and scheduling backups. I got through the entire morning without anyone noticing me, yet they noticed each other. I could see all the jealousies, flirtations, power plays, and betrayals parading across their faces as they chatted, drank coffee, and workshopped system issues. Unless I drew attention to myself, I was ignored.

Walking across campus, buying lunch, it was the same. People only noticed me if I made them do something, like selling me a sushi roll or a coffee. In the afternoon, I presented a report on system continuity, pointing out that the entire center had not been shut down and restarted

in fifty years, that we did not have a plan to restart it in an emergency, and that a restart might not even be possible. Five of the section managers were daydreaming about sex, two were asleep, and the division head was cruising Twitter while pretending to take notes.

"As it stands, restarting the entire system would be like trying to revive a guy in cardiac arrest without knowing CPR," I concluded.

My words should have made them go white with alarm, but the division head merely thanked me in a listless tone. The others sat up and glanced at their agendas at the sound of her voice. There were no questions. Waiting at the pedestrian crossing, taking the tram home, same deal. When an inspector stepped aboard, he checked everyone's pass card but mine. Now that I thought about it, no inspector had ever asked to see my card, and no committee had ever acted on any of my reports. This was all normal for me, only now I was aware of it.

I am a scientist at heart, and I was coping very badly with the idea that a supernatural washerwoman had given me some sort of telepathy. I noticed that the effect did not work when I spoke to people on the phone or saw faces on television. So, magic, if this was indeed magic, did not work through electronic devices. I recalled that I had landed my current job after a telephone interview.

My background project was an intrusion-detection algorithm based on probability theory. I tested it on the following Friday morning and immediately found an elegantly disguised rootkit in one of the administration servers that we maintain. I emailed a report to the shift manager, and an hour later saw my supervisor being escorted out of the building by two security guards. He had not realized I was closing in on his industrial espionage scam until the guards walked into his office.

Ever pull off a great achievement but have nobody to celebrate with? Story of my life.

It was raining by the time I got home and changed into my tracksuit, but I jog no matter what the weather is doing. Jilly was in the street with an umbrella, waiting for an Uber car to take her nightclubbing. She was wearing a short black dress, black stockings, and black high heels, so I did not see her until we nearly collided. Nor did I notice the deep puddle on the footpath beside her until I splashed into it.

"Shit, Peter, that went right up my legs!" was what she shrieked.

"I'm sorry, I didn't see — "

"And don't offer to dry me off!"

With that, she stalked back to her unit to change. She was dressed as if it were summer, but practical midwinter gear does not look sexy, and nightclubs and cars are always heated.

I ran along the foreshore walking track beside Beaconsfield Parade, and it was absolutely deserted. I was wondering if there ever had been a beacon in a field near Beaconsfield Parade when I heard the roar. It was one of those monstrous 1970s muscle cars with a V8 engine, and you didn't need second sight to know what the driver was thinking: *The old bastard is finally dead, I can do whatever I want with his damn car!* What he wanted to do was run the red light at the intersection of Beaconsfield Parade and Kerferd Road, just as a late-model sedan was making a right-hand turn. I did not hear a squeal of brakes, perhaps because the V8 had locked its wheels and was aquaplaning along the wet road.

Although I was a hundred yards away, I still got hit by some of the glass crumble from the smash. I phoned Emergency Services as I ran over to help. Two guys in the V8 had died, taking all four people in the sedan with them. The sedan's front-seat passenger was just a mess strapped down by a seat belt. *I have right of way*, was on the dead face of the driver, who was more recognizably human. The couple in the back had been mashed into a single body with too many limbs.

The two girls and guy from the back seat of the V8 were still alive. I like to think that I helped keep them that way by organizing people from the gathering crowd to apply compression to their injuries and hold umbrellas to keep the rain off until the ambulances arrived. Six deaths qualify as a Grade A horror smash and is big news, yet the people from TV networks and radio stations ignored me, even though I had been the only eyewitness. Even the police questioned me as if they were doing me a favor. This was quite normal for me, except that I was now aware that it was abnormal. Nobody offered to drive me home, so I jogged back.

The washer was wading through the ford as I reached York Street, her fox under one arm and a load of clothes over the other. Think about how much blood-soaked clothing six dead people would be wearing in the

middle of winter, and you will have an idea what she was carrying. I called out, then splashed through the ford after her.

"I saw the crash," I said as I caught up.

"I know. You saved four lives."

"Three."

"No, four."

Again, that feeling: Good boys don't argue with Mother. I fell in with her, even though the winter rain was still pouring down.

"How is it, knowing your curse?" she asked.

"Is this three questions again?"

"No, you're my son now."

Not possible. My mother lived sixteen hundred miles away in a Port Douglas retirement village. This woman was younger than me.

"What did you do to me?"

"Those who taste my milk become my children, and my children have second sight. If you take me as a lover, you lose the gift. You cannot be both my child and my lover."

I did not believe in magic, yet nor did I believe in ignoring data.

"You...changed me. I can read people's faces like neon signs."

"Second sight is like being shortsighted and wearing spectacles for the first time, Peter. You see detail you had previously missed."

"But I've realized everyone ignores me."

"You wanted to learn about your curse. You can see it now."

We reached the laundromat. Being late on a very wet Friday night in winter, the place was again deserted. There was so much to wash that she barely fitted it into one machine.

"Look, er, how does this work?" I asked.

"Work?"

"Second sight. I keep seeing what people think of each other. Mostly it's a bit drek."

"All of civilization is built on facades. Humans can't achieve anything unless they pretend, conceal, and deceive."

"I can't read your face."

"I'm not human."

The scientist in me bristled. I have a low tolerance for nonsense, so I hit back.

"I've been doing some Web searches on how we unconsciously drop clues about what we're thinking."

"That's understandable."

"Facial muscles, blushing, tone of voice, eye movement, hand gestures — they all add up to messages. Like, anyone can look at a photo of wreckage in a news feed and be pretty sure it's of a plane crash that killed everyone on board. You don't have to read the article or caption. Since last Sunday, I can do that with people."

"I don't know much about science."

She was dodging me, but I don't give up easily.

"You said other people can't see you."

"They can if I'm about to wash for them."

"You could be some sort of hypnotic illusion. Like, you're real, but I don't see what you actually are. The human brain can fool itself into seeing what's not there, because it can fill the gaps in reality when there's not enough information."

"If you say so."

"You could have given me a drink from a milk carton but made me think it was your breast."

"If it makes you happy, think that."

It did not make me happy, which was very annoying.

"So I've been cursed to be ignored. Who cursed me?"

"So you believe in curses now?"

I was close to defeat, because it's not safe to be totally rational. If you are walking down the street and a saber-toothed cat comes around a corner and charges you, what is the sensible thing to do? Tell yourself that they went extinct thousands of years ago and keep walking? I would turn and run, and only wonder where the thing came from if I managed to run fast enough.

"For the sake of argument, yes," I replied.

"Once there was a girl who adored you, a fellow student at university. She was the type who is invisible to boys like you, and you indeed ignored her. As so often happens with those who do not quite fit into human reality, she could see things that walk unseen. Magical things. When her love for you turned to malice, she sold herself to a demon in exchange for a curse. She cursed you to be as anonymous to everyone else as she was to you."

"What? And that's it?"

"Yes."

"I was cursed for not noticing some mousy tart?"

"Yes."

"She never even spoke to me?"

"No."

"Bloody hell!" I exclaimed.

"Don't be angry — she paid a very high price for blighting you."

"What price?"

"The demon abandoned her last Sunday, leaving her dying."

"The Tweety Bird woman."

"Yes."

I should have said something caring and sensitive, but just then I was feeling like the only person on Earth who had the right to be a victim.

"That was the day I met you," I recalled.

"Demons have obligations, just like humans."

There was a pause in the conversation. I was probably expected to pass some sort of test by drawing an intelligent conclusion.

"So...the demon did not want to inherit her responsibility for cursing me. It made a pact with you?"

"Yes. I allowed you to see me, then granted you second sight. Second sight lets you notice your curse, although many would not even call it a curse. People like you are never noticed by muggers, bullies, thieves, or ticket inspectors."

I had to think about that. The washing machine chugged its way through to the end of its cycle, then I helped put her damp laundry into a dryer. As it tumbled and hummed, I Googled the keywords *washerwoman*, *ford*, and *death*.

"*Bean Nighe is a fairy of the Scottish Highlands*," I said, reading aloud from a folklore website. "*She is seen only by those who are about to die violently, washing the blood from their clothes at a ford.*"

"And by yourself."

The spectral Scottish washer at the ford from centuries past was now using laundromats. *Is she on Facebook?* I wondered. *Does she Tweet about her jobs? What would she put on Instagram?*

The dryer stopped turning, but it was empty when I opened it. The

washer was not surprised. It was still raining as we walked back along York Street. When we reached the ford, she picked up her fox without breaking stride and waded into the water. It was halfway up her calves by the time she faded out.

I crossed by the footbridge and entered my unit. I was looking forward to a long, hot shower when there was a tap at the door. It was Jilly.

"Look, I'm sorry about splashing that muddy water on you — " was as far as I got.

"They're all dead!" she cried, her voice edged with mania.

"What? Who?"

"I texted my friends to go on without me. I needed to shower and change."

"I know, I know, I ruined your evening."

"Their Uber car was wiped out in a smash — they were all killed! If you hadn't splashed me as you ran past, I'd be dead, too."

HAVING A VIEW of the bits of human nature that generally go unseen can be seriously addictive. All around me were grubby secrets on respectable faces: fraud, adultery, lust, theft, hate, envy, and fear, to name just a few.

Fraudsters and adulterers have a lot in common because they are used to getting away with misbehavior. There are more murderers out there than you might suspect; walk amid the CBD crowds at lunchtime and you are sure to pass a few. Psychopaths stand out like bold text highlighted in yellow, and most of them wear expensive suits. When middle age kicks in, so does the knowledge that you might never become chair of the board of directors, or even sit on the board. Anger, envy, and resentment glow from the faces of people who have realized that.

Still, it's not all sleaze and darkness. Want to know if the stock market is about to wobble? Hang out with me near a trading bank and I'll tell you what the faces say.

It was an unseasonably warm evening in early summer and I was preparing for my run, doing stretches beside the footbridge, as he came jogging over. He was as absolutely nondescript as it's possible to be: cheap

tracksuit, not-quite-stylish haircut, and a hint of aftershave to signal that he was only jogging because he was on the make. Because I am cursed not to be noticed, he looked straight through me as he jogged past, but he glanced hungrily at our block of units. Jilly was on her balcony, having a smoke.

Want to check out a neighborhood and not attract attention? Go jogging there. Burglars do it all the time, but he was no burglar. He had the eyes of a cruel and malicious god, and I was terrified. Although I am passably fit, I don't do martial arts and have never fired a gun. He was not just a murderer, he was a predator in search of prey, someone who knew how to subdue, control, and kill other humans better than an SAS commando. Jilly was on his radar.

What to do? Call the police? What was the evidence?

"Well, Officer, a Scottish fairy gave me second sight by letting me suck her — "

No! No, no, no, I was not going to go there or say that. The jogger turned into Fraser Street. Yes, I felt as guilty as all hell for doing nothing, but what *could* I do? I decided to do the solar system run and let my subconscious tackle this nightmare.

There is a billionth scale model of the solar system laid out along the foreshore, with brass planets mounted on pedestals. The sun is at the St. Kilda Marina, and four miles along the foreshore takes you to Neptune. Farther along is a model of Pluto, but if astronomers say it's not a planet anymore, then I'm turning back at Neptune.

As I approached Saturn, he was there, standing beside a dark blue hatchback with the driver's door open. This was near where gays hang out and cruise each other. Those who did not live nearby parked their cars here, at the Catani Gardens. To my second sight, gays on the cruise have a very distinct look, somehow bold and flamboyant yet coy and vulnerable. I could see that this guy looked nothing like them, yet to normal eyes he fitted right in.

Work in computer continuity and you get sent to a lot of security seminars. These can be pretty wide-ranging, and after fifteen years I had picked up enough skills to be a passably good private investigator. I memorized the car's registration, make, and model, so getting the guy's name and address online was not hard: John Knight, from Moorabbin.

Moorabbin, an average suburb full of average people, the perfect place to not be noticed.

A check of unsolved murders and missing people showed six girls and women who had disappeared in the city over the past three years. I plotted their homes on a map. None lived closer than five miles from each other, which to my eyes was suspicious. Serial killers are known to operate within a few miles of where they live because they like familiar turf. Knight was deliberately breaking that mold...and there was currently a vacant five-mile circle centered between the Lighthouse Nature Reserve and the Catani Gardens.

I thought of Melody, the Tweety Bird woman. The Lighthouse Reserve borders a car park. How hard to catch his victim in the unlit reserve, drag her to his car, and drive off? Now he was parked beside the Catani Gardens. I recalled a security seminar about abductions. He might come up behind his victim, catch her neck in the crook of his arm, then squeeze. The carotid artery keeps pumping blood to her brain, but the veins taking it back to her heart are cut off. Blood pressure builds up and her brain is starved of oxygen. Unconsciousness follows within seconds, but why stab Melody? It did not matter. Jilly bought her party drugs in the Catani Gardens.

I got no sleep that night and was useless at work the next day — but nobody noticed. What to do? How long to find a handgun in a country with some of the strictest gun control laws in the world? How long to learn to shoot with any real prospect of hitting a human-sized target? Probably longer than half a day for both of those questions. True, I had a small carving knife in the kitchen, but if I waved it at anyone who knew knife fighting, I would only stand a chance if he laughed so much that he fell over.

But I did have a weapon.

How suspicious did I look that evening, standing by the York Street footbridge for an hour, doing stretches? The washer did not appear, carrying my bloodstained clothes to the Fitzroy Street laundromat, so I was not going to die. I jogged south, turning onto Pier Road and skirting the Catani Gardens. The blue hatchback was there again, parked opposite the brass model of Saturn. The driver was nowhere to be seen. I jogged on

to the lighthouse, then did the mile back to the Catani Gardens in eight minutes.

Knight was leaning against his hatchback, doing a great job of looking like a gay who was a bit shy about approaching other gays, establishing an alibi for when Jilly disappeared. On his face was a banner headline that blotted out everything else: triumph. I jogged straight past him.

I don't like jogging in summer. Too many people on the foreshore track, getting in the way, too many faces with distracting stories that only I could see. I only jogged as far as Uranus, then returned to the ford. I was doing stretches beside the footbridge when the washer appeared. She was carrying jeans and a slashed, blood-soaked T-shirt. She waded out of the ford, followed by her fox.

"Coming?" she called to me.

I crossed Albert Creek by the footbridge, because that was for humans and I needed to remind myself to be human.

"I'm not wearing jeans or a T-shirt, so that can't be me," I said as we set off for the laundromat.

"The young man who owns these clothes will be stabbed with a broken wine bottle at a beach party near the old lighthouse. He'll bleed to death."

A carload of youths navigated the Cowderoy Street roundabout, burning rubber and shouting abuse. I dodged back, pulling the washer with me.

"Is he in that car?" I asked.

"Yes."

"So he's seen you?"

"Those I wash for seldom notice me."

This was hardly surprising. How could an Australian yob have heard of Bean Nighe from Scotland, the Mórrígan Sisterhood from Ireland, or the Lavandières de la Nuit from France? We walked on to the laundromat. Fitzroy Street is always crowded and busy on hot summer nights, but nobody reacted to the bloody clothes that the washer carried. Not even a homeless man asked for spare change as we approached, and he flinched with surprise when my coin landed in his cup.

We entered the laundromat and for a time we just sat together, listening to the machine work through its cycle, sounding like minimalist nightclub music.

"Aren't you going to ask me about Jilly?" I said, even though I was sure that she knew.

She did not answer. Two young men with sly eyes and wearing dark hoodies paused in front of the laundromat and peered at us.

"Coranians," she said.

"Welsh imps," I replied. "Stealers of secrets."

"You have studied a lot of mythology in six months."

"Did they steal from me?"

"They told me you phoned the police, using a prepaid phone. You then tossed it into the bay at the Kerferd Road Jetty. The police were waiting at Knight's house when he got home. Jilly was found in the back of his car, under a blanket."

"You don't have her clothes, so she must be alive."

"You learn quickly. Too quickly."

I had reported seeing a woman being dragged unconscious into a blue hatchback. *Did you get the registration number, sir?* Yes I did.

"What next?" I asked as we transferred the clothes to a dryer.

The washer gestured to the laundromat's window. A naked girl of about twenty sauntered past. She waved to us.

"Echo, she distracts jealous husbands and wives while adulterous couples do the things that make them adulterous," I said before the washer could speak. "We have coffee sometimes."

"So you like second sight?"

"It's cooler than being a rock star. Supernatural weirdos are great company."

Her face changed as I was speaking, becoming rounder, softer, radiantly beautiful without being intimidating, and oh so very wanton. Suddenly she was human, and I could read her face. It told me that she was a young mother, stuck at home, bored. She placed a hand on my knee, then giggled self-consciously because proposing an act of infidelity is by its very nature embarrassing. It was a warm, balmy afternoon, her husband was at work, it would be all pleasure and absolutely no consequences.

"If I sleep with you...I lose second sight," I said, forcing the words out.

"You no longer need it, Peter. Six months of second sight has taught you to sidestep your curse. You can be normal, successful."

"But — "

"You can't stay as you are."

These words were firm and unyielding. She morphed back into the washer.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because fey gifts make mortals disruptive if they have them too long. Mortals don't follow our rules."

"Tell me your rules."

"You would not understand them."

"Think so? I'm pretty good at research. In the past six months, I've read two million words about mythology and taken a hundred thousand words of notes."

"Numbers mean nothing."

"Now it's you who doesn't understand," I said, like a stern teacher with a slow student. "Tell me, why is a conversation with fey folk like a well-scripted TV series?"

"I don't watch television."

"It's because every single word has an agenda. You mentioned the ifrit Albastor, and his pact with the guy who wanted a sex curse lifted. I bet that guy was Knight. Thanks to Albastor, he got free of the curse, but that curse was an outlet for his sexual urges. Without the curse, they stayed bottled up until they exploded in a frenzy of sadism, rape, and murder. Albastor could not cast a new curse of sexual potency — that's against his job description. Instead, he offered you something in return for stopping Knight."

"You're good, but not good enough."

"Then I'll try harder. Remember the Tweety Bird woman? Fifteen years ago, I was popular with the girls, and I bet she was someone I never noticed. I think Albastor was her demon, and she had him curse me for being too good at getting laid. In return, she became his servant. I've read that some magical stuff can only be done by mortal hands, so win-win. Six months back, Albastor needed a murder victim, so he lured Knight into attacking Melody just as I came jogging along. How am I doing?"

"Dangerously well."

"Knight's been caught, so mission accomplished. Trouble is, I still have second sight. You want it back."

"Peter, you're too good for your own good."

"Story of my life," I said as I got up to go.

THERE WERE NO CORPSES at Knight's house, but DNA from four of the six missing women was found in his kitchen. I kept my distance from the investigation, for pretty obvious reasons. Once she got out of hospital, Jilly decided to move back in with her folks. Too much freaky stuff goes on in St. Kilda, she explained as we had our first and last coffee at the Cowderoy Street Café. All her gear was now in a hire truck that her father was driving east, toward bland and affluent middle suburbia.

"And another weird thing," she said. "Knight and I were hidden by bushes when he grabbed me. Like, nobody could have seen us together."

True, but I had seen the triumph in his face. How to tell her that?

"Somebody saw something," I said with a shrug. "Must have been your lucky day."

"Hey, Peter, do you mind a personal question?"

"Ask, I'm a person."

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-four."

"Amazing! You dress way older."

"We cyber-geeks are not into fashion."

He's only seven years older than me, flicked across her face. The smile that followed said, *I shouldn't but I will...just this once. If we became an item, he'd want me to give up smoking and jog with him.*

A sound like the computer center's fire evacuation siren blared in my head. After three years of just being neighbors, Jilly was thinking about an intimate encounter with me on the day she was moving out. Why? She had no idea that I saved her from Knight. Besides, she had been abducted and nearly murdered only two weeks earlier. Who thinks about sex so soon after something like that?

Why doesn't he make a move on me?

Her unspoken question had a very obvious answer. Because she might not be Jilly. I had seen the washer shapeshift, and to sleep with the washer was to lose second sight. And if she were the real Jilly? The prospect made my head spin with desire. It had been a very long time.

"Hey, why don't I come back to your place and go through your wardrobe to give you some fashion tips?" is what she said. Her face said, *I'll offer to strip off and model his clothes for a laugh, that will break the ice.*

That was exactly the sort of thing Jilly would say. She was a long-term neighbor. People who know me long-term do tend to notice me and acknowledge my presence, but in fifteen years, nobody ever proposed a lay.

"That sounds great," I said brightly, then held my hand up. "Hold a minute, my phone's vibrating and I'm on call."

I pretended to read a text.

"Sorry, the fashion show's off," I announced. "The DNS server at work just blew its brains out."

"Er, say again?"

"Computer crash. I have to go in right now."

Ah, shit! displayed itself on her face so plainly that I could have seen it without second sight.

"On Saturday evening?" is what she asked.

"That's why I get a callout allowance."

"Well, let's do lunch some time." She sighed, then kissed me on the cheek.

"You know where I live. Give me a call."

"I'll do that," she said. *As if,* was what her face said.

I took a tram to the university, feeling absolutely wretched, then took the next tram back. Although I changed into my tracksuit, I was not going for a run. I had been doing stretches beside the ford for ten minutes when the washer appeared. I joined her, and we set off for the laundromat. The clothes she was carrying smelled of vomit.

"He got drunk and is about to throw up and choke," she said.

"Then he's not me?"

"No."

"And was the girl in Cowderoy's Café really Jilly?"

"That would be telling."

"She fancied me, so she was probably you."

"Perhaps."

We walked on while I thought about this. We reached Fitzroy Street.

"I can't see the Coranians or Echo, but that lady wearing tight leathers near the parked Harleys looks not quite human," I observed.

"She is Epona, the Celtic guardian deity for horses. She's moved on to motorbikes."

Epona smiled at us. I waved back.

"Why do you want to take away my second sight?" I asked as the washer and I walked on. "What harm does it do?"

"Some gifts are not safe in the hands of mortals. You would cause disruption if you continued to use second sight."

"Disruption? Together we stopped a serial killer."

"Only because I wanted Albastor to owe me a favor."

"And that's all?"

"Yes."

"Well, I did it to save Jilly, and all the other Jillys that Knight will not kill."

"That was very mortal of you."

I think that was meant to be an insult.

"How many more deadly enchantments are loose in our world?" I asked, not taking her bait.

"More than you could count."

"What do you do about them?"

"I warn people when Death approaches."

"You give them warnings they don't understand. You save nobody."

"How much better can you do?" she retorted, suddenly angry. "Nobody can make a real difference."

"Yet I did."

"You were meant to die, confronting Knight to save Jilly. Now you are alive with second sight, and that disturbs our balance. Without balance, we are vulnerable."

"Balance? But you fey creatures do nothing important. Echo gives adulterers a bit of privacy, the Coranians steal secrets that don't matter, Epona looks after motorbikes while their owners are trashing each other, and you give people warnings that don't save them. Why bother?"

"Because our tasks let us exist!" she muttered sullenly.

At last, the truth. The fey folk had immortality, but it was immortality without purpose. We reached the laundromat.

"Damn your balance," I said, stopping at the door. "I want to make a difference."

"And I have an obligation to take back your second sight. I will make other women aware of you, Peter. It will be very, very tempting."

"But one of those women will be you, shapeshifted."

"Oh yes. How long can you hold out?"

"Fifteen years of living with my curse has trained me to do without sex."

"They were fifteen years without anyone making a move on you. Big difference."

"I resisted you as Jilly. I think I can last a very long time, and unlike you and your kind, I think I can do some good."

To my surprise, she held out her hand. I hesitated, then grasped it.

"You can never win," she said, shaking her head but smiling.

"Then not losing will have to be good enough," I replied.

There was nothing else to say, so I wandered away and mingled into the Saturday-night crowds of Fitzroy Street. Now I had the measure of creatures like Echo, Albastor, and the washer. They did indeed preserve balance, but only for themselves. Mortals like Jilly and Melody are not part of that balance; they are there to be used and discarded. Now here am I, a mortal with second sight who has no interest in maintaining the balance of their shadow world. True, I have restrictions and vulnerabilities, but they are part of my job description. Making a difference is in that description, too.

