

Eros Takes a Bow
by
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1. Finding an Opening

The funniest thing about humans is that they can't tell when the joke's on them.

One human can see another follow some ridiculously wrong path like adultery or murder or theft or betrayal and think themselves so completely different from their errant kin that they could never go that way.

That doesn't sound funny; I understand. The funny bit is why they think they could never do such things. You would think, since experience, history, revelation, and a look outside the window show that all humans are blatantly fallible, that these witnesses of error would worry about their own actions and seek to amend their ways. You know -- try to be good, to help and love one another, that sort of thing. One would hope that they might see that way as the road away from the danger of being a danger.

But no. That would be too easy. They can't do that. And besides, they know that they're safe from such courses because they are special. The universe revolves around them. And why do they think that? That's part of the joke. They think that they think that because of any of a myriad of sources of self confidence. A human

might see their special nature because of who their parents are, or what nation they live in, or their skin tone, or whichever religion they happen to belong to, or because the way the sunrise over their home is so pretty that they must be personally favored of the divine.

Don't you get it? They think that because of the accidents of their lives they've been blessed with immunity from doing wrong.

You still don't think that's funny. All right. All right. I've had enough experience telling people jokes about themselves to know they don't like to hear them. I'll tell the gag another way. This way it won't really be about humans.

Yes, yes, some of it will. That's unavoidable. But don't worry. This is family gossip. Humans like that. Let me tell you about my son and my daughter-in-law.

At 11:00AM each morning of each day, the Old God opened his antique shop. The ceremony of opening was a brief one, but vital. The path to him began each day shut, sealed, secret, no ingress for those who sought his antique understanding. To prepare the way he needed first to appear at the door, a half-limned figure behind smoky glass; then undo the chain, audible in click and dangle; then unlock the three locks, hesitantly, resolutely, and carefully. Then pause, once, thrice, five times, a beating heart skipping in nervous drumming. Then at the pause after the fifth rim-shot, he would turn round the simple rectangular card hanging on a string from a little brass hook in the door frame.

Once turned, what faced inward was the single menacing word "Closed", but looking out upon and for the world was a hopeful "Open." On the line below this single word the Witticism nestled.

The Witticism had a linguistic fluidity, flowing beyond words and eyes, going directly into those who looked upon it, mingling with their life's blood. Once the Witticism had beat its way into their hearts, their heads would supply the words they thought they were reading. When customers came to the door the Old God would judge them based on their reaction to the words they created after reading it. Those who came for antiques because they liked the beauty of them would smile at their own wit. Those who sought the truth of the past through antiques would frown thoughtfully. Those who looked for antiques that would fit into their lives making them better would hesitate at the wordless words. And those who were looking for investments would not even notice the Witticism. These last the Old God would judge in other ways.

On this particular Monday morning, at 11:07AM -- at least that's what the unsellable long case clock said it was -- but again, on this particular Monday morning in late March of a quiet year -- not that the Old God cared much for particulars, since all people had been and were at times and places his worshippers -- to repeat, on this particular Monday morning, at 11:07AM, in the city named whatever the name of that city was, where, of course, so much was both particular and general . . .

On this particular Monday morning at 11:07AM a woman came to the door, stopped, read the Witticism, looked in through the window at the Old God sitting on a high backed unupholstered chair behind a Sheridan desk in the middle of the antique-choked room, looked back at the Witticism and laughed, bright and loud and long, startling the self and cell phone absorbed people walking by.

She opened the door and stepped in, jangling the bells into wind-through-a-steeple-tower changes. Her laughter was harmonious with the higher and counterpoint to the lower tones of these temple bells. She stepped with care, as a person does who is

used to moving through dangerous environments. Her right hand firmly gripped the strap of a tan leather purse that hung on her shoulder. Her left arm was at her side, making no sudden motions.

"I don't know," she said to the Old God, turning a smooth yet wry face upon him. "How can you tell if a love song was written in Heaven?"

The Old God drank in the question, becoming the Right Old God for her. "If it's a love song," he said. "It was."

The woman cocked her head to one side. A rich red curl trickled out from under her otherwise close-fitting hat, and she smiled, delicate, but deep. An impulse grabbed her and she thrust out her right hand, leaving her purse to a sudden pendulum swing. "Callie Bowen," she said.

The Old God watched the impulse, a brave little thing to come out in his presence. It should be rewarded for its temerity. The impulse felt the god's gaze and trembled in fear at the rewards to come.

A name, pick a name. Humans cared so much about names. Perhaps this human less than most, but still, he would need to choose a name that she would listen to. Joke names, irony, hidden meanings. Humans of this bent loved those. The Old God knew better than any what humans loved. "Harold Amory," he said. "How can I help you, Ms. Bowen?"

"I need a wedding present," she said. Her gaze flicked around the antiques shop, a butterfly glance darting hither and thither, looking for the right beauty on which to alight. Yet a butterfly with sharp, clear eyes. One that looked at and saw each thing in turn, judging it for her needs. An analytical butterfly. With so many kinds of butterflies abroad on the Earth the Old God could have found a species of appropriately

clever name. But diversity of name and being were not directly his concern, although no doubt she would have found such a discussion of interest.

"A wedding present, hmm."

Wedding Present. Wedding. The word called out to all that could hear. Weddings were very attractive to a certain kind of uninvited guest, the kind that lived and grew in the Old God's shadow and the kind that flitted through the air, empty and wanting. They whispered to each other. Would it be safe to go? The god had taken an interest. Would he be at this wedding? Would that make it safer or more dangerous to go? Regardless, the pickings would be wonderful. So much to glean of hope and fear, lust and plan, and oh so finicky detail at a wedding.

"You'll have to give me a little more to go on," the Old God who wore the name of Harold Amory said. "Do you know the tastes of either the bride or groom?"

Ms. Bowen's face drew four slashes into a frown. To a human the look would have revealed her age, her previous youthful expression turned into an abrupt fortiness. To the Old God all adult human faces were the same, and appearance mattered not. Spirit was another matter. The spirit that emerged, hard around soft, spoke chocolate around caramel depths to the God.

"Not a wedding you want to attend?" he asked. The voice was gentle, without a touch of compulsion or of intrusion to it. It was a question asked in the way one questions oneself.

"My former sister-in-law, my ex-husband's sister is getting married," Callie Bowen found herself saying, as if it were the most natural thing ever to open her heart to this strange man. "My daughter dotes on her Aunt Maggie. Margaret to me. I'd have nothing to do with this if it weren't for my daughter."

"So, do you want a present for your daughter's views of this Margaret? Or yours? Or perhaps one with a tinge of the other. A little reminder of what you think?"

This was the second test. The Witticism had been the first, whether she could find her way into the shop correctly. If so, could she stand the simple temptation of her desires. The old God watched those desires, floating and flitting inside Callie Bowen, wisps of air and insinuation, gusts of dust and distraction, gales of smoke and disorientation.

Ms. Bowen, Callie, tottered. One way or the other? Her face flickered and the whisperers in the God's shadow peeked around him, studying her as form of cat prowling, its nose and whiskers alive to the night might study shape of deer at gaze, peering out in tremble heart swift, swift hart, ready to leap at the best chance. If they jumped fast they could take from her before her own desires struck. A few slinked out to grab her ambivalence, but the God slapped them back. The trial would be pure.

"My daughter's feelings," she said at last. "I won't use the wedding. Anyway, Margaret's not a bad person. A little too wrapped up in herself, but nothing like my ex-husband."

The Old God smiled, and Callie Bowen's heart felt lighter than it had in the years since her divorce. Her desires slunk back into her memories. They did not dare push themselves hard upon her in the god's presence, although those who dwelt in the new-dredged memory thumbed their metaphorical noses at him. Divorce was their home and he had no part in it that they could see.

Divorce. The word hung between them, separating woman and god, a welter of events and stories, of memories and challenges. In the shadows those who feed upon human suffering and drink the sadnesses of life stirred, feeling the call but not daring too much in the divine presence. Besides, their kin already dwelt in this recollection.

Divorce. Callie Bowen remembered with iron bell clarity the hour in which she had chosen it, or rather the moment when she had seen that regardless of the fact that she and he were still wed in the eyes of the law, in all deep truth divorce had already happened. A cold day. No, not physically. She had been out in the yard in cutoffs and a t-shirt, working with a pad of paper and a laptop under the shade of the big apple tree. A hot day, but only in earthly climate. Paul had come home, but not really his home, just the place where his feet landed and his backside rested before returning to the world of his real interests. He had walked in as if he owned the place, owned the world and all in it. He had neither smiled nor laughed, nor kissed his wife or daughter who had come in and down from their own works. He had walked in: house door to refrigerator door to the television. Shelter, food, and entertainment. What need was there for another person?

Divorce. The god shed a tear, a parent sad for a child who had died. Too young this marriage, too stretched out upon a rack of indifference, broken in body and spirit. It had ailed and suffered and died. What parent would not weep in that memory? But better dead than undead.

"I know what you need," the god said. "Come to the back of the store. I have an Art Deco mirror. Full length, in a mahogany and silver frame. Come look in it, then give away what you see."

He moved through the clutter of time and memory with an ease and simplicity that Callie found startling. She had to pick her way through, making sure not to touch each protuberance, each knob and bulb, each extrusion of glass and rod of wood, each curlicue of silver. One by one she made her way through. With a grace she could not see, she made her way. His grace was born of undying inherency, hers of practice against errancy.

Callie's eyes flicked from left to right, top to bottom, appraising the shop as she walked. Its ceiling was dusty and dark, but there was marquetry up there, hidden secret patterns of many shaded woods, an insinuating forest. The floor was curiously shiny, given the dust everywhere else. It had a stark modernity to it, like a sheen of chrome, but it too was wooden. The antiques were carelessly laid around in odd piles, silver upon chairs and tables, porcelain upon silver, knick-knacks in half open drawers, labels only half written, hints of provenance and price, as if the proprietor cared not a bit for them.

Yet when her attention touched each one it became enormously attractive and showed signs of careful tending and, where needed, gentle healing of time's injuries. An old inlaid gaming table caught her life-long gamer's eye. It had many folds in hidden crevices that if opened out could transform it from the symmetries of a chess board to the partnered war of bridge to the racy lines of backgammon. Heaven alone knew how many other games lay inside its secret recesses.

Callie flushed with some odd thought. Her mind seemed to be tripping over double entendres, as if every piece of wood or metal, every line and curve of the shop and its contents contained secret meanings of a blatant nature.

"Here it is," the Old God said, stepping aside like a master of ceremonies unveiling the opening act.

The mirror was tall, full length for a basketball player, and oddly curved. Its edges bent outward to catch more of the room than a straight mirror would. But it bent only at the edges, avoiding the funhouse mirror bloating that would have elicited dread questions about weight gain.

The Old God slipped in behind her, shadowing Callie, while his shadow shadowed him. Through the transparency of her body he watched her eyes. Not once

did they alight on her own reflection, and though called by each imaged thing in turn, they did not linger, as if the currents of desire were not enough to catch her heart.

The Old God wondered. It had been so long since anyone had passed the test of the Witticism, let alone the trial of the mirror. Should he give her the third ordeal? It was time to choose. Difficult for a god. Time was not their concern and choice was a human thing.

The god drew back his finger, pointed it arrow-like at her back. One touch of its willow-leaf nail would be enough to give her everything. He moved in, then paused again. It had been so long, so far from the possibility of hope. Should he dare, should he whom all the universe feared go beyond his own fear? Should he for whom all others tried, try again himself? He waited for decision.

Callie's eyes in that moment, weary of their circling, looked ahead, and for a moment, a sudden startled moment, she saw right through her reflection to the reality that lay behind it.

The Old God pulled back the shot of his finger and opened wide his arms to fill the world-bending prudence of the mirror. Here, his silent voice said. Let me show you all that I am, all that you are, all that is.

The roof exploded into the sky, nine days' travel upward, the floor dropped away, nine days' travel down. The walls retreated in all directions, one day's travel by plane -- assuming that one could book a reservation, that there were no cancellations and of course one would have to hope that one's luggage was not lost.

Roof above me.

Floor below me.

Walls are gone.

I remain in between.

In the air.

Filling the space between.

Who am I?

Callie drew in a breath, a gasp, drawing in the Air:

Spiritus

Pneuma

Chi

Breath.

Drawing in the Shadow of the Old God, she filled her lungs with a swirl of emptiness, cold and hungry. It came into her being, wanting all that she had but fearing what she was. Drink, but not too much. Beware. Beware, for the god has sent us.

Beware. But should she beware, or should they who lived in the shadow and in her now, filling her memories, blending in with those already there, should they be the ones to fear? You are his, they said. We are not, they defied. We only follow him.

"I'll take it," Callie said, her eyes soaring up to the roof of Heaven, her feet gripping the stone of Earth. "Can you deliver?"

The Old God smiled. "Anywhere you wish."

You should understand that my son takes what we in the profession call a "charitable" view of people. Don't get him wrong. That word doesn't mean what you think it does. Charity isn't being nice to people. It's offering them a helping hand upward. A chance to raise themselves up. Another of those in our biz calls it mercy, yet another calls it compassion. But whatever you call it, it isn't nice.

You don't see that. Hmm. Think about this. Imagine that at every moment in everything you are doing there is a hand waiting to help you. That hand exists to pull you up out of the difficulties of your life. Not to solve them, not to remove the things that cause pain, but to take away the fear of pain, to show you a higher view of things in which your difficulties are drowned in a vast sea of endless hope.

Sounds great, right? It always does. But here's the joke. Humans who are suffering deeply: the dying, the starving, the plague-ridden; they want hope. They want a chance to get out and live a good life. But humans who are suffering just a little, who are niggled and pestered and anguished and angst-ridden, they don't want hope. They take the pesters and the anguish and the angst too seriously. Most humans in that state push away the hand of hope. They love the causes of their misery too much. Isn't that hysterical?

No. Well, you gotta laugh or cry about it.

I always do both.

Back to my son. He perks up whenever someone takes his offered hand. And then he pours out to them an unending stream of gifts. Of course, humans have a hard time recognizing gifts as well.

But that's another joke.

Actually it isn't, but humans have a hard time telling when things are the same.

Now, that really is another joke. I'll tell you that one too.

When?

I've already started.

Callie Bowen stepped out of the shop into a world boundlessly startling. Yet where did the startle come from? Tien Street, at first sight, was that same old ramble of old eccentric shops it had always been. It was the kind of place where every establishment looked as if it had been there forever, yet each stroll down it brought a new surprise. Morning light covered half the street in shade; the nearby skyscrapers from the city's booming times overshadowed it with nine decades of office and condominium. A swooping Art Deco building whose sides looked like ladders being climbed by gargoyles and angels abutted a Postmodern lance of glass and blue steel with a red stone base and no less than three plant-filled atria. Voyeur's paradises these should have been, but they were full of people who never looked out on lives other than their own.

She had seen all this before, had enjoyed the street's homey oddities, but not thought about them. It had always been like this, since her childhood. She had looked upon it many a time, but had she given it--

No second chance.

No second glance.

The smell was the same as well, the aroma of a city in spring, the smells of humanity and machinery with just a hint of floral and tree, a bouquet being presented to the springtime.

No second scent.

No second spent.

But the sounds. The city noise still came to her ears, hard and jangled as ever. Its clamor and assault had long ago forced her to develop that citizen's ear that is practiced in passing untroubled through cacophony yet sharply focused enough to pick out a friend calling her name or the jingle of an ice cream truck or the warning of official

sirens. Her jaded ears were now amazed by something unheard and unheard of upon the boulevards.

Music. Not the isolated strands of street musicians struggling to gain attention and praise and enough cash to live on. This was music over all and under all, music in all things of the city. There were rhythms and beats in the walk of the people and the stall of the cars. There was a glissando in the heights of a nearby forlorn tree as its fingering branches strummed the wind while it tried to drink the blocked off sunlight. A clot of people standing outside a used book shop smoking and chatting were a brass quartet, jazzy in their debate, a hard deep bassoon challenging long-talking trombone, while two piccolos tried to stick their pointy ends into the debate.

A pretty young lady strode by, a flageolet trilling out a self-involved "look at me, but don't bother me" stride. As she passed the trombone tuned out the quartet and tried to get in tune with the flageolet, but she was soloing and wanted no one to play her second fiddle.

Callie laughed, a violin arpeggio. Out into the music went her voice, echoing, resounding as if the world were full of a great emptiness, a vastness of air so large that there was room for as many players and sounds as any could want, as if the whole universe were nothing but an endless acoustic chamber with walls so far and so close that all could be heard right here and all could spread forever.

That sound, a resounding greatness, called to Callie, asked her out to dance into the wideness, the wildness of its void. It called to her with a garment of starlight and shoes of diamond. She wanted to dance with it, dance to it, dance forever in the void, dance until her feet wore down treading the empty measure, dance until her body gave out, dying of hunger, thirst, fatigue, and the ballerina's broken life. Dance until death and beyond.

Which was exactly the kind of stupid idea she was always warning her daughter against. Honestly, how could anyone be silly enough to throw their life away for a fancy dress, flashy shoes, and a cheap Byronic line like that?

The music paused, as if something vast, all pervasive and unendingly deep were drawing in a breath. Something blinked a silence in the light. A darkness in the sound. Then another flash, and yet another. A strobe of bewilderment cutting off symphony with shadow, illumination with mum-keeping.

The hidden musicians whispered behind their hands to each other, relieved that she did not seem to hear them when they were not playing. What had the Old God let loose among them? It was tempting to protest, but they knew all about temptation, and about the futility of griping to the gods. It wasn't that divinity didn't listen to complaints. The gods always gave ear. But after they had heard they would give answer and you would be the one filled up with far more than one earful of words.

Safer, not that they understood safety, and wiser, not that they knew wisdom, to pretend. They certainly knew pretence. Strike up again, and dissemble, hope that this wasn't happening.

The band played on.

A song in her heart and a dance in her step, Callie Bowen made her way home.

I'll be the first to admit that I've had trouble with some of those who say they follow me. They catch a glimpse of my presence and go all moony-eyed and overcome with poetic inspiration. They look at the world and see only the beautiful things. Don't

get me wrong, I like when that happens. People in that state of mind are receptive. They listen to me then. But they think I'm only present when they're seeing that happy beautiful place. They think that I'm a romantic.

Silly. I'm as hardheaded and practical as anything this side of Heaven. If I were only present in moments of romance, mothers would hate their children for the ordeals of birth and children would hate their parents for making them eat their vegetables.

Love isn't only found in chocolate. Sometimes it's in the Brussels sprouts.

Callie Bowen lived in a spoil of many wars. The land on which her house had been built had, long before the coming of her ancestors, been fought over by tribes and soldiers for many years. They had fought and bled for a stretch of open ground long before the settlements grew up and were engulfed by the city. The homesteaders who eventually took it after the wars had been lost lived there only one generation, growing an orchard, apples for the many, pennies for apples, pennies that grew to dollars and opened doors. The children of the apple growers departed, following the roads of their various ambitions to older cities with grand ambitions and streets paved with gild and guilt-edged securities.

Meanwhile the local town had itself grown into an upstart city, and a generation later the grandchildren of those who had farmed the land fought in court for ownership of what had become prime real estate. There had been no victors in that battle, but Callie's grandfather, Lawrence Timson, a man with an acquisitive eye, had bought the land from the people who emerged from the courtroom clutching the deed and their

destitution. With a few strokes of a pen upon a check he had relieved them of both. Lawrence had intended to wait a few years then sell it again, thinking then to move deeper into the city.

But Timson made a mistake. One day in seeking to show off all that he had to an easily impressed audience, he took his daughter to see the place. Melissa Timson, Callie's mother -- although at eight years of age that future was not yet fully spun -- had seen the lone surviving apple tree, grown tall and gnarled. Ancient before its time, its fruited limbs, gangly yet firm, had called the girl to climb and eat. Melissa fell in love with that tree. And her love for it tangled her father's heart, so he, hard-souled in all other matters yet conquered by child-love, had given up his plans to sell the land and had instead built upon it .

Lawrence Timson built a forethoughtful house, narrow in the manner of city dwellings, though the city had not yet arrived in full force. Roads and trains had come, shops and theaters, but not yet the full urbanity. He enclosed a piece of the ground, that containing the tree, and bargained the rest of the no longer fruitful orchard away for long life and comfort.

Melissa's love for the tree had been stronger than that she held for the husband she later married, Callie's father, Karl Waters, a man shortsighted in many ways. He could not hold back his ambitions for the house-loving, homeliness of his wife. He had vanished into time and political action, long since having lost his war against the house. Melissa remained at home while Karl with his dreams of making a perfect world faded into the apparatus of state government, a nameless figure sure that one day his ambitions would be realized. He never noticed what he had left behind, a place of roots that grew one perfect crop, a child of brilliance.

In youth Callie, though shrewd in so many ways, had not learned the lesson love and apples had taught her mother. She did not then know that some things can only be gleaned from experience, and she did not know that if she would not learn from her mother's she would have to learn from her own. She too fell in love with someone who could not see beyond his own desires. Paul Bowen's interests had been neither so focused nor as randomly humanitarian as her father's. He had an interest in beauty. He was quite egalitarian on the matter. The spoils of his hunts could be found in artworks in the house and the comfort area he had made for himself near the television, and of course in the kind of story that makes a good movie but a bad life. He felt that these scraps of him made the place and everything in it his.

Paul had fought for the house. He had fought for Callie. He had even fought for their daughter Annette. And his fighting had been startling in its savagery. Hell hath no Fury--

Actually hell has three Furies, or Kindly Ones, but while they come into many stories like this one, we'll manage to avoid them, luckily for Callie Bowen. For now, let us say that . . .

Hell hath no Fury like thwarted sulking desire.

Paul Bowen had fought, and Callie had fought back, challenging his wants with the clarity of fact. The house was her inheritance. He had no claim to it. Callie was her own person --

More than she could then know.

And their daughter needed a stable place to grow up which she could give and he could not.

Paul had lost. Unsurprisingly, he who loved grace in all things had shown little of it at that moment.

Callie had the house, she had her life, and she had her daughter.

Another thing humans can't tell is when they have a thing or it has them.

Having that being or being that having.

A joke? Perhaps.

Callie Bowen let her house into her mind as she stepped through the melodrama of her front door. She was not one of those people who did not notice where they lived. She had paid attention, as a soldier will pay heed to the little patch of dirt fought and bled for. It might not matter to anyone else, but to her every little detail mattered, for each was a memorial of domestic conflict.

Take the door. It was tall, high enough for a stilt walker. It had an arched glass transom above it. It was made of thick oak, but veneered in faux ebony. In summer it gleamed in the sunlight. In winter it brooded. At night the two carriage lamps that flanked it gave off classic horror movie lighting.

It had been the perfect door to slam in Paul's face. It was not a good door to face after the fence mending she had done today. It opened like a knife drawing back and slammed again. It could do nothing but slam, truth to tell. It was too big and too

reverberating for a gentle close. Its ebony edge slammed again like sacrificial onyx carving out an enemy heart.

Callie paused. What kind of an image was that? Where had that thought come from? It was her door. The front door of her home. Callie Bowen's home. Known as Shaded Green in the recesses of her heart, where lurked old novels in which homes had names instead of addresses, and No one goes there at night in the part of her head where she was the mad scientist (never the mad scientist's easily seduced daughter. She had had enough of lantern jaws and steely eyes).

Callie felt queasy, as if something were poking around in her vitals, probing for weak spots. Callie clutched her stomach, took off her gloves and coat, and clutched it again, feeling it now, fingers through silk to skin. Something was drumming in her. The music. It was the music of her own house and her own place in it.

She looked around, tilting her head, this side to that, listening now to the echoes of memory singing out from each thing in her home. So much of it from her ancestors, hard won, true memories of war and inheritance. But one bit she touched in cool sleekness had come from elsewhere, a fond sad elsewhere. Paul's grandfather, Michael Bowen, that aged man losing so much of himself moment by moment, but still she remembered, and knew he had remembered until the end, the day Paul had brought her to meet him and announce engagement. That moment of pure lucidity that came forth in a word of greeting and the gift of a rose quartz inlaid table used now for holding the mail and the newspapers. How could she have buried the memory of that glimpse into a sweet old man, now long vanished and not so long interred? Here was his memory embodied, left behind while he had gone to a silent elsewhere.

Next to it, a ding in the wall, painted over twice, but still a chunk of wood gone, an artifact from Annette's seventh birthday party and an overzealous game played by

too many children with an imported wooden horse now splintered in the basement. Callie had seen Annette look at that dent many times and seen her veneer of teenage detachment flip into childish near-giggles at the victory that had come with that dent. Callie had always watched and listened to see if she would let the laugh out. It had not happened. Always Annette would recover herself to black ice teenagerhood.

Through the hallway Callie saw her kitchen, modernized with the latest gadgets, computers in everything down to the toaster, just the way she liked it. But she also saw the kitchen as it had been built with her grandfather's equal zeal for toys, and then as her mother had had it, with nostalgia for the farm this had once been and apple designs everywhere. Kitchen over kitchen over kitchen like animated images washing over each other in domestic songs.

Her ears now open, Callie heard her house singing to her, calling with its memories, hers and those before her. House and grounds called in so many voices. There was so much to remember, so much meaning in the place she lived. How could she have forgotten it all? What could possibly have come over her in the years of her life to drive down all the great matters right in front of her?

Callie took a step toward the living room door.

There was thud from outside. Then another. The doorbell rang, jangling tempered chimes into the music.

Reflexively, Callie Bowen turned away from the chamber music and opened the front door to face . . .

Not a face. More of a midriff, or perhaps a little lower. It was hard to say, for the leather tatters and rags that covered it obscured anatomy. That was probably just as well. The ends of two long lumpy greenish arms, huge, comic-book exaggerated, hung

down by the sides. One of them held a clipboard, everyday in size and shape, the other a pen, bone white with a needle sharp nib dripping greenish ink.

Callie looked up and up through a body that filled the oversize portal of her home, into a face snaggle-toothed, nine-day-bender red-eyed, sallow cheeked, but deeply jowled. A baleful face, fearsome, unlike anything she had seen outside of video games and monster movies. It opened its blister of a mouth and spoke.

"Good afternoon, madam. My name's Evil troll, Frederick Sebastian Evil troll. I represent the Evil Troll's Association of America. We are campaigning to have an Evil Troll installed in every home in the nation. May I come in?"

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