

Camelot
By
Graham Masterton

Jack was scraping finely-chopped garlic into the skillet when he heard somebody banging at the restaurant door.

“Shit,” he breathed. He took the skillet off the gas and wiped his hands on his apron. The banging was repeated, more forcefully this time, and the door-handle was rattled.

“Okay, okay! I hear you!”

He weaved his way between the circular tables and the bentwood chairs. The yellow linen blinds were drawn right down over the windows, so that all he could see were two shadows. The early-morning sun distorted them, hunched them up and gave them pointed ears, so that they looked like wolves.

He shot the bolts and unlocked the door. Two men in putty-colored raincoats were standing outside. One was dark and unshaven, with greased-back hair and a broken nose. The other was sandy and overweight, with clear beads of perspiration on his upper lip.

“Yes?”

The dark man held out a gilded badge. “Sergeant Eli Waxman, San Francisco Police Department. Are you Mr Jack Keller?”

“That’s me. Is anything wrong?”

Sergeant Waxman flipped open his notebook and peered at it as if he couldn’t read his own handwriting. “You live at 3663 Heliograph Street, apartment 2?”

“Yes, I do. For Christ’s sake, tell me what’s happened.”

“Your partner is Ms Jacqueline Fronsart, twenty-four, a student in Baltic singing at The Institute of Baltic Singing?”

“That’s right.”

Sergeant Waxman closed his notebook. “I’m sorry to tell you, Mr Keller, but Ms Fronsart has been mirrorized.”

“What?”

“Your neighbors heard her screaming round about nine-thirty this morning. One of them broke into your apartment and found her. They tried to get her out but there was nothing they could do.”

“Oh, God.” Jack couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Which – what – which mirror was it?”

“Big tilting mirror, in the bedroom.”

“Oh, God. Where is it now? It didn’t get broken, did it?”

“No, it’s still intact. We left it where it was. The coroner can remove it for you, if that’s what you want. It’s entirely up to you.”

Jack covered his eyes with his hand and kept them covered. Maybe, if he blacked out the world for long enough, the detectives would vanish and this wouldn’t have happened. But even in the darkness behind his fingers he could hear their raincoats rustling, and their shoes shifting uncomfortably on the polished wood floor. Eventually he looked up at them and said, “I bought that mirror about six months ago. The owner swore to me that it was docile.”

“You want to tell me where you got it?”

“Loculus Antiques, in Sonoma. I have their card someplace.”

“Don’t worry, we can find it if we need to. I’ll be straight with you, though – I don’t hold out much hope of any restitution.”

“Jesus. I’m not interested in restitution. I just want -- ”

He thought of Jacqueline, standing on his balcony, naked except for a large straw hat piled ridiculously high with peaches and pears and bananas. He could see her turning her face toward him in slo-mo. Those liquid brown eyes, so wide apart that she looked more like a beautiful salmon than a woman. Those brown shoulders, patterned with henna. Those enormous breasts, with nipples that shone like plums.

“*Desire, I can see it in your every looking,*” she had whispered. She always whispered, to save her larynx for her Baltic singing.

She had pushed him back onto the violently-patterned durry, and knelt astride his chest. Then she had displayed herself to him, her smooth hairless vulva, and she had pulled open her lips with her fingers to show him the green canary-feather that she had inserted into her urethra.

“*The plumage of vanity*,” she had whispered.

Sergeant Waxman took hold of Jack’s upper arm and gave him a comforting squeeze. “I’m real sorry for your loss, Mr Keller. I saw her myself and – well, she was something, wasn’t she?”

“What am I supposed to do?” asked Jack. For the first time in his life he felt totally detached, and adrift, like a man a rowboat with only one oar, circling around and around, out of reach of anybody.

“Different people make different decisions, sir,” said the sandy-haired detective.

“Decisions? Decisions about what?”

“About their mirrors, sir. Some folks store them away in their basements, or their attics, hoping that a time is going to come when we know how to get their loved ones back out of them. Some folks -- well, they bury them, and have proper funerals.”

“They *bury* them? I didn’t know that.”

“It’s unusual, sir, but not unknown. Other folks just cover up their mirrors with sheets or blankets, and leave them where they are, but some doctors think this could amount to cruelty, on account of the person in the mirror still being able to hear what’s going on and everything.”

“Oh, God,” said Jack.

The sandy-haired detective took out a folded handkerchief and dabbed his forehead “Most folks, though -- ”

“Most folks *what*?”

“Most folks *break* their mirrors, sooner or later. I guess it’s like taking their loved ones off life-support.”

Jack stared at him. “But if you break a mirror – what about the person inside it? Are they still trapped in some kind of mirror-world? Or do they get broken, too?”

Sergeant Waxman said, solemnly, “We don’t know the answer to that, Mr Keller, and I very much doubt if we ever will.”

When the detectives had left, Jack locked the restaurant door and stood with his back against it, with tears streaming down his cheeks, as warm and sticky as if he had poked

his eyes out. “Jacqueline,” he moaned. “Jacqueline, why *you*? Why you, of all people? Why you?”

He knelt down on the waxed oak floor, doubled-up with the physical pain of losing her, and sobbed between gritted teeth. “Why you, Jacqueleine? Why you? You’re so beautiful, why you?”

He cried for almost ten minutes and then he couldn’t cry any more. He stood up, wiped his eyes on one of the table-napkins, and blew his nose. He looked around at all the empty tables. He doubted if he would ever be able to open again. Keller’s Far-Flung Food would become a memory, just like Jacqueline.

God, he thought. Every morning you wake up, and you climb out of bed, but you never know when life is going to punch you straight in the face.

He went back into the kitchen, turned off all the hobs and ovens, and hung up his apron. There were half-a-dozen Inuit moccasins lying on the chopping-board, ready for unstitching and marinating; and yew branches for yew branch soup. He picked up a fresh, furry moose-antler. That was supposed to be today’s special. He put it down again, his throat so tight that he could hardly breathe.

He was almost ready to leave when the back door was flung open, and Punipuni Puusuke appeared, in his black Richard Nixon T-shirt and his flappy white linen pants. Jack didn’t know exactly how old Punipuni was, but his crew-cut hair looked like one of those wire brushes you use for getting rust off the fenders of 1963 pick-up trucks, and his eyes were so pouchy that Jack could never tell if they were open or not. All the same, he was one of the most experienced bone chefs in San Francisco, as well as being an acknowledged Oriental philosopher. He had written a slim, papery book called *Do Not Ask A Fish The Way Across the Desert*.

Punipuni took off his red leather shoulder-bag and then he looked around the kitchen. “Mr German-cellar?” (He always believed that people should acknowledge the ethnic origins of their names, but translate them into English so that others could share their meaning.) “Mr German-cellar, is something wrong?”

“I’m sorry, Pu, I didn’t have time to call you. I’m not opening today. In fact I think I’m closing for good. Jacqueline was mirrorized.”

Punipuni came across the kitchen and took hold of his hands. "Mr German-cellar, my heart is inside your chest. When did this tragedy occur?"

"This morning. Just now. The police were here. I have to go home and see what I can do."

"She was so wonderful, Mr German-cellar. I don't know what I can say to console you."

Jack shook his head. "There's nothing. Not yet. You can go home if you like."

"Maybe I come along too. Sometimes a shoulder to weep on is better than money discovered in a sycamore tree."

"Okay. I'd appreciate it."

He lived up on Russian Hill, in a small pink Victorian house in the English Quarter. It was so steep here that he had to park his Ford Peacock with its front wheels cramped against the curb, and its gearbox in Backward. It was a sunny day, and far below them the Bay was sparkling like shattered glass; but there was a thin cold breeze blowing which smelled a fisherman's dying breath.

"Jack!"

A maroon-faced man with white whiskers was trudging up the hill with a bull mastiff on a short choke-chain. He was dressed in yellowish-brown tweeds, with the cuffs of his pants tucked into his stockings.

"I say, Jack!" he repeated, and raised his arm in salute.

"Major," Jack acknowledged him, and then looked up to his second-story apartment. Somebody had left the windows wide open, Jacqueline probably, and the white drapes were curling in the breeze.

"Dreadfully sorry to hear what happened, old boy! The Nemesis and I are awfully cut up about it. Such a splendid young girl!"

"Thank you," said Jack.

"Buggers, some of these mirrors, aren't they? Can't trust them an inch."

"I thought this one was safe."

"Well, *none* of them are safe, are they, when it comes down to it? Same as these perishing dogs. They behave themselves perfectly, for years, and then suddenly, for no

reason that you can think of, *snap!* They bite some kiddie's nose off, or somesuch. The Nemesis won't have a mirror in the house. Just as well, I suppose. With a dial like hers, she'd crack it as soon as look at it -- what!"

Jack tried to smile, but all he could manage was a painful smirk. He let himself into the front door and climbed the narrow stairs, closely followed by Punipuni. Inside, the hallway was very quiet, and smelled of overripe melons. Halfway up the stairs there was a stained-glass window with a picture of a blindfolded woman on it, and a distant castle with thick black smoke pouring out of it, and rooks circling.

Punipuni caught hold of his sleeve. "Your God does not require you to do this, Mr German-cellar."

"No," said Jack. "But my heart does. Do you think I'm just going to hire some removal guy and have her carted away? I love her, Pu. I always will. Forever."

"Forever is not a straight line," said Punipuni. "Remember that your favorite carpet store may not always be visible from your front doorstep."

They reached the upstairs landing. Jack went across to his front door and took out his key. His heart was thumping like an Irish drum and he wasn't at all sure that he was going to be able to do this. But there was a brass *ankh* on the door, where Jaqueline had nailed it, and he could see her kissing her fingertips and pressing it against the *ankh*, and saying, "This is the symbol of life everlasting that will never die."

She had been naked at the time, except for a deerstalker hat like Sherlock Holmes. She loved Sherlock Holmes, and she often called Jack "Watson." Without warning she would take out her violin and play a few scraping notes of Cajun music on it and proclaim, "The game is afoot!"

He opened the door and pushed it wide. The apartment was silent, except for the noise of the traffic outside. There was a narrow hallway, with a coat-stand that was clustered with twenty or thirty hats -- skimmers and derbies and shapeless old fedoras -- and the floor was heaped with smelly, discarded shoes -- brown Oxfords and gilded ballet-pumps and \$350 Guevara trainers.

Jack climbed over the shoes into the living-room. It was furnished with heavy red-leather chairs and couches, and glass-fronted bookcases crammed with leather-bound books. Over the cast-iron fireplace hung a large colored lithograph. It depicted a

voluptuous naked woman riding a bicycle over a hurrying carpet of living mice, crushing them under her tires. Only on very close examination could it be seen that instead of a saddle the bicycle was fitted with a thick purple dildo, complete with bulging testicles. The caption read “*The Second Most Pleasurable Way To Exterminate Rodents – Pestifex Powder.*”

The bedroom door was ajar but he hardly dared to go inside. At last Punipuni nudged him and said, “Go on, Jack. You have to. You cannot mend a broken ginger-jar by refusing to look at it.”

“Yes, you’re right.” Jack crossed the living-room and pushed open the bedroom door. The pine four-poster bed was still unmade, with its durry dragged across it diagonally, and its pillows still scattered. On the opposite side of the room, between the two open windows, stood Jacqueline’s dressing-table, with all of her Debussy perfumes and her Seurat face-powders, and dozens of paintbrushes in a white ceramic jar.

In the corner stood the cheval-mirror, oval, and almost six feet high on its swiveling base. It was made out of dark highly-polished mahogany, with grapevines carved all around it, and the face of a mocking cherub at the crest of the frame. Jack walked around the bed and confronted it. All he could see was himself, and the quilt, and Punipuni standing in the doorway behind him.

He looked terrible. His hair was still disheveled from taking off his apron, and he was wearing a crumpled blue shirt with paint-spots on it and a pair of baggy Levis with ripped-out knees. There were plum-colored circles under his eyes.

He reached out and touched the dusty surface of the mirror with his fingertips. “Jacqueline,” he said. “Jacqueline – are you there?”

“Maybe there was mix-up,” said Punipuni, trying to sound optimistic. “Maybe she just went out to buy lipstick.”

But Jack knew that there had been no mistake. In the mirror, Jacqueline’s white silken robe was lying on the floor at the end of the bed. But when he looked around, it wasn’t there, not in the real world.

He leaned close to the mirror. “Jacqueline!” he called out, hoarsely. “Jacqueline, sweetheart, it’s Jack!”

“Maybe she hides,” Punipuni suggested. “Maybe she doesn’t want you to see her suffer.”

But at that moment, Jacqueline appeared in the mirror, and came walking slowly across the room toward him, like a woman in a dream. She was naked apart from very high black stiletto shoes with black silk chrysanthemums on them, and a huge black funeral hat, bobbing with ostrich plumes. She was wearing upswept dark glasses and dangly jet earrings, and her lips were painted glossy black.

Jack gripped the frame of the mirror in anguish. “Jacqueline! Oh God, Jacqueline!”

Her mirror-image came up to his mirror-image and wrapped her arms around it. He could see her clearly in the mirror, but he could neither see nor feel her *here*, in the bedroom.

“Jack...” she whispered, and even though he couldn’t see her eyes behind her dark glasses, her voice was quaking with panic. “You have to get me out of here. Please.”

“I don’t know *how*, sweetheart. Nobody knows how.”

“All I was doing...I was plucking my eyebrows. I leaned forward toward the mirror...the next thing I knew I lost my balance. It was like falling through ice. Jack, I *hate* it here. I’m so frightened. You have to get me out.”

Jack didn’t know what to say. He could see Jacqueline kissing him and stroking his hair and pressing her breasts against his chest, but it was all an illusion.

Punipuni gave an uncomfortable cough. “Maybe I leave now, Mr German-cellar. You know my number. You call if you want my help. A real friend waits like a rook on the gatepost.”

Jack said, “Thanks, Pu. I’ll catch you later.” He didn’t turn around. He didn’t want Punipuni to see the welter of tears in his eyes.

After Punipuni had left, Jack knelt in front of the mirror and Jacqueline knelt down inside it, facing him, although he could see himself kneeling behind her.

“You have to find a way to get me out,” said Jacqueline. “It’s so unfriendly here...the people won’t speak to me. I ask them how to get back through the mirror but all they do is smile. And it’s so *silent*. No traffic. All you can hear is the wind.”

“Listen,” Jack told her. “I’ll go back to Sonoma, where we bought the mirror. Maybe the guy in the antiques store can help us.”

Jacqueline lowered her head so that all he could see was the feathery brim of her funeral hat. “I miss you so much, Jack. I just want to be back in bed with you.”

Jack didn’t know what to say. But Jacqueline lifted her head again, and said, “Take off your clothes.”

“What?”

“Please, take off your clothes.”

Slowly, like a man with aching knees and elbows, he unbuttoned his shirt and his jeans, and pulled them off. He took off his red-and-white striped boxer shorts, too, and stood naked in front of the mirror, his penis half-erect. The early-afternoon sun shone in his pubic hairs so that they looked like electric filaments.

“Come to the mirror,” said Jacqueline. She approached its surface from the inside, so that her hands were pressed flat against the glass. Her breasts were squashed against the glass, too, so that her nipples looked like large dried fruits.

Jack took his penis in his hand and held the swollen purple glans against the mirror. Jacqueline stuck out her tongue and licked the other side of the glass, again and again. Jack couldn’t feel anything, but the sight of her tongue against his glans gave him an extraordinary sensation of frustration and arousal. He began to rub his penis up and down, gripping it tighter and tighter, while Jacqueline licked even faster.

She reached down between her thighs and parted her vulva with her fingers. With her long middle finger she began to flick her clitoris, and the reflected sunlight from the wooden floor showed Jack that she was glistening with juice.

He rubbed himself harder and harder until he knew that he couldn’t stop himself from climaxing.

“Oh, God,” he said, and sperm shot in loops all over the mirror, all over Jacqueline’s reflected tongue, and on her reflected nose, and even in her reflected hair. She licked at it greedily, even though she could neither touch it nor taste it. Watching her, Jack pressed his forehead against the mirror in utter despair.

He stayed there, feeling drained, while she lay back on the floor, opened her legs wide, and slowly massaged herself, playing with her clitoris and sliding her long black-polished

fingernails into her slippery pink hole. After a while, she closed her legs tightly, and shivered. He wasn't sure if she was having an orgasm or not, but she lay on the floor motionless for over a minute, the plumes of her hat stirring in the breeze from the wide-open window.

Mr Santorini, in the downstairs apartment, was playing *Carry Me To Heaven With Candy-Colored Ribbons* on his wind-up gramophone. Jack could hear the scratchy tenor voice like a message from long ago and far away.

San Francisco folk wisdom says that for every ten miles you drive away from the city, it grows ten degrees Fahrenheit hotter. It was so hot by the time that Jack reached Sonoma that afternoon that the air was like liquid honey. He turned left off East Spain Street and there was Loculus Antiques, a single-story conservatory shaded by eucalyptus trees. He parked his Peacock and climbed out, but Punipuni stayed where he was, listening to Cambodian jazz on the radio. *That Old Fish Hook Fandango*, by Samlor Chapheck and the South East Asian Swingers.

Jack opened the door of Loculus Antiques and a bell jangled. Inside, the conservatory was stacked with antique sofas and dining-chairs and plaster busts of Aristotle, and it smelled of dried-out horsehair and failed attempts to make money. There was a strange light in there, too, like a mortuary, because the glass roof had been painted over green. A man appeared from the back of the store wearing what looked like white linen pajamas. He looked about 55, with a skull-like head and fraying white hair and thick-rimmed spectacles. His top front teeth stuck out like a horse.

"May I show you something?" he drawled. His accent wasn't Northern California. More like Marblehead, Massachusetts.

"You probably don't remember me, but you sold me a mirror about six months ago. Jack Keller."

"A mirraw, hmm? Well, I sell an awful lot of mirraws. All guaranteed safe, of course."

"This one wasn't. I lost my partner this morning. I was just starting work when the police came around and told me she'd been mirrorized."

The man slowly took off his spectacles and stared at Jack with bulging pale blue eyes. "You're absolutely sure it was one of mine? I don't see how it could have been. I'm *very*

careful, you know. I lost my own pet Pomeranian that way. It was only a little hand-mirror, too. One second she was chasing her squeaky bone. The next...gone!

He put his spectacles back on. "I had to --" and he made a smacking gesture with his hands, to indicate that he broken the mirror to put his dog down. "That endless pathetic barking...I couldn't bear it."

"The same thing's happened to my partner," said Jack, trying to control his anger. "And it was one of *your* mirrors, I still have the receipt. A cheval-mirror, with a mahogany frame, with grapevines carved all around it."

The man's face drained of color. "*That* mirror. Oh, dear."

"Oh, dear? Is that all you can say? I've lost the only woman I've ever loved. A beautiful, vibrant young woman with all of her life still in front of her."

"I *am* sorry. My Pom was a pedigree, you know...but this is *much* worse, isn't it?"

Jack went right up to him. "I want to know how to get her out. And if I can't get her out, I'm going to come back here and I'm going to tear your head off with my bare hands."

"Well! There's no need to be so *aggressive*."

"Believe me, pal, you don't even know the meaning of the word aggressive. But you will do, if you don't tell me how to get my partner out of that goddamned mirror."

"Please," said the man, lifting both hands as if he were admitting liability. "I only sold it to you because I thought that it *had* to be a fake."

"What are you talking about?"

"I bought it cheap from a dealer in Sacramento. He wouldn't say why he was selling it at such a knock-down price. It has a story attached to it, but if the story's true...well, even if it's only *half*-true..."

"What story?" Jack demanded.

"Believe me, I wouldn't have sold it to you if I thought there was any risk attached, especially after that last outbreak of silver plunge. I'm always so careful with mirrors."

He went over to his desk, which was cluttered with papers and books and a framed photograph of Madame Chiang Kai-Shek, with the handwritten message, *To Timmy, What A Night!*

He pulled open his desk-drawers, one after the other. “I put it down to vanity, you know. If people stare into the mirraw long enough, it’s bound to set off *some* reaction. I mean, it happens with *people*, doesn’t it? If you stare at somebody long enough, they’re bound to say ‘who do you think *you’re* looking at?’, aren’t they?”

He couldn’t find what he was looking for in his drawers, so he pulled down a steady shower of pamphlets and invoices and pieces of paper from the shelves behind his desk. At last he said, “Here we are! We’re in luck!”

He unfolded a worn-out sheet of typing paper and smoothed it with the edge of his hand. “The Camelot Looking-Glass. Made circa 1842, as a gift from an admiring nation to Alfred Lord Tennyson on publication of the revised version of his great poem *The Lady of Shalott*.”

“What does that mean?” said Jack, impatiently. “I don’t understand.”

“The mirraw was specially commissioned by The Arthurian Society in England as a token of esteem for *The Lady of Shalott*. You do *know* about *The Lady of Shalott*?”

Jack shook his head. “What does this have to do with my getting Jacqueline back?”

“It could have *everything* to do with it. Or, on the other hand, nothing at all, if the mirraw’s a fake.”

“Go on.”

The man pulled up a bentwood chair and sat down. “Some literary experts think that *The Lady of Shalott* was a poetic description of silver plunge.”

“I think I’m losing my patience here,” said Jack.

“No! No! Listen! *The Lady of Shalott* is about a beautiful woman who is condemned to spend all of her days in a tower, weaving tapestries of whatever she sees through her window. She weaves tapestries of all the passing seasons. She weaves courtships, weddings, funerals. The catch is, though, that she is under a spell. She is only allowed to look at the world by means of her mirraw. Otherwise, she will die.

“Let’s see if I can remember some of it.

“There she weaves by night and day

A magic web with colors gay.

She has heard a whisper say,

*A curse is on her if she stay
To look down to Camelot...*

*“And moving thro’ a mirraw clear
That hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear.
There she sees the highway near
Winding down to Camelot...”*

“Yes, great, very poetic,” Jack interrupted. “But I still don’t see how this can help Jacqueline.”

“Please -- just let me finish. One day, Sir Lancelot comes riding past the tower. He looks magnificent. He has a shining saddle and jingling bridle-bells and his helmet-feather burns like a flame. The Lady of Shalott sees him in her mirraw, and she can’t resist turning around to look at him directly.

*“She left the web, she left the loom
She made three paces thro’ the room
She saw the water-lily bloom,
She saw the helmet and the plume
She look’d down to Camelot.
Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirraw crack’d from side to side;
“The curse is come upon me,” cried
The Lady of Shalott.”*

“She knows that she is doomed. She leaves the tower. She finds a boat in the river and paints her name on it, *The Lady of Shalott*. Then she lies down in it and floats to Camelot, singing her last sad song. The reapers in the fields beside the river can hear this lament, as her blood slowly freezes and her eyes grow dark. By the time her boat reaches the jetty at Camelot, she’s dead.

“Sir Lancelot comes down to the wharf with the rest of the crowds. He sees her lying in the boat and thinks how beautiful she is, and he asks God to give her grace. That’s what Tennyson wrote in the poem, anyhow. But listen to what it says on this piece of paper.

“ ‘Several other stories suggest that Sir Lancelot visited the Lady of Shalott in her tower many times and become so entranced by her beauty that he became her lover, even though she could not look at him directly when they made love because of the curse that was on her. One day however he gave her ecstasy so intense that she turned to look at him. She vanished into her mirraw and was never seen again.

“ ‘The mirraw presented to Alfred, Lord Tennyson, is reputed to be the original mirraw in which The Lady of Shalott disappeared, with a new decorative frame paid for by public subscription. When Lord Tennyson died in 1892, the mirraw was taken from his house at Aldworth, near Haslemere, in southern England, and sold to a New York company of auctioneers.’”

Jack snatched the paper out of his hand and read it for himself. “You knew that this mirror had swallowed this Shalott woman and yet you sold it to us without any warning?”

“Because the Lady of Shalott is only a poem, and Sir Lancelot is only a myth, and Camelot never existed! I never thought that it could happen for real! Even Lord Tennyson thought that the mirraw was a phony, and that some poor idiot from The Arthurian Society had been bamboozled into paying a fortune for an ordinary looking-glass!”

“For Christ’s sake!” Jack shouted at him. “Even ordinary mirrors can be dangerous, you know that! Look what happened to your dog!”

The man ran his hand through his straggling white hair. “The dealer in Sacramento said that it had never given anybody any trouble, not in thirty years. I inspected for silver plunge, but of course it’s not always easy to tell if a mirraw’s been infected or not.”

Jack took two or three deep breaths to calm himself down. At that moment, Punipuni appeared in the doorway of the antiques store, and the bell jangled.

“Everything is okay, Mr German-cellar?”

“No, Pu, it isn’t.”

The man jerked his head toward Punipuni and said, “Who’s this?”

“A friend. His name is Punipuni Puusuke.”

The man held out his hand. “Pleased to know you. My name’s Davis Culbut.”

“Pleased to know you, too, Mr French-somersault.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“That is what your name derives from, sir. The French word for head-over-heels. Topsy-turvy maybe.”

“I see,” said Davis Culbut, plainly mystified. He turned back to Jack and held up the typewritten sheet of paper. “It says here that Sir Lancelot grieved for the Lady of Shalott so much that he consulted Merlin the Magician, to see how he might get her back. But Merlin told him that the curse is irreversible. The only way for him to be reunited with her would be for him to be to pass through the mirraw, too.”

“You mean -- ?”

“Yes, I’m afraid I do. You *can* have your lady-friend back, but only if you join her. Even so...this is only a legend, like Camelot, and I can’t give you any guarantees.”

“Mr German-cellar!” said Punipuni, emphatically. “You cannot go to live in the world of reflection!”

Jack said nothing. After a lengthy silence, Davis Culbut folded the sheet of paper and handed it to him. “I can only tell you that I’m very sorry for your loss, Mr Keller. I’m afraid there’s nothing else that I can do.”

They sat by the window in Steiner’s Bar on 1st Street West and ordered two cold William Randolph Hearsts. Their waitress was a llama, with her hair braided and tied with red-and-white ribbons, and a brass bell around her neck.

“You want to see a menu?” she asked them, in a high, rasping voice that came right from the back of the throat. “The special today is saddle of saddle, with maraschinos.”

Jack shook his head. “No, thank you. Just the beers.”

The waitress stared at him with her slitted golden eyes. “You look kind of down, my friend, if you don’t mind my saying so.”

“Mirror trouble,” said Punipuni.

“Oh, I’m sorry. My nephew had mirror trouble, too. He lost his two daughters.”

Jack looked up at her. “Did he ever try to get them back?”

The waitress shook her head so that her bell jangled. “What can you do? Once they’re gone, they’re gone.”

“Did he ever think of going after them?”

“I don’t follow you.”

“Did he ever think of going into the mirror himself, to see if he could rescue them?”

The waitress shook her head again. “He has five other children, and a wife to take care of.”

“So what did he do?”

“He broke the mirror, in the end. He couldn’t bear to hear his little girls crying.”

When she had gone, Jack and Punipuni sat and drank their beers in silence. At last, though, Punipuni wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and said, “You’re thinking of trying it, aren’t you?”

“What else can I do, Pu? I love her. I can’t just leave her there.”

“Even supposing you manage to get into the mirror, what’s going to happen if you can’t get back out?”

“Then I’ll just have to make my life *there*, instead of here.”

Punipuni took hold of Jack’s hands and gripped them tight. “If your loved one falls from a high tower, even the flamingos cannot save her, and they can fly.”

That night, Jack sat on the end of the bed staring at himself in the cheval-mirror, like a fortune-teller confronted by his own mischance. Outside, the city glittered on the ocean’s edge, like Camelot.

“*Jacqueline?*” he said, as quietly as he could, as if he didn’t really want to disturb her.

He thought of the day when he first met her. She was riding side-saddle on a white cow through a field of sunflowers, under a sky the color of polished brass. She was wearing a broken wedding-cake on her head, and a white damask tablecloth, wound around and around her and trailing to the ground.

He stopped and shaded his eyes. He had been visiting his friend Osmond at the Mumm’s Winery in Napa, and he had drunk two very cold bottles of Cuvée Napa *méthode champenoise*. He had taken the wrong turning while looking for the parking-lot, and he had lost his way.

“Excuse me!” he shouted, even though she was less than ten feet away from him. “Can you direct me to Yountville?”

The cow replied first. "I'm sorry," she sighed, with a distinctive French accent. "I've never been there." She slowly rolled her shining black eyes from side to side, taking in the sunflower field. "To tell you the truth, I've never been *anywhere*."

But Jacqueline laughed and said, "I can show you, don't worry!" She slithered down from the cow and walked up to him, so that she was disturbingly close. The tablecloth had slipped and he could see that, underneath it, her breasts were bare.

"You're not really interested in going to Yountville, are you?" she asked him. She was wearing a very strong perfume, like a mixture of lilies and vertigo. "Not any more."

"Have I drunk too much wine or is that a wedding-cake on your head?"

"Yes...I was supposed to get married today, but I decided against it."

Jack swayed, and blinked, and looked around the sunflower field. Sunflowers, as far as the eye could see, nodding like busybodies.

"Hold this," Jacqueline had told him.

Jacqueline had given him one end of the tablecloth, and then she had proceeded to turn around and around, both arms uplifted, unwinding herself. Soon she had been completely naked, except for the wedding-cake on her head and tiny white stiletto-heeled boots, with white laces. Jack was sure that he must be hallucinating. Too much heat, too much *méthode champenoise*.

Jacqueline had an extraordinary figure, almost distorted, like a fantasy. Wide shoulders, enormous breasts, the narrowest of waists, and narrow hips, too. Her skin had been tanned the color of melted caramel and it was shiny with lotion. The warm breeze that made the sunflowers nod had made her nipples knurl and stiffen, too.

"I was supposed to consummate my marriage today," she told him. "But since I don't have a groom any longer..."

"Who were you supposed to be marrying?"

"A Frenchman. But I decided against it."

Jack licked his lips. They were rough from sunburn and too much alcohol. Jacqueline rested one hand lightly on his shoulder and said, "You don't mind doing the honors, though?"

"The honors?"

She turned around and bent over, reaching behind her with both hands and pulling apart the cheeks of her bottom. He found himself staring at her tightly-wrinkled anus and her bare, pouting vulva. Her labia were open so that he could see right inside her, pink and glistening and glutinous.

“Well?” she asked him, after a moment. “What are you waiting for?”

“I, ah -- ”

The cow stopped munching sunflowers for a moment. “*Si vous ne trouvez pas agréables, monsieur, vous trouverez de moins des choses nouvelles,*” she quoted, with yellow petals falling from her mottled lips. “If you do not find anything you like, sir, at least you will find something new.”

Jack stripped off his shirt and unbuckled his belt, undressing as rapidly as he used to, when he was a boy, on the banks of his grandpa’s swimming-hole. His penis was already hard, and when he tugged off his white boxer shorts it bobbed up eagerly.

He approached Jacqueline from behind, his penis in his hand, and moistened his glans against her shining labia.

“With this cock, you consummate our union,” Jacqueline recited.

He pushed himself into her, as slowly as he could. She was very wet inside, and hot, as if she were running a temperature. His penis disappeared into her vagina as far as it would go, and for a long, long moment he stood in the sunflower field, buried inside her, his eyes closed, feeling the sun and the wind on his naked body. He felt as if a moment as perfect as this was beyond sin, beyond morality, beyond all explanation.

With his eyes still closed, he heard a light buzzing noise. He felt something settle on his shoulder, and when he opened his eyes he saw that it was a small honey-bee. He tried to flick it off, but it stayed where it was, crawling toward his neck. He twitched his shoulder, and then he blew on it, but the honey-bee kept its footing.

He heard another buzzing noise, and then another. Two more honey-bees spiraled out of the breeze and settled on his back. Jacqueline groped between her legs until she found his scrotum, and she dug her fingernails into his tightly-wrinkled skin and pulled at it. “Harder!” she demanded. “Harder! I want this union to be thoroughly consummated! Harder!”

Jack withdrew his penis a little way and then pushed it into her deeper. She let out a high ululation of pleasure: *tirra-lirra-lirra!* He pushed his penis in again, and again, but each time he did so more and more honey-bees settled on his shoulders. They seemed to come from all directions, pattering out of the wind like hailstones. Soon his whole back was covered in a black glittering cape of honey-bees. They crawled into his hair, too, and onto his face. They even tried to crawl into his nostrils, and into his mouth.

“Harder, sir knight!” Jacqueline screamed at him. He gripped her hips in both hands and began to ram his penis into her so hard that he tugged her two or three inches into the air with every thrust. But now the honey-bees were gathering between his legs, covering his balls and crawling up the crack of his buttocks. One of them stung him, and then another. He felt a burning sensation in his scrotum, and all around the base of his penis. His balls began to swell up until he was sure that they were twice their normal size.

A honey-bee crept into his anus, and stung him two or three inches inside his rectum. This explorer was followed by another, and another, and then by dozens more, until he felt as if a blazing thorn-bush had been forced deep into his bottom. Yet Jacqueline kept screaming at him, her breasts jiggling like two huge Jell-Os with every thrust, and in spite of the pain he felt a rising ecstasy that made him feel that his penis was a volcano, and that his sperm was molten lava, and that he was right on the brink of eruption.

Jacqueline began to quake. “Oh *con-sume*-AAAAAAAAAation!” she cried out, as if she were singing the last verse in a tragic opera. She dropped onto her knees on the dry-baked earth, between the sunflower stalks, and as she did so, Jack, in his suit of living bees, spurted semen onto her lower back, and her anus, and her gaping cunt.

He pitched sideways onto the earth beside her, stunned by his ejaculation, and as he did so, the bees rose up from him, almost as one, and buzzed away. Only a few remained, dazedly crawling out of his asshole, as if they were potholers who had survived a whole week underground. They preened their wings for a while, and then they flew away, too.

“You’ve been stung,” said Jacqueline, touching Jack’s swollen lips. His body was covered all over with red lumps and his eyes were so puffy he was almost blind. His penis was gigantic, even now that his erection had died away.

Jack stroked the line of her finely-plucked cheekbones. He had never seen a girl with eyes this color. They were so green that they shone like traffic-signals on a wet August night in Savannah.

“Who are you?” he asked her.

“Jacqueline Fronsart. I live in Yountville. I can show you the way.”

They lay amongst the sunflowers for almost a half-hour, naked. Jacqueline stretched out the skin of Jack’s scrotum so that it glowed scarlet against the sunlight, like a medieval parchment, and then she licked it with her tongue to cool the swelling. In return he sucked her nipples against the roof of his mouth until she moaned at him in Mandarin to stop.

Eventually the cow coughed and said, “They’ll be wondering where I am. And anyway, my udder’s beginning to feel full.”

“You shouldn’t eat sunflowers,” Jacqueline admonished her.

“You shouldn’t eat forbidden fruit,” the cow retorted.

But now Jacqueline was gone and the mirror showed nothing but his own reversed image, and the bed, and the dying sunlight inching down the bedroom wall. Dim jerky far away he heard a boat hooting in the Bay and it reminded him of the old dentist from Graham Greene’s *The Power and the Glory*. Still there waiting last boat whistling in the last harbor.

“What’s going to happen if you can’t get back out?” Punipuni had asked him.

He didn’t know. He couldn’t see much of the world in the mirror. Only the bedroom, and part of the hallway, and it all looked the same as this world, except that it was horizontally transversed. Medieval painters invented a device with three mirrors which enabled you to see your face the way it really was. Frightening, in a way. Your own face, staring at you, as if your head had been cut off.

He stood up and pulled his dark blue cotton sweater over his head. He had never felt so alone. He unfastened his belt and stepped out of his stone-colored chinos. He folded his chinos and laid them on the bed. At last he took off his shorts and stood naked in front of the mirror.

“Jacqueline?” he called. Even if he couldn’t penetrate the mirror, he needed to see her, to know that she was still there. *Who hath seen her wave her hand? Or at the casement seen her stand? The Lady of Shalott.*

“Jacqueline?” he repeated. “Jacqueline, I’ll come join you. I don’t care what it’s like in the mirror-world. I just can’t stand to live without you.”

The phone rang, beside the bed. He ignored it, to begin with, but it rang on and on and in the end he had to pick it up.

“Mr German-cellar? It is I Punipuni Puusuke.”

“What do you want, Pu?”

“I have decided that it is in the interests of both of us for me to open the restaurant this evening. I will be serving boiled pens in their own ink.”

Jack didn’t take his eyes off the mirror. He was sure that he had seen the mirror-curtains stir, even though the windows were closed.

“Pu...if that’s what you want to do.”

“We cannot afford to be closed, Mr German-cellar. The fierceness of the competition does not allow us.” He paused for a moment, and then he said, “What are you contemplating, Mr German-cellar?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all.”

“You are not reconsidering a plunge into the mirror, sir? You know that it is better to rub margarine on your head than to run after a wig in a hurricane.”

“Pu -- ”

“Mr German-cellar, I do not wish for throat-constricting goodbyes. I wish for you to remain on this side of the reflective divide.”

“Pu, I’ll be fine. Just open the restaurant.”

“You must promise me, Mr German-cellar, that you will not do anything maniacal.”

Jack put the phone down. He couldn’t make any promises to anyone. You can only make a promise if you understand how the world works, and after Jacqueline’s disappearance he had discovered that life is not arranged in any kind of pattern, but incomprehensible. Nothing follows. Nothing fits together.

He returned to the mirror and stood facing it. As he did so, the door in the reflection slowly swung open and Jacqueline slowly walked in. Her face was very pale, and her

hair was elaborately curled and braided. She was wearing a royal-blue military jacket, with gold epaulets and frogging, and black riding-boots which came right up over her knees, but nothing else. Her heels rapped on the bedroom floor as she approached him.

Jack pressed the palms of his hands against the mirror. “Jacqueline...what’s going on? Why are you dressed like that?”

She pressed her palms against his, although all he could feel was cold glass. Her eyes looked unfocused, as if she were very tired, or drugged.

“It’s a parade,” she told him, as if that explained everything.

“Parade? What parade? You’re practically naked.”

She gave him a blurred and regretful smile. “It’s all different here, Jack.”

He felt a tear creeping down his left cheek. “I’ve decided to join you. I’ve thought about it...and there isn’t any other way.”

“You can’t. Not unless the mirror wants you.”

“Then tell me how.”

“You *can’t*, Jack. It doesn’t work that way. It’s all to do with vanity.”

“I don’t understand. I just want us to be together, it doesn’t matter where.”

Jacqueline said, “I walked down to the Embarcadero yesterday afternoon. The band was playing. The bears were dancing. And there it was, waiting for me. A rowboat, with my name on it.”

“What?”

She looked at him dreamily. “Jack...there’s always a boat waiting for all of us. Still there last boat whistling in the last harbor. One day we all have to close the book and close the door behind us and walk down the hill.”

“Tell me how I can get into the mirror!”

“You can’t, Jack.”

Jack took a step back. He was breathing so heavily that his heart was thumping and his head was swimming. Jacqueline was less than three feet away from him, with those salmon eyes and those enormous breasts and that vulva like a brimming peach. All of the days and nights they had spent together flickered through his head like pictures in a zoetrope.

Jacqueline said, “Jack – you *have* to understand. It’s not that everything changes. Don’t you get it? *Everything was back-to-front to begin with.*”

He took another step back, and then another, and then another. When he reached the bed, he stepped to one side. Jacqueline stood with her hands pressed flat against the mirror, like a child staring into a toy-store window.

“Jack, whatever you’re thinking, don’t.”

He didn’t hesitate. He ran toward the mirror, and on his last step he stretched out both of his hands ahead of him like a diver and plunged straight into the glass. It burst apart, with a crack like lightning, and he hurtled through the mahogany frame and onto the floor, with Jacqueline lying underneath him.

But this wasn’t the soft, warm Jacqueline who had wriggled next to him in bed. This was a brilliant, sharp, shining Jacqueline – a woman made out of thousands of shards of dazzling glass. Her face was made of broken facets in which he could see his own face reflected again and again. Her breasts were nothing more than crushed and crackling heaps of splinters, and her legs were like scimitars.

But Jack was overwhelmed with grief and lust and he wanted her still, however broken she was. He pushed his stiffened penis into her shattered vagina, and he thrust, and thrust, and grunted, and thrust, even though the glass cut slices from his glans, and stripped his skin to bloody ribbons. With each thrust the glass sliced deeper and deeper, into the spongy blood-filled tissue of his penile shaft, into his veins, into his nerve-endings. Yet he could no longer distinguish between agony and pleasure, between need and self-mutilation.

He held Jacqueline as tightly as he could, and kissed her. The tip of his tongue was sliced off, and his face was criss-crossed with gaping cuts.

“We’re together,” he panted, with blood bubbling out of his mouth. “We’re together!”

He squeezed her breasts with both hands and three of his fingers were cut down to the bone. His left index finger flapped loosely on a thread of skin, and nothing else. But he kept on pushing his hips against her, even though his penis was in tatters, and his scrotum was sliced open so that his bloodied testicles hung out on tubes.

“We’re together...we’re together. I don’t mind where I live, so long as I have you.”

At last he had lost so much blood that he had to stop pushing, and lie on top of her, panting. He was beginning to feel cold, but he didn't mind, because he had Jacqueline. He tried to shift himself a little, to make himself more comfortable, but Jacqueline crackled underneath him, as if she were made of nothing but broken glass.

The afternoon seemed to pass like a dream, or a poem. The sun reached the floor and sparkled on the fragments of bloodied mirror. Jack could see his own reflection in a piece of Jacqueline's cheek, and he thought to himself, now I know what she means about the last boat whistling in the last harbor.

Eventually it began to grow dark, and the bedroom filled with shadows.

*“For often thro’ the silent nights
A funeral, with plumes and lights
And music, went to Camelot.
Or when the moon was overhead
Came two young lovers lately wed;
‘I am half-sick of shadows,’ said
The Lady of Shalott.”*

Punipuni knocked on Jack's door at midnight. He made three paces through the room; then stopped.

“Oh, Mr German-cellar,” he said. He pressed his hand over his mouth to stop himself from sobbing out loud, although nobody would have heard him. “Oh, Mr German-cellar.”

He wrapped Jack's body in the multi-colored durry from the bed, and carried him down to the street. He stowed him into the trunk of his ageing brown Kamikaze, and drove him to the Embarcadero. The night was very clear, and the stars were so bright that it was difficult to tell which was city and which was sky.

He found a leaky abandoned rowboat beside one of the piers. He lifted Jack into it, and laid him on his back, so that his bloodied face was looking up at Cassiopeia. Then he untied the rope, and gave the rowboat a push, so that it slowly circled away. The reflected lights of Camelot glittered all around it, red and yellow and green.

Punipuni stood and watched it with his hands in his pockets. “Men should never go looking for darkness, Mr German-cellar. You can only find darkness in a closed cupboard.”

During the night, as the tide ebbed, the rowboat drifted out toward the ocean, under the Golden Gate bridge.

As the tide began to turn, another rowboat appeared from the opposite direction, and in this rowboat lay a naked woman in sunglasses, lying on a bed of dried brown chrysanthemums. The two rowboats knocked against each other with a hollow sound, like coffins; and then they drifted away, their prows locked together as if there were only one rowboat, reflected in a mirror.

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