

**NIGHT WATCH**  
**GRAHAM MASTERTON**

He stood well back from the window, waiting for the wintry sun to sink behind the leafless poplar trees and bite into the edge of the roof. The paved courtyard between the apartment buildings filled up with shadow, and one by one the lights came on, and the evening's performances began.

In one fourth-story window, high up to his left, he could see an Hispanic woman in a bright red sleeveless sweater, reaching up to her kitchen cupboard with tattooed arms, and bringing down a large casserole dish. In the next window, he could just make out the top of her husband's high black pompadour, as he slouched in his armchair watching television. The light from the television flickered and jerked, so that the interior of the apartment looked like an auto-repair shop.

Below him, to his right, an elderly woman in a grubby pink housecoat was bending over to feed her cats. Next door, two young children were sitting at their kitchen table, laboriously writing in their homework books. Immediately above them, a bald bespectacled man was sitting with a cello in between his knees, not playing, just staring into space as if he had forgotten all the music that he had ever learned.

When he had first moved here to Van Cortlandt Apartments, Jimmy had felt guilty about watching his neighbors as they went about living their daily lives. He had closed his blinds and tried to concentrate on writing his articles for *Manhattan Living* and *Architectural Review* and *Realty Weekly*. But again and again he had been drawn to close his laptop, switch off the lights in his living-room, and pull up the blinds again. Each window on the opposite side of the courtyard was a miniature theater, and every evening he had over twenty different dramas to choose from.

The drama that he had been following most attentively was the continuing battle between a heavily-built middle-aged man and his much younger wife, a dark-haired woman who habitually wore far too much make-up. Jimmy had seen her sitting at her dressing-table, peering into the mirror with utter self-absorption as she applied her thick scarlet lipstick. Then her husband would come in, and an argument would start. Jimmy could tell that the man was shouting because of the way he kept banging his right fist into the palm of his left hand. Sometimes he would storm out and slam the door behind him. Other times he would grab hold of his wife by the arms, and shake her violently, and throw her onto the bed.

Jimmy had christened the couple Punch and Judy. In fact he had given names to all of the residents on the opposite side of the courtyard. The Huxtables – they were a black family, always smartly dressed, whom he had named after the characters in *The Cosby Show*. Then there were Milly, Molly and Mandy – three girls who shared one chaotically messy apartment. Milly and Molly were American Airlines flight attendants, and were always bringing different men home. They seemed to spend most of their evenings in their underwear, or their boyfriends' shirts and nothing else.

Most colorful of all were The Flying Burrito Family, an argumentative crowd of Mexicans, who were constantly rushing from room to room in brightly-colored T-shirts, arguing and gesticulating.

The sad, bald cellist Jimmy had named Donald, after the late Donald Pleasence. Donald always wore brown.

On the second floor – between Punch and Judy and The Flying Burrito Family – there was an empty apartment, with blacked-out windows. It had been empty ever since Jimmy moved in. But this evening, the lights were switched on, and a woman in a blue dress walked into the living-room. She crossed over to the windows and Jimmy instinctively stepped back even further, in case she looked up to the third floor and saw him staring down at her. But without any hesitation she reached up and drew the purple loose-weave drapes across the window, and tugged them to make sure that they were tightly closed.

So – a new drama was beginning. A new soap opera to add to his evenings' entertainment. Even if she kept her drapes drawn together, he could see the woman's shadow crossing and re-crossing the living-room, like a figure in a Burmese puppet-theater.

She seemed to be alone. At least, hers was the only shadow he could see. Several times she walked through to the bedroom. She didn't switch on the bedroom light, but she didn't close the drapes, and enough light was falling across the corridor from the living-room for him to see her lift a suitcase onto the bed, and start to unpack it. She had coppery shoulder-length hair which hid her face from him, but he could tell from her bearing that she was probably in her late twenties or early thirties. Tallish – maybe five-seven or five-eight even – and very large-breasted. So large-breasted that after a few minutes he went across to his bureau, opened the top drawer, and lifted out his racing binoculars.

Jimmy was always extremely cautious about using his binoculars, in case the lenses caught the light, and one of his neighbors realized that he was spying on them. He thought that if he ever got caught for peeping, he would probably die from humiliation. But he was fascinated by the way that all of these different lives unfolded in front of him, evening by evening. He

had grown almost to love his neighbors, as if they were part of his extended family – even Punch and Judy and the lugubrious bald-headed Donald. He felt that he was doing more than watching them – he was watching over them.

All the same, the woman in the blue dress had a spectacular figure. She was wide-shouldered, but she had narrow hips and endlessly-long legs. He focused his binoculars on her, ready to put them down instantly if she came closer to the window. She leaned over her suitcase, and he could see deep into her cleavage, where a glittering gold star dangled.

*Lucky star*, he thought. *I bet it's warm where you are, star, and fragrant with perfume. Chanel, probably.*

He watched the woman for over an hour, although she spent most of that time in the living-room and the kitchen, and so she appeared as nothing more than a provocative silhouette. He wondered what her name was, and what she did for a living, and why she was alone. Maybe she was a divorcee, or had recently separated from her boyfriend. Maybe she was a call-girl. Maybe she didn't like men at all, or maybe she preferred to live on her own. He decided to call her Annie, after Little Orphan Annie, because she had red hair, and she was alone.

At about 11:00 pm Annie switched off her living-room lights. She drew her bedroom drapes together, but only a little more than halfway, and he could see her staring down at the courtyard. Her bedroom was too shadowy for him to be able to make out her face in any detail, but she was very pale, as if she were the ghost of a woman who had lived there when she was a child, and was trying to remember what it had been like to be young, and alive.

Eventually she turned away, and he presumed that she had gone to bed. He stayed watching for a while, but then he went back to his couch and opened up his laptop. He had outstanding emails from South Korea and Australia, and one from the Colegio De Arquitectos De Chile, inviting him to give a talk in Ritoque, all expenses paid.

He was in the middle of writing back, accepting the Chileans' offer, when something made him stop, with his fingers poised over the keyboard. He sat there for a while, frowning, and then he laid down his PC, and returned to the window. On his stereo, Barbra Streisand was singing "*Love...ageless and evergreen...*"

Annie had switched on her bedside lamps, although she had left the drapes as they had been before, halfway apart. Inside, her bedroom looked inviting and warm, with a pale green patterned comforter diagonally pulled back across the bed, and dark green cushions and carpet. Annie was standing naked with her back to the window, her coppery hair spread out over her dead-white shoulders. But even though she had her back to him, there was a tall

mirror on the opposite side of the bedroom, and he could see her full-frontal reflection with startling clarity.

He turned his head away. He didn't really know what to do. This was hard-core slot-machine-style Peeping Tom-ism. His decency told him to draw down his blinds and go back to his laptop and finish his reply to the Chileans. "*Gracias por su invitación buena. Me plazco decir 'si!'*"

"Oh Jimmy-Jimmy-Jimmy," he breathed. He was supposed to watch over these people. He was supposed to take care of them; or at least make sure that no great harm befell them. If Punch had started to beat up on his wife – like, seriously beat up on her, knocking her teeth out and blacking her eyes – Jimmy would have been round to their apartment so fast, hammering on the door. Or at least he would have dialed 911.

If the elderly lady in the grubby pink housecoat had taken a tumble while she was feeding her cat, Jimmy would have phoned for a paramedic. Or if he had seen any of those Puerto Rican kids being mistreated, he would have informed children's services. They were totally unaware of it, the people who lived in Van Cortlandt Apartments, but Jimmy was their protector – their unseen, all-seeing, guardian angel.

Yet here he was, peering secretively into Annie's bedroom. And here was Annie's full-length full-frontal reflection, and she was wearing nothing at all, except for a three-stranded pearl necklace. What was he supposed to do? Turn away? Close his eyes and pray for redemption? She was standing completely still, her arms by her sides, staring at herself, and she had the faintest smile on her face.

*If she moves, thought Jimmy, then I'll stop looking. I'll go back to my laptop and finish my emails. If she moves, or if she starts to fondle herself, or anything like that, then I'll respect her privacy. Everybody is entitled to their privacy, even if they leave their bedroom drapes open and stand in front of a full-length mirror with the lights on.*

But Annie didn't move. She stayed motionless, still smiling at herself, as if she were hypnotized by her own flawlessness.

Jimmy felt hot. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead with the back of his hand and then he wiped his hands on his shirt. Goddamned heat in these apartments was always too high. Sometimes it made him feel as if he were suffocating. He glanced across at the binoculars on top of the bureau. *No*. That would be much too intrusive. It was obvious that Annie didn't realize that anybody was watching her. To stare at her through binoculars would be a breach of trust. A lack of human respect. Or something.

All the same, it wasn't as if he was going to rape her or anything. He wasn't even going to touch her, and what she didn't know couldn't hurt her, could it? And from the way she was admiring herself so intently, it was obvious that she was more than proud of her nudity. I'll bet she's even modeled for *Playboy*, and if several million *Playboy* readers can ogle her in the nude, why shouldn't I?

Jimmy propped his elbows on the windowsill so that he could focus the binoculars to pin-sharp detail. God, she was beautiful. Her red hair was soft and shining. Her eyes were as green as a cat's. She had high cheekbones and a tilted nose and lips that looked as if she had just finished kissing.

"Annie," whispered Jimmy. "You really are something."

Although they were so big, her breasts were high and rounded, with the palest pink nipples. Her waist was narrow, and there was an emerald set in her navel to match her eyes. She held her hands together between her thighs in a pose that was modest and yet highly provocative, as if at any moment she might slyly choose to expose herself.

Jimmy stared and stared for almost a minute and then he deliberately fell back on the carpet and lay there, staring up at the ceiling-tiles. He felt stunned. A goddess, he thought. A goddamned goddess, sent by God. Without any question Annie was the most beautiful girl that he had ever seen in his life. Even more beautiful than Evaline Chatwin, with whom he had fallen in love with at Barnard College, when he was studying architecture, but who had always laughed at him and called him Frank Lloyd Wrong.

He sat up again, but while he had been lying on the floor Annie had switched off her lights. She still hadn't drawn her drapes, but her bedroom was too dark for him to see anything except shadows.

It took him a long time to go to sleep that night. When he did, he dreamed that he was crossing the courtyard in between the apartment blocks and entering the lobby on the opposite side. There was a thick rushing noise in his ears, like water running. He pressed the button for the elevator, but its door refused to open. He pressed it again and again, but still nothing happened. There was a small window in the door, however, and when he looked through it he could see Annie standing naked inside the elevator car, under a single bare light bulb. She was trying to say something to him, but he couldn't hear her. When he shook his head to show her that he didn't understand, she came right up to the window and shouted at him. He thought she was shouting, "*You can't come in here! You mustn't!*"

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The following evening, Jimmy had to attend a promotional party for *US Design* magazine at their glossy offices on Madison Avenue. It was the usual crowd of preening interior decorators in black shirts and arrogant celebrity architects with gray swept-back hair and all of the scruffy bespectacled oddballs who designed peripherals such as bathroom faucets and light-switches and kitchen cutlery-drawers.

As he circled around the room, with a glass of warm red wine in one hand and a prawn canapé in the other, he saw several people he recognized, but he didn't feel very sociable tonight – at least, not to the extent of shouting about armchair designs for half an hour with perspiring men in over-tight bow-ties.

He went to the window and looked down over Madison Avenue. It was raining, and the glass was beaded with glittering droplets. He could see his reflection in the window, and he wondered if Annie was home yet, and whether she was standing in front of her mirror, admiring her nakedness.

He was still standing there, watching the endless stream of traffic below him, when he felt a tap on his shoulder. In the window, he saw a woman's face, and for one ridiculous second he thought it was her, but when he turned around it was a plumpish woman with a short black bob, with wide blue eyes and bright crimson lipstick. She was wearing a tight brown velvet dress with a plunging cleavage, which made her look like a burst-open bratwurst at a neighborhood barbecue.

"Jimmy Lightoller!" she said, in a breathless little scream.

Jimmy blinked at her. "Heidi?" he ventured. "Heidi Branning?"

She gave another little scream and flung her arms around him and gave him a sticky kiss directly on the lips. "It's so good to see you! How long has it been? Look at you! You haven't changed one bit!"

"I don't know if that's a compliment or not," he told her. "You always used to say I was 'visually unstimulating'. Those were your exact words."

"Oh, come on! It was only the way you dressed! Everybody else was walking around the campus like Goths, or punks, and you were dressed like a bank manager!"

"Well, *you've* sure changed," he acknowledged. When he had known her at Barnard, she must have weighed at least 165 pounds. She had always worn black lipstick and her hair had reached down to her waist. They had slept together only once, after a very drunken party at a friend's loft in the East Village, but they had remained friends until they graduated.

"I'm working for Bloomingdale's now," she told him. "Interior design consultancy for people with more money than taste. How about you?"

“This and that. Writing articles, mostly, and lecturing. I worked for Minoru Yamasaki for a while – you know, the guy who designed the World Trade Center. But all I got to design was a glass-covered wheelchair ramp at Bellevue Psychiatric Unit.”

“You married?”

Jimmy shook his head. “How about you?”

“No, me neither,” she said, and he could tell by the tone of her voice that there must have been somebody once, but she had lost him.

Jimmy looked around. “How about splitting this place?” he suggested. “I think I’ve had it up to here with posers. And all this boasting is giving me a migraine.”

“Okay, sure. Where do you want to go?”

“How about you come back to my place?”

He hesitated, wondering if he was making a ridiculous mistake. But he couldn’t keep Annie to himself much longer. Somebody else had to see her. Somebody else had to know what he was feeling about her. And who better than Heidi, who had always understood him better than most?

In the taxi on the way to Van Cortlandt Apartments, Heidi reached across and held his hand, just the way she used to when they were students together. When Evaline Chatwin had knocked him back, she had hugged him tight and made him feel that she would always be there to comfort him, no matter what. He supposed, in a way, that he had loved her, and that she had loved him, but it had never been a passionate love. No fire, no danger, no excitement. Only a deep mutual affection, and a pleasure in each other’s company.

“When we get to my apartment,” he said, “there’s something I have to show you.”

“You want me to see your etchings?”

He gave her the briefest of smiles. “Actually, it’s a person, rather than a thing.”

“A person? You have a partner? Are you gay?”

“No, no. Nothing like that. You’ll just have to see for yourself.”

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He opened a bottle of shiraz cabernet and they stood side by side in the darkness looking at all the apartment windows on the opposite side of the courtyard.

“This is just like *Rear Window*,” said Heidi. “Did you see anybody murdered yet?”

“To tell you the truth, it makes me feel more than a little guilty. But it’s not like I wish them any harm. I just like to watch them living out their lives.”

“Who’s the guy on the exercise walker? The one with the muscles and the khaki T-shirt?”

“Him? I call him Punch. And the woman he lives with, I call her Judy. She’s not home yet, by the look of it. But you wait. As soon as she comes in the door, they’ll start arguing. Then he’ll hit her. Then she’ll laugh at him. Then he’ll hit her again, until she stops laughing.”

“My parents were like that. Makes you wonder why they go on living together.”

Jimmy looked at her. “I guess everybody needs somebody, when it comes down to it.”

Annie didn’t come home until well past 10 PM, when they were already on their third glass of wine. By now, Jimmy had introduced Heidi to almost all of his ongoing soap operas – Punch and Judy, the Huxtables, the Flying Burrito Family, Milly, Molly and Mandy, and Donald. But suddenly, Annie’s living-room light was switched on, followed almost immediately by her bedroom light.

“She’s back,” said Jimmy.

Heidi glanced across at him but said nothing.

After about ten minutes, Annie switched off the living-room light and appeared in the bedroom. She was wearing a dark red dress, which she unzipped at the back, and stepped out of. Underneath she was wearing a red bra and a red thong.

Heidi cleared her throat. “I think this is making me feel a little uncomfortable.”

“It’s okay,” said Jimmy. “We’re not touching her. We’re not doing her any harm.”

“You really have a *thing* for her, don’t you?”

Jimmy continued to stare at Annie’s bedroom window. She reached behind her to unfasten her bra, and then she sat down on the end of the bed to take off her thong. He could only see her back, however, because the full-length mirror was covered with a dark green sheet.

“I just wanted somebody else to see her,” said Jimmy. “Somebody else apart from me.”

“Why?” she smiled. “So that you wouldn’t feel like such a pervert?”

“I don’t know. If you could see a really handsome naked guy out of your window, waving his cock around, wouldn’t you look?”

Heidi thought about it, and then she said, “I guess I would, yes.” She paused. “But not if he was a redhead.”

Annie went through to the bathroom. She stayed there for at least ten minutes, and Heidi started to grow fidgety. “Maybe I should call it a night. This is all a little too weird for my taste.”

“Please,” said Jimmy. “She shouldn’t be long now.”

Annie came out of the bathroom with a towel around her waist, but almost immediately she took it off and threw it onto the chair beside the bed. Then she went up to the full-length



mirror and stood in front of it, but she didn't pull the sheet off. She just stood there, almost as if she were tantalizing herself with the anticipation of her own nakedness.

Heidi put down her wine glass and came up close to Jimmy, putting her arm around his waist. He looked down at her, and she looked up at him. He kissed her on the forehead, and then her lips. They were only quick kisses, but then she reached up and touched his cheek and kissed him back – and this time the kiss was long, and exploratory, and she closed her eyes.

“Heidi – ” he said. But she raised her fingertip to her lips and said, “*Ssh.*” They both knew that what they were doing was strange, and maybe a little depraved, too, but this was one of those moments when the normal rules of morality were suspended. Annie would never know, and neither would anybody else.

They looked back to Annie's bedroom window. She had pulled the sheet away from the mirror now, and was standing in front of it, quite still.

Jimmy said nothing, but looked at Heidi to see what her reaction was.

“She's stunning,” said Heidi. “I have to admit it. Even as a woman.”

She stared at Annie's reflection for a long time, and then she turned around to face Jimmy. She kissed him, and kissed him again, and then she reached down and grasped the front of his pants.

“She turns you on, doesn't she?” she said. “She really turns you on.”

“Heidi – ”

“What? Maybe she turns *me* on, too.”

She kept her mouth pressed against his while she located his zipper and tugged it downward with three insistent jerks. Then her hand burrowed inside his boxers until she found his gradually-stiffening erection. She pulled it out, quite roughly, and started to pump it, until it reared up hard and curved as a rhino horn.

She pushed him, two or three awkward steps, until he was stopped by the back of the couch. He perched himself on the edge of it, while Heidi dragged up her dress to her waist. Her thighs were big and white and soft, and she was wearing a tiny pair of black lace panties. She didn't take her panties off: she pulled them to one side so that her bulging bare lips were exposed.

She climbed onto him, panting with effort, lifting one heavy leg over the back of the couch and then the other. Then, awkwardly, she guided him inside her. She was very warm and very slippery.

“I should use a condom,” he said.

“No, you shouldn’t,” she told him, burying her head in his chest. “This isn’t *me* you’re making love to. It’s her.”

“What?”

“Don’t look at me. No – *don’t look at me!* Look at *her!*”

Jimmy stared out of the window at Annie’s naked reflection in her bedroom mirror, while Heidi rode up and down him, grunting and gasping. Annie’s face was so calm and beautiful; her breasts so full; her legs so long. As Heidi bounced up and down in his lap, he wished only that Annie would take her hands away and expose herself, but she remained in that same self-protective pose.

For a split-second, he really imagined that he was making love to Annie. He could feel her, he could smell her – that foxy smell of redheaded women when they become sexually aroused. He came, in three distinct jolts, and with each jolt he felt as if his back was breaking. Heidi gave a breathy shout, and then the two of them toppled off the back of the couch and onto the cushions.

They lay there, all tangled together, breathless. Then they both started laughing. Then they both stopped laughing, and Jimmy kissed her, and they held each other like Hansel and Gretel, brother and sister, when they got lost in the forest and the robins covered them with leaves.

“You know something?” said Jimmy, as they disentangled themselves. “I think you must be my best friend ever.”

“We should have married,” said Heidi. “We could both have had affairs, to keep it spicy.”

Jimmy zippered himself up. “How about another glass of wine? Are you hungry?”

Heidi pulled her dress down. “I should go, really. What’s the time?”

“Come on, have another glass of wine and a pastrami sandwich.”

“Well ... okay. If you insist.”

He went into the kitchen, while Heidi went to the window and stared at Annie.

“It’s very odd,” she said, after a while. “But she looks kind of familiar, don’t you think?”

“She reminds you of someone?”

“Yes, very much. But I can’t think who.”

“There’s a pair of binoculars on the side there. Just make sure you don’t stand too close to the window with them.”

Heidi picked up the binoculars and focused on Annie’s bedroom window.

“*My God,*” she said.

Jimmy paused in his sandwich-making and came to the kitchen door. "What is it?" he asked her.

"It's Nadine Frost."

"You're kidding me."

"No, I'm not. I'm sure of it. It's Nadine Frost."

Jimmy came over and took the binoculars from her. He trained them on the reflection's face, and Heidi was right. It *was* Nadine Frost.

"But she disappeared, didn't she?" said Jimmy. "Her agent said that she never wanted to make another movie."

"*Valley of Dreams*, that was her last picture," said Heidi. "I thought it was easily her best movie ever. I cried all the way through."

Jimmy focused on Annie's reflection again. "You're absolutely right, though. It's Nadine Frost. Nadine Frost with nothing on. But what the hell is she doing, living here? She must be worth millions."

"Maybe she just wants to be left alone. You know, like Greta Garbo. She was the same."

"I doubt if Greta Garbo stood stark naked in front of her bedroom window every evening, looking at herself in the mirror."

As soon as he said that, Annie's bedroom light was switched off. Jimmy waited for a moment, to see if she would switch it on again, but it looked as if that was the end of their voyeurism for tonight.

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They sat together, drinking wine and eating sandwiches. Jimmy found it hard to believe that only a short time ago they had been perched precariously on the back of the couch, having sex.

Heidi said, "You should introduce yourself."

"Excuse me?"

"You should go round to Nadine Frost's apartment and introduce yourself."

"And say what? 'I've been watching you take your clothes off for the past few nights, and I've been drooling so much that my living-room rug is totally soaked through.'"

"No, stupid. Just politely say that you've recognized her, and that you loved all of her pictures, and if there's anything she needs at any time, all she has to do is ask you."

"And what if she tells me to go take a running jump?"

Heidi swallowed, wiped her mouth, and then kissed him. "What do you have to lose?"

Jimmy sat and thought for almost half a minute. Then he said, "Why?"

“Why what?”

“Why would you want me to?”

“Because it would make you happy. I’m your friend, aren’t I? And that’s what friends do, they make each other happy.”

“I think you’re kinkier than I am.”

She kissed him again. “Thanks for the compliment.”

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Late that night, he Googled Nadine Frost and looked up her career in the movies. Nadine Frost, real name Zsuzanna Erdélyi, was born in a suburb of Budapest, Hungary, in February, 1973. Her father was an electronics engineer, and the family moved to Los Angeles California in 1982 so that he could work for Modex, Inc.

Zsuzanna excelled at school, both in sport and drama, and when she was 15 she was offered a part in the family TV drama *The Lovehearts*. After that, she appeared in seven more movies, and was nominated for an Oscar for her supporting role in *Thunder Bay*.

A month after the release of her last movie, however, she disappeared from public view, and her agent Cy Willard made a statement that she had given up her acting career and was looking for “seclusion and spiritual solace.” Despite the efforts of the media, her whereabouts were never discovered.

Until now, when she had unexpectedly appeared in one of Jimmy’s nightly dramas, in the Van Cortlandt Apartment block, in Manhattan.

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He didn’t have enough nerve to go around to Nadine Frost’s apartment until two evenings later. On the first evening, he stood and watched her for over twenty minutes as she stood naked in front of her mirror. Now that he knew who she was, he found himself asking even more questions about her. Did she regret giving up her movie career? Was that why she stood in front of her mirror night after night, admiring her body? Or was she looking for something beyond her physical beauty – maybe that “spiritual solace” that her agent had mentioned?

Early on the second evening, Heidi called him.

“Did you go to see her yet?”

“Not yet.”

“Be brave. Go. Like I told you, what do you have to lose?”

“I don’t know. My self-esteem?”

“Go. Go now.”

“I don’t know what number her apartment is.”

“You can *count*, can’t you? Go.”

Reluctantly, he left his apartment, went down in the elevator and crossed the courtyard. An elderly black man was sitting on one of the benches, underneath a leafless aspen. He was wearing a hat, and a heavy tweed overcoat, and a scarf.

“Evening,” he said, as Jimmy walked by.

“Pretty chilly out here,” said Jimmy.

“Oh, I’m just giving myself a little quiet time. Sometimes a body needs a little quiet time.”

“I guess so. Me, I think I get too much of it.”

The black man adjusted his hat. “In that case, you need to find yourself a companion. Everybody should have a companion. Road of life, it’s too damn long and too damn empty to walk along it all on your ownsome.”

If Jimmy had been thinking of turning back, the black man’s words gave him fresh resolve to go on. He went into the lobby of the apartment block opposite, and pressed the button for the elevator. When it arrived, he looked into the window but there was nobody inside it. No naked Nadine Frost, screaming “*You mustn’t!*”

He went up to the fourth floor, and walked along the corridor to the fourth door on the right. The corridor was dimly lit, with a faded royal blue carpet. From all sides he could hear televisions and music and people talking. He came to the fourth door and stood in front of it, with his finger poised an inch away from the buzzer.

This was madness. He knew it was madness. She would simply tell him to go away and leave her alone. Yet he kept thinking of her reflection in the mirror, and the way that his back had almost cracked when he had made love to it.

He pressed the buzzer. Out here in the corridor, it was scarcely audible, like a blowfly in a sealed bottle. He waited, but there was no response. He knew that she was home because he had seen her switch on her living-room lights. Maybe she had taken a squint at him through her peephole and decided that he looked too visually unstimulating.

He pressed the buzzer again. After a long pause, a muffled woman’s voice said, “Who is it?”

“Ah – my name’s Jimmy, Ms Frost. Jimmy Lightoller. I live right opposite. I saw you move in and I wondered if you needed any help.”

An even longer pause. Then, “You know who I am?”

“Couldn’t mistake you, Ms Frost. I’m one of your biggest fans. I was really sorry when you gave up making pictures. Me and about fifty million other fans.”

“What do you *really* want?”

“Truthfully? Just to be friends. There are one million six hundred thousand people in Manhattan, but that doesn’t mean you can’t be lonely.”

The next pause was so long that Jimmy thought she had lost interest, and he was almost ready to go back to his apartment.

But then she said, “What makes you think that *I* need a friend?”

“I don’t know, Ms Frost. Just trying to be sociable, that’s all.”

Without warning, the apartment door clicked open, and stayed a few inches ajar.

“Come on in, Jimmy,” said Nadine Frost, although he still couldn’t see her.

“You’re sure about this?”

“I’m sure.”

“I don’t like to impose or anything. It’s just that I’m such a great fan.”

“Come on in. Don’t be shy.”

Jimmy stepped into the apartment. As he did so, he saw Nadine Frost disappearing through the living-room, heading toward the bedroom. She was wearing a long white satin robe, with a hood, so that she looked like a ghost.

“I’ll – ah – I’ll close the door, shall I?” Jimmy called out.

“Of course,” she called back.

He closed the door and walked into the middle of the living-room. It was plainly furnished with dull Swedish-style furniture – oatmeal-colored chairs and a pine coffee-table, and a pottery jar with dried bulrushes in it. On one side of the room hung a large multiple portrait of Nadine Frost in all of the major roles she had played – as the heiress to a cotton plantation, as an Egyptian queen, as a female aviator, as a frontierswoman, as a prostitute with a heart of gold.

“Fantastic picture,” he said, loudly.

“You like it?”

“Fantastic. If you don’t mind my saying so, you really look terrific.”

“Only ‘terrific’?”

“Well ... beautiful. You really look beautiful.”

He waited. He wondered what she was doing in the bedroom, and whether he ought to sit down and make himself at home.

“So, you think I’m beautiful?” she said.

“No other word for it.”

Another pause. Then, “I’ve seen you watching me, Jimmy. It *was* you, wasn’t it?”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, don’t try to pretend. I saw you watching the very first night I moved in. That’s why I put on my little show for you.”

“I don’t know what you mean. I really don’t.”

“Oh, come on, Jimmy. You don’t have to pretend. You stood in your window and you watched me for hours.”

Jimmy felt himself flushing hot with embarrassment. “Look,” he said, “maybe this wasn’t such a good idea after all. Maybe I’d better leave.”

“No, Jimmy, don’t do that. Come into the bedroom and see me as I really am.”

“Listen, please. I’m sorry if you thought I was spying on you. I really wasn’t. It’s just that I saw you in your mirror – only a few seconds’ glimpse – and – well, you’re beautiful. That’s all I can say, except that I’m sorry.”

“You saw me in my mirror?”

“Only a few seconds’ glimpse, I swear it.”

“You saw me in my *mirror*?”

“Yes.”

“Come into the bedroom, Jimmy.”

Jimmy hesitated, and then he walked out of the living-room and into the corridor. The bedroom door was half-open, and up against the left-hand wall he could see the full-length mirror, framed in gilt. And there was the image of Nadine Frost, utterly naked, smiling.

Except that the full-length mirror wasn’t a mirror at all. It was a full-length painting, in oils. Meticulously detailed, highly realistic, but only a painting.

“Come on in,” Nadine Frost repeated. “Come and see me as I really am.”

It was only now that Jimmy noticed a curious whistling sound in her voice, followed by the soft cackle of phlegm at the end of every phrase.

“I think I’ve made a mistake,” he said. “I think it’s probably better if I go.”

“No, Jimmy. I wouldn’t go, not if I were you. You wouldn’t want me to cause a fuss, would you? A peeping tom who forced his way into my apartment, and tried to assault me?”

“I’ll just go,” said Jimmy, his voice rising in panic.

“Don’t you want to take advantage of me first?”

“What?”

“It’s been a long time since a man took advantage of me. Not once in seven years, ever since my accident. Come on, Jimmy. Think of what we could do together. Deep throat, with a woman with no face. You could actually watch it as it disappeared.”

The bedroom door opened wider. Nadine Frost was standing in front of him now, in her white hooded robe. Inside the hood, he could see her eyes glittering, but underneath her eyes there was nothing but shadows.

“Oh, God,” he said, and sank to his knees, his head bowed.

Nadine Frost came up to him and rested her hands lightly on his shoulders. “Come on, Jimmy,” she said. “You and I are going to be wonderful together.”

She twisted her shoulders so that her satin robe whispered to the floor. Jimmy raised his head and her plume of russet hair was right in front of him.

Then he looked up.