



CHARLEE
JACOB

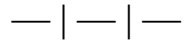
*Winner of the
Bram Stoker
Award for Best
Horror Novel
of 2005*

DREAD
IN THE
BEAST

DREAD IN THE BEAST

BY CHARLEE JACOB

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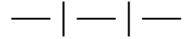
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This book is dedicated to my husband, Jim,
~~who showed me there could be light in the unlikeliest places.~~

And to Dave Barnett,
who showed me the dark wasn't necessarily all bad.

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Let me begin this introduction with a review. It's a review I wrote for a long-dead horror magazine called *Midnight Hour*, and I'm reviewing *Dread in the Beast* by Charlee Jacob. Here's the review:

"I've been writing horror and reading horror for almost twenty years. I've had almost two million words of my own work published, and with all the stuff I've read in between, I thought I'd seen it all.

I was wrong.

I'd heard of Charlee Jacob over the past few years, had read a story of hers here, a story of hers there. Always good stuff, but in the every-growing avalanche of small-press and limited-edition horror fiction cropping up, I never paid this name much mind.

I was wrong.

The word "horror," of course, is a bad word now amongst most New York editors. The genre bottomed out in the early-to-mid '90s—a glut, they called it—and broke the field's back. Some of this sensibility is legitimate, some is not. All that aside, the horror genre did not die at all, it merely picked up where it left off in the independent press. Things seem to be turning up lately, though: New York houses such as Tor and Harper, to name a few, are suddenly increasing the number of horror titles they release per year. And after a marketing revamp, Leisure is supporting horror fiction to the absolute mass-market max, releasing two horror paperbacks per month.

To make my point, horror fiction seems to be crawling back from its own grave, and this is good news for the typical horror reader. A mass-market resurgence in the genre is inevitable—in fact, it's already started.

But before horror can get fully back on its feet in the average bookstore, we still have a considerable inventory of excellent material being actively released by the independent press, and one such book that deserves serious attention is *Dread In The Beast* by Charlee Jacob. To slap some tagline on her like "A feminist Clive Barker" or "A startling new voice" would simply be insufficient. Charlee Jacob, instead, is clearly one of the best new writers working in the horror field today. Her work *blows away* so much of the competition it's almost scary, and now a collection of her very best short stories is available in an inexpensive, autographed trade-sized paperback.

A woman with a burning-flesh fetish? A story in which a growing tumor proves as an apt allegory for modern society? Spiritual transcendence via surgical addiction? A deity revered by *human waste*? This ain't the Headless horseman, folks. This ain't the Wizard of Oz. This is, instead, serious, primo, important new horror fiction more daring than anything you've likely read. The only thing missing is a warning sign on the cover. With crystalline prose and images as concise as a piano-wire garrotte, Charlee Jacob takes you on an excursion through hell that might even cause the devil to reconsider the trip. Each of the 16 stories in this collection is unique, shocking, and brilliant, and the title piece is probably the very best horror novella I've ever read in my life.

You got thirteen bucks for some of the best horror fiction you could ever imagine? Then pick up a copy of *Dread In The Beast* before it sells out."

That's the review. Keep in mind the book I was reviewing back then is different from the nov

you're holding in your hands, despite identical titles. The former, as mentioned, is an outstanding small-press horror collection released by Necro Publications, and has been sold out for quite a while. The reason for the sell-out can be found simply by reading the above review. Jacob's fiction, in general, exists several rungs higher on the excellence ladder than most of what I'm reading today. But remember, I'm generalizing.

And, back to the review, I was right in my thesis about the ups and downs of mass-market horror. Since those shaky days, things have gotten much better for the field and, conversely, the field has gotten better within itself. Charlee Jacob is proof. She remains not only one of the small-press' most distinctive short-story writers, she is now an actively published mass-market horror novelist.

But remember, I'm generalizing.

I'm also rambling a bit (I'm prone to that; I'm no spring chicken anymore) but I only ramble when I'm excited. You can tell by the above review that I was very excited about the release of Jacob's short-story collection. I'm even more excited now about the novel by the same name.

Look back at the review. I referred to the collection's title piece, "Dread in Beast," as "...probably the very best horror novella I've ever read in my life."

That's no bullshit. And my mind hasn't changed in the four years since I wrote that. Hence, this is the keystone of my excitement.

I'd love to tell you some of the devastating things that happen in this novel...but then I'd blow your mind for you. I'd love to describe my most favorite and impacting scenes...but I won't go to the trouble because Jacob does it better in the text. A recant by me would be useless and inferior. But at least let me say this: the book kicks off with what has to be among the most atrocious crimes ever depicted in fiction. It's a brick in the fuckin' face come Chapter One, and that's just the beginning. This novel *doesn't let up. Ever.* What's the book about, in a nutshell?

Folks, there ain't no nutshell that this could be placed in. It's a slot-buster. It's a category-defy-er. It's unlike any horror novel you've read, yet it's not obscure at all, it's not avant-garde or experimental. It's not pseudo-literary drivel or over-intellectualized pap. Jacob wisely harnesses comfortable formulae and then transfigures these elements into a total individuality. We don't feel hoodwinked by a writer whose ego needs to bury readers in self-pretension. This book is wonderfully different while not treading into perimeters of abstraction or experiment. With all the book's oddities, with all its intricate myth, philosophy, and sophistication, Jacob never once lets indulgence seduce her muse and run away with her. Her focus remains resolute on the "job" of any horror novelist: to entertain the readership. How is this accomplished? By delivering a solid story peopled with characters whom we can—however positively or negatively—relate to. I won't lay some clichés on you like "*Dread In The Beast* is a joyride through hell!" Oh, lord, it's no joyride. It is an exercise in the absolute darkness of the human heart. No "joy" here—instead, you're dragged *kicking and screaming* through hell. Wear a raincoat. Bring an umbrella.

In other words, there's no nifty tagline for this book. More antithesis: it's completely different while being exactly what any great horror novel must be. Its merit exists on many levels but chiefly in the manner through which it succeeds as a great read.

But remember, I'm generalizing.

Let's speak with more specificity. What's most unique of all here (and jealously fascinating) are the creative guts of the author. If there's an ultimate dichotomy in the horror genre, it's got to be Jacob. Call her an antipode. Call her an aesthetic contradiction. Imagine Raphael or Claude Monet painting a picture of a demonic rape. Imagine a sleek and flawless supermodel prancing down the runway in designer garb fashioned from human skin. Imagine a poet who writes with the finery of T.S. Eliot or an Emily Dickinson crafting stanzas about trans-vaginal evisceration. This is Jacob, armed with a talent to write the most beautiful prose yet using that talent to examine the mo

unspeakable and detestable horror.

Here's an example:

“This was her own poignant torture and then frenetic release. It filled her with delicious grief, then emptied her out again. Made her buck with her sturdy pelvis until she lifted him right off the mattress. Slung herself upward and across the ceiling like some metaphor for orgasmic levitation, then made all her flesh turn into frosted peach jelly.”

Is this not beautiful? It's a young woman losing her virginity, for God's sake. Yet a moment later here's her next observation:

“She went blind for an instant, next saw the city's stygian shit straining at the window, matting itself in brown swirl against the panes, trying to desecrate this single pure moment of hers by passing through the glass by means of a feculent osmosis. It did enter the room, overtaking Dorien and Gavin, covering them in suffocating purgation until they froze in mid-thrust, fossilizing as ash-covered victims in Pompeii. It was evil coming in, determined not to let her escape through love, determined to drag them into the underworld which existed on a tide of worldly sewage.”

Some “first time,” huh?

Dread In The Beast is swollen to the gills with such fine, fine writing—hence, the lucid, gorgeous etched prose unveiling the most primal atrocities ever depicted in fiction. I won't reveal any of the atrocities here. I'd love to but I won't...

You'll know 'em when you come to 'em.

In all, to me, Jacob is what we sometimes call a “Throw in the Towel” writer. I'll read a passage by her and think: “Fuck it. Why do I even bother? In a million years, I could never write this well.” She makes me jealous. I could never think of this:

“In the great house, she could see a hole in one stone wall of a bay which surely contained a privy. Refuse was falling from it into a stream which ran below, sluggishly carrying the muck to the heavily polluted river, itself clogged with corpses as if with logs.”

Or this:

“What was touching this substance if not touching the proxy of oblivion, coming back to life with its stench in your sinuses and its secret madness yours to flaunt?”

Or this:

“Before tonight Dorien thought she understood what evil consisted of. It was graphic, intentional of blunt force and explicit with gore. It grinned as it turned cities into abattoirs, dancing without subtlety with blood splashed to further inflame already burning loins. Evil was extreme, unspeakable, relentless violence. Its aim was to dismantle you unto your most sacred atoms, rape your soul into uncreation, rip your sanity from asshole to lips, and snort the names of your most sacred beliefs until you were damned forever in the five-second high it enjoyed immediately after.”

Nope. Not in a million fuckin' years. I could never come up with that if my life depended on it.

~~So instead, I'll toss my jealousy aside (all writers, deep-down, are egomaniac) and tell you that~~ was an honor to be able to read this book essentially before anyone else. After all, it's a novelization of my favorite horror novella, and the result of that process is a monumental achievement in the field. It, too, was an honor to write this introduction—I hope it does you some good by at least conveying my admiration and my utter awe. I hope you find the same distress, provocation, and wonder that I found in this work. *Dread In The Beast* is maximum horror via maximum talent. It's one of my all-time favorite novels in the field.

Edward Lee
St. Pete Beach, Florida
August 23, 2003

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~~“One does not...find dread in the beast, precisely for the reason that by nature the beast is not qualified by spirit.” —Kierkegaard~~

— | — | —

The night was brown when Dorien Warmer lost her virginity. Big city, blanketed with pollution to the hilt. Nobody her age had an inkling of what true darkness was. What it had been before smog and neon became permanent factors of alteration.

She'd been depressed lately. It wasn't unusual for teenagers to develop antagonistic views of the world. Dorien had decided it was a sewer. It stank the moment she stepped outside her door, air no longer sanitized through filters and temperature controls. She choked, heard corruption clattering in her lungs, wanted to spit—but was too much of a lady to do so. It clung to her skin, clothes, hair. The first thing she did upon getting home every day was to strip and shower, soaping up in fragrant foam, shampooing and repeating until the strands of her beige blond hair squeaked. She'd want to buy whatever she'd worn as contaminated, but that would be too expensive. She even cleaned her shoes nightly, spraying them with disinfectant. She wiped down her purse and used an antibacterial spritz on her jacket.

She wasn't really that fastidious, not obsessed with toxic and germinal contagions. It was the blasphemy she had to wash away, the filth of degradation...a logical expression of almost two decades of experiences here. She'd just seen too much of people and cruelty, of the rampant crime at large in any metropolis.

Why, just that morning, after she'd stepped down from the bus, and walked down the street toward the college, there was a gathering around a baby carriage which had been found in the alley behind a submarine sandwich place that catered to the university crowd. Several had turned away to throw up or gag. This ought to have spurred Dorien into hurrying past without trying to see...but it didn't. There was a reflex in city dwellers that made it necessary for them *to see*. Perhaps it was a shared gene to be a witness to calamity, believing deep down that souls couldn't rest until outrages done to them had been solemnly viewed and accorded even the flimsiest or even most apathetic of prayers.

She'd pushed through the little collection of audience. Wished she hadn't—there must be that right? To tell herself she didn't want to see such a thing, not her idea. She wasn't jaded or voyeuristic.

Her nostrils caught the scent before her eyes registered the image. Of the sight being just the dome of the baby's head and one doll-like fist emerging from under the congealed toilet the interior of the carriage had become during the night.

There was a gang in the city these days calling themselves (or had the media dubbed them this) The Shit Detail. All their victims had been killed in a variety of ways which employed the excreta of the gang's members. And something was always written on the victim or nearby in shit.

An enterprising reporter had interviewed a professor at a college across town. This man, an archaeologist, had given an interesting background on television the night before.

“Outhouse graffiti,” explained Dr. James Singer, “goes back to the Romans. They used public latrines in which a wiping stick was employed by all, unsanitary by modern standards surely, to say the very least. As the next person would wipe the stick clean before they used it themselves, he or she might—out of inspiration or boredom—be moved to use the matter clinging to it, deposited by the last person, to write some comment on the wall with.”

Bile washed up Dorien's throat but she swallowed it back down. She felt an almost religious need to get to where she could read what the gang had left this time. Where would it be? Somewhere on the baby carriage? Yes, on its fold-out roof. The print for these messages was usually rather small, seldom easily read, especially depending on where it had been written. The sleek plastic of the carriage top must have been too slippery. So a page from a notebook (with a crinkled edge and three-punch hole

indicating a spiral) had been the canvas used. Then the paper had been fastened to the top with a couple shards from a broken bottle. As they usually did for their epitaphs, they used a bit of poetry or a quoted piece from some philosopher, leading the authorities to theorize that the gang might be made up of students from one of the local colleges.

The coprographic note left with the baby carriage was this:

Why have all our fruits become rotten and brown?

What was it fell last night from the evil moon?

—Nietzsche

Dorien heard a man reading it aloud, then cursing. A young couple squeezed each other's hands and prayed fervently. Someone else was punching 911 on a cell phone, babbling frantically into it to call for help that was long past possible. Another woman sobbed.

Dorien realized this last was her. Then, surprised because she'd have thought herself too hardened by now to react so negatively, she fainted.

Someone caught her and eased her to the sidewalk. When she opened her eyes again, she found Gavin Parrish bending over her. She knew him from her English Lit class. A handsome kid, almost inevitably surrounded by admiring females. Where was his gaggle today?

"Are you okay? Dory, isn't it?" he asked, face a mask of concern. "Police are on their way. We could get an ambulance for you if you think you need one."

"Dorien, actually. Thanks. It won't be necessary," she told him as she struggled to sit up. It was spring but early enough in the day that the concrete felt cold under her back. "My god, that poor child."

"Where do you suppose the parents are? I didn't see an Amber Alert on TV this morning," he said, helping her to stand. He shut his eyes for a moment and shook his head. "What sort of monster would you have to be to do that to a kid?"

"I hope I never find out," she replied.

He'd gone with her to class, the same one they both took. They sat together at the back of the lecture hall, almost too quiet, shocked. How was it they made a date to see a movie later? Dorien had been surprised when he'd invited her. She didn't consider herself to be especially attractive, probably why she didn't date much and still hadn't slept with anyone. She wasn't sexy or vivacious or even remotely fashionable. But he'd asked and she'd said yes, counting lucky stars one by one to have (however the ill-favored auspices of their introduction) the attentions of such a gorgeous guy.

Dorien hardly remembered the rest of the day. She'd had one other class in the afternoon, biology. They were studying parasitic flatworms prone to infesting the liver and digestive tract. The textbook showed photographs of invertebrate Cestoda (phylum Platyhelminthes) and the occasional drawing or painting of extinct or at least very rare species like the *aureum incretum*. Her biology prof, Leonard Landa, droned, "Called '*aureum*' because of its bile-yellow color, this pest was quite a problem in the ancient world where it bred in unsanitary conditions in primitive cities that didn't have the benefit of modern sewage management. Similar in appearance to many tapeworm species, it possessed a definite head, followed by a series of identical segments called proglottids. The head, called the scolex, bore suckers and hooks which allowed it to fasten onto its host. The body was covered in tough cuticle through which food was absorbed. It had no mouth or digestive tract and was hermaphroditic. Unlike tapeworms, the *aureum incretum* would live in its host without reproducing until fully grown, reaching a length of up to many meters coiled within the digestive tract. But it was only an eighth of an inch in diameter. Upon reaching this stage, it would then exit the host by swimming down the intestine and out the rectum, sometimes killing the host but usually only causing a great deal of discomfort as the

bowels were blocked and locked up for a time. Ancient doctors—when a patient was stubbornly constipated—used to quip “he’s raised a champion goldworm.”

Landa paused in case anyone wanted to laugh. When nobody did, he continued, nasally and upon a single note. “The last time the *aureum incretum* was actually seen much was during the heyday of Victorian patent medicines. Ladies would ingest one to keep them slim enough a man could put his hands all the way around their waists. Then one decided to swim downstream to spawn—as it were—while the lady in question was at a function attended by Queen Victoria, and this was the end of that particular fad.”

Dorien felt woozy, leaving biology fifteen minutes early. She went home, showered and sanitized, then stretched out on her couch until it was time to get ready for her date. Maybe it was because she couldn’t get the image of that baby out of her head. Or perhaps it was a case of nerves, giddiness, going out with somebody like Gavin, someone clearly out of her league.

Dorien didn’t even remember what movie they saw. Some chick flick. Women in fussy clothes talking about their orgasms in high prose, profound pussies yack yack yack. He’d chosen it, perhaps to prove himself sensitive. Dorien always found those dull, preferring action to pretention. *Show me life as I’ve learned it: blood and guts, violence and sex*. Even if she’d never had sex nor hurt anyone. That wasn’t the question anyway; the question was realism. Anything less was a sham, unworthy of anybody who recognized grimmer truths.

The theater was across the park from the university. She lived farther into the city, but Gavin had an apartment just off campus.

“Come back to my place first, Dory?” he offered, not pushy, not acting as if he expected her to screw him for the price of the movie ticket. But the scent of his aftershave was a scented, secret garden. “Sure,” she answered, trying not to appear nervous. “And really, I prefer to go by Dorien.”

There had been several students at the movie. Dorien and Gavin were hardly alone as they took a walk across the park. It was about 10:00 p.m. The moon had already climbed halfway up to the top of the sky, where it sat like a round caramel, sullied by the smog. They strolled across a bridge, in a group of at least ten others. When a scream came from the culvert below, everyone ran to the railing to look down.

“Hey!” Gavin cried out. “Don’t! Hey!”

It was dark below. There had been lights but the bulbs had been smashed. It was hard to make out the black-clad group as they attacked some hapless, homeless old woman. Their victim managed only the single shriek before something scooped from the ground was thrust down her throat to shut her up. She’d been stripped naked and beaten. No one knew if what had been stuffed into her mouth was her own shit or a gang member’s. Dorien heard her choking, strangling. A couple of guys ran to either end of the bridge to scramble down the slopes to help the woman.

The assailants wore stocking masks, dark-tinted hose stretched to distort and conceal their features. They’d hunched over the woman and relieved themselves, now shaking their naked asses at the people on the bridge. From what she thought she saw, some of the punks were female. One pulled a pistol from a coat pocket and shot a boy coming down to save the woman. He—or she?—then swung about and aimed it at the other would-be-rescuer until that kid started trying to climb the slope again, slipping, sliding down toward the culvert.

They pulled their jeans up slowly-as-you-please, understanding full well there was an indignant audience overhead. They didn’t even care that someone had turned a video camera on them, getting their fifteen minutes of fame. Fuck yeah! Well, if that camera lacked night vision, they wouldn’t get much. So it was no big deal that this was the first time anybody had witnessed one of The Shit Detail crimes. How much did they really see? Dorien assumed they were leering and sneering under their stocking masks, but there was no way to know for certain. It was strange how silent they were, n

gesturing and shouting obscenities. Yet when they ran off, they howled and yipped for about fifteen seconds, raising the hair along her arms and on her scalp.

She clung to Gavin, frozen with horror but also oddly detached. As if watching a crime as it was committed a long time ago...or somehow witnessing an act destined to come about painfully and atrociously in the future.

Was this the worst thing she'd ever seen? Or had the baby carriage been that? How did you measure atrocity? Was there a point system for grading, so much for each participant and more for every perversion? Did each blow count? Every drop of blood or splinter of bone or inch of greasy coprolite? Was gang defilement necessarily worse on a scale of one to ten than murder, and ought there to be greater distinction made if the victim took an especially long time to die? Before tonight Dorian thought she understood what evil consisted of. It was graphic, intentional of blunt force and explicit with gore. It grinned as it turned cities into abattoirs, dancing without subtlety with blood splashed to further inflame already burning loins. Evil was extreme, unspeakable, relentless violence. Its aim was to dismantle you unto your most sacred atoms, rape your soul into uncreation, rip your sanity from asshole to lips, and snort the names of your most sacred beliefs until you were damned forever in the five second high it enjoyed immediately after. She seemed to have eagle eyes, seeing down into the dark so clearly, senses at a crucial peak she wouldn't have thought possible. She saw the bloody man as it leaked from the old woman's torn rectum where something—a bottle or piece of brick—had been forced. She heard her wheezing the final breath. Smelled rust and uric acid and earthy stool. Tasted from the air the spaghetti the woman had found in the trash outside an Italian restaurant, her last meal. Felt her own sphincter muscle clench. Read the message written on the hard culvert wall, printed in darkness in the dark, in a spot where the lights from the bridge didn't shine. So how could she see that? What? Did she suddenly have super powers?

A small black angel getting sick
From eating too much licorice stick.
He takes a shit, then disappears;
But as the empty darkness clears,
Beneath the moon his shit remains
Like dirty blood in dirty drains.

—Rimbaud

Dorian's vision abruptly spiralled, turning round and round faster, faster, clockwise and completely lightless. Then she was in Gavin's arms, hearing him shout, then whisper her name. "Do you do this often, Dory?" he asked when she finally came around.

"Do what?" she wanted to know. Did he guess she'd just had these sensations, like some smutty savant?

"Faint," he clarified. "You know, you almost tumbled over the railing."

"I never faint," she said. "Twice today is a coincidence."

He managed a subdued chuckle. "Sure you're not pregnant?"

She smiled back, rueful. "That I'm positive I could not be."

And she added in a whisper, "It's Dorian..."

'Dory' had always sounded infantile to her. It was demeaning to be rendered down to the childish component. As if you didn't have even the remotest possibility of survival. Her father had always called her Dory, a growl that drifted down the hallway as he prowled it. Sirens in the distance came nearer, sound gargled in the clotted atmosphere. Several of the witnesses on the bridge had gone down

to help the boy the one gang member had shot. From his moans and gasps, it was obvious he still lived, even as he clutched his gut and bent double in the shadows. A couple others checked the other woman but only shook their heads, hands pressed protectively against their noses and mouths, keeping out the stink—and shielding themselves from the invasion of evil.

Gavin and Dorien remained long enough to give statements to the police. She'd started shivering even though the night was warm yet. Gavin took off his shirt and wrapped it around her. It made her feel guilty, noticing how muscular he was, broad-shouldered, narrow-waisted, washboard abs. That was inappropriately arousing, moistening her between the thighs as an emergency crew loaded the other woman's corpse into the back of an ambulance. *Shame on me, shame shame. How can I allow myself to feel steamy? Guess I'm no better than a jungle creature myself.*

They continued their walk to his apartment. She really should have just gone home but she shook too much. He wouldn't hear of it. "I think you need to sit down and rest first. My place is just right over there, quarter of a mile tops."

He kept his arm around her to help hold her up. Then once inside his door, he led her to the sofa and got her a glass of sherry. Could you believe that? In this age of imported beer and flavored wine coolers, he gave her a glass of sherry for chrissakes. Amontillado, pale in the glass. Its flavor was high and dry, no note of sweetness in it. Nothing of the taste of alimentary-processed, garbage can spaghetti.

He gave her this romantic swill, then held her, stroked her wheat hair, studying it with a admiration that said he could tell it was natural—not dyed. She'd wilted from the sheer stress of the day. Coming upon the scenes of two separate murders was extreme even by the standards of their city which had from time to time been the murder capital of the country. She couldn't just flip it off as simply more random acts in homey hell. She felt unclean and knew that once she reached home, she would indeed be burning this set of clothes."

"Would you like a hot bath, Dory?" he suggested. How had he realized that? Could he be the perfect man? "Of course you would! After something that nasty..."

And this time she didn't bother correcting him on how she preferred her name to be. She was starting to think she liked the way he said it: no growl, no thrum from the jungle.

He ran the bath, pouring in foaming soap which smelled of vanilla. He gently removed her dress, panties, bra. Carried her to the tub like she was a child who'd been pushed down at a river bank. Still naked to the waist so there was no need to roll up his sleeves, he washed her, caressed with strong yet tender hands. Gavin massaged the horror right out of her back, arms, legs.

This is a dream, she thought. And I've no plans to wake up for a while, thank you.

Could he be for real? Dorien didn't know, not having anyone to compare him with. But she'd heard other women talk. She'd heard them bitch was more like it. Drunken, selfish dicks, the lot of mankind. Didn't care, didn't call.

No, Gavin was wonderful. If he wasn't, then how come he always had so many females chasing him? He possessed the raw, magical talent to banish evil from the moment, disarming its threat with holy finesse. He anointed her into believing there might be hope yet.

Damn, did that sound like emotional drivel? Right out of a vapid paperback with a couple of women on horseback, riding across the beach? Fragile lady and Renaissance hunk? Well, so what? It's how Gavin made her feel: safe, cherished, redeemed as only love could do it—a heart at a time. She was glad she'd saved herself for a man like him. (Actually, she hadn't saved it. She wasn't a saint or made of particularly moral stuff. It just hadn't been asked for prior to this.)

Dorien's alter-ego (who liked to believe she was so tough) knelt in a corner of her subconscious, stuck not just two fingers or three fingers down her throat in the gag joke choke but the entire bulimic fist. Puked up roses and kittens and cooing doves. *Give me a break...*

(Fuck off, Id. This here's my moment.)

She stood in the tub as he towed her off, then let him carry her to his bed. It was just a mattress with a bottom sheet on it and a single feather pillow. No top sheet, no blanket or quilt. He laid her down here and then began to kiss her. She let his fingers roam anywhere and everywhere they pleased as he whispered her name, "Dory, Dory..."

Almost sounded like 'I adore you.' Music. Fairy tale or wet dream, the heat inside her built until she thought her nipples and crotch would catch pink fire. Having sex for the first time didn't have to conjure up the images she'd seen on cable's soft porn. This was her own poignant torture and the frenetic release. It filled her with delicious grief, then emptied her out again. Made her buck with her sturdy pelvis until she lifted him right off the mattress. Slung herself upward and across the ceiling like some metaphor for orgasmic levitation, then made all her flesh turn into frosted peach jelly.

She'd bled some; virgins were supposed to do that, right? The hymen split by the man's erection and then a small amount of what felt like boiling scarlet spurted out with or without a startled feminine scream, juice of the proverbial cherry. Clinical, traditional, amazing. She rippled in all possible directions, out toward a contrapuntal combination of nervous laughter and freakish deaf-mute transcendence. She went blind for an instant, next saw the city's stygian shit straining at the window matting itself in brown swirl against the panes, trying to desecrate this single pure moment of hers by passing through the glass by means of a feculent osmosis. It did enter the room, overtaking Dorian and Gavin, covering them in suffocating purgation until they froze in mid-thrust, fossilizing as ancient covered victims in Pompeii. It was evil coming in, determined not to let her escape through love, determined to drag them into the underworld which existed on a tide of worldly sewage.

Dorian bit her tongue, confused and angry. Where had that come from, so close on the heels of rapture? It was the baby submerged in monstrous scurf in the carriage, the old woman throttled with her own void. It was the damned brown night, arriving in buggery behind a bleeding asshole of sunset. Because you couldn't help but be poisoned in a city like this, body and mind. Body, mind, and soul.

The hallucination, or whatever it was, fled. She lay nestled in Gavin's arms, inhaling the musk and spice notes of his cologne, his clean skin. Did she also detect something else? A foulness left behind from the lapse she'd suffered?

She let herself muse on sentimental schtick. They would never be apart. They would live together forever, never tiring of each other's bodies. Even if it wasn't true, she could imagine it for a while. And it might end up happening. Such things did occur.

She glanced toward the window again. For the first time, the night had changed. Not brown, not putrid with toxins and tricked out like a whore trying to hide her plague with cosmetics. It was black velvet, clean. As if the apartment had been transported to somewhere far outside the city, far beyond the earth. She held her breath, it was so beautiful. How could it be that there was no light, no corrosion?

Gavin leaned close, nibbled her ear. He whispered sweetly, "Leave now."

She was distracted, confused. "What did you say?"

He gave her shoulder a little push.

"I'm finished with you. Get out."

She stared at him. He must be joking. But if he was, his face didn't betray the humor.

He shrugged. "Go away. Get out of the bed, get dressed, go home."

Outside, brown darkness against the window pane. Impure night. Inside, brief love affair with the "love" removed and "sordid" used to replace it. His game was not revealed to her but she crawled off the bed and, shaking, began to dress herself.

He also got off the bed, began stripping off the sheet and the pillow case. Without looking at her-

as if she'd already left the apartment, at least as far as he was concerned—he folded these neat around the secretions their sex had left behind. He took a plastic bag from a drawer in his dresser and slipped the items inside.

She saw the bag bore a label with a name on it.

Dorien Warmer

So he didn't have trouble with her name.

And he had the bag prepared before bringing her there! He'd planned this humiliation?

He opened the closet door and laid it on top of a pile of similarly labeled bedsheets in plastic. He souvenirs.

He glanced back at her, arched one finely crafted eyebrow, and asked, "What? You still here? Would you get turned on by my foot up your ass? See these?" He indicated the bags of memorabilia. "This is all you are now. The sum total of your importance in this world. Get fucked, get sick with sores all over your body, get dead. I don't care. Just get out."

Dorien somehow made her legs work to carry her outside. She still dribbled virgin blood, warm the crotch of her panties. The stinking night rushed to cling to her damp body. She understood she was just as defiled as the darkness.

««—»»

Saint Francis of Assisi was reported to roll naked in filth. When he would do this he would cry out welcome to Sister Death.

—*Sacred Seps*
Dr. Louis Godard and Dr. James Sing

—|—|—

MT. KOSHTAN,
ZAGROS MOUNTAINS
1965

Dr. Singer raised his chin, massaging the muscles in his neck, gazing up at the blue Persian sky where the sun had steadily been beating down on his head since dawn. He'd been too excited to put on a sensible hat, to even consider sunstroke as he carefully dusted earth from crackling bare bone. The air itself was icy cold as the expedition was thousands of feet above sea level. The Zagros range always had snow dusting its bleak tops. A man could freeze while still suffering a burn on his scalp.

The wind came up from a dead stillness. It seemed to suck all the air away toward some void he couldn't see. He briefly gasped for breath. It was easy to be short of breath up this high. One day, he scolded himself, he really ought to give up cigarettes. At least if he considered climbing cloud-covered peaks for the rest of his life. Eddies. Whirlwinds. Brown shapes dancing observed only from the corner of the eye, never straight on. If he let himself, he might hear gourd rattles, bells, flutes such a teasing wind. The rustle of tassles on caparisoned animals gracefully crossing some ghostly meridian. The murmurs of captured women destined for a slave market. Oh, further back. Clash of metallic armor, the discordant cry of an ancient trumpet, not very different from the skraw of a buzzard overhead.

They had chosen this spot to begin digging for many reasons. Theories about decisive history, yet there must be that. Some solid data to suggest *here* when so many others who were reinforced with myth and tradition insisted *there*. But Dr. Godard knew that Jim had sensations: of killing plain death on a scale so monumental it left a psychic impression practically as concrete as a field of broken tombstones. Time skewed a bit, so that everytime he woke up there he felt dislocated, the way the body played tricks upon the mind just prior to passing out. The borders had a vigor to them, energy slightly electric, raising the hair on the head and along the arms. Even tugging at the hair between the legs, tickling his balls. When Dr. Singer felt that in a place, he knew there was something hidden he was intended to find. Waiting for him. Calling from the wind, flashing reviews of spirits passed nearby: sometimes dancing/sometimes bent and broken in dying mode/sometimes merely still and staring. He inhaled. Sandalwood. *Pimienta negra molida*. Rose. Lime. Mint. But that was faint. What else did he smell? It wrinkled his nose, rankled his midwestern sensibilities.

“Sir, sir!”

He looked up, the wind and its spectral natives and even the disturbing odor vanished. Moments such locational phenomena were rare enough. He decided not to give in to being annoyed at the disturbance. After all, he knew he wasn't alone here. And the vision, moderate as it had been, might only have been announcing that the occult (read at its strictest definition: being “hidden”) was about to be glimpsed. He grinned as Hassan came running to the edge of the dig. “Yes, here I am. What is it?”

“Dr. Godard say hurry,” the youth declared, sputtering at the hole Jim Singer sat in. The boy's breath smelled of goat cheese and the bitter coffee the locals preferred. It took so long to make coffee at the dig, in the mornings. At this height among the skies, it took forever for water to get hot, even though it came to a boil fast. “He has found something he say is unusual.”

Early yesterday Jim might have expected a chariot, or part of one anyway. Or possibly even a snarling bronze lion, like the ones used as standard weights at the royal treasury in Susa. Perhaps even

a cache of gold darics, the coin from King Darius' realm of the fifth century B.C. If it hadn't been for what they dug up only ten or so hours before, that is.

The expedition hadn't made much headway at this location, in a scientifically unpopular attempt to forge a link with Mt. Koshtan and the ancient Royal Road which had run for 1,600 miles in the old Persian civilization. Everyone in the archeological community had laughed when Louis Godard and his young protégé proposed this mountain as a remote place where Darius had taken on the Scythians. The skeptics had pointed out that this was a long way from the Black Sea and Thrace, which had been the locational spearhead of Darius' offensive against the horse culture nomads. But the Frenchman and his American associate couldn't be dismissed, and indeed had been heartened by last night's unearthing of approximately one hundred skulls which had their tops removed and edges sanded. Something in the soil served to keep them from turning to dust. The Scythians were infamous for using the skulls of their battle-slain enemies as drinking vessels.

Jim sensed death here. Godard agreed, having seen the younger man's insight work on previous occasions, including when Jim had only been a student of his at the university. Much of reactionary theory must derive from inspiration. And the twenty-two-year-old (a rather tender age at which to have a doctorate degree) suffered a strong sense of *frisson* when near an authentic site of not only important history but bloody history. Death could have, and probably had happened, just about everywhere, but sometimes an event or events were so powerful that an imprint was left. Not really haunting but a recording: the way that lightning sometimes etched glass, and atom bombs going off could leave a shadowy umbra upon a wall to mark where someone had been and then had been disintegrated. If this intuition sometimes made for rogue science, so be it.

The men had been ecstatic, had danced a jig together that left Hassan puzzled. Had the thin atmosphere driven them mad? But closer inspection had suggested that these bones were far too old. Possibly as many as twenty or thirty thousand years older than what they were looking for. Carbon dating would back this up. The expedition had found a verifiably ancient site all right, but it was prehistoric one. Not Darius, not the Scythians. Not even young Persia in the time of Babylon or even the first of the bloody pyramids in Egypt. Back before silk, before linen. Before the wheel. Long before the Bronze Age and into the Stone.

This was not necessarily bad news. Millions of people had lived and died in the Paleolithic eras but only a few hundred of them had ever been dug up. Bones didn't always fossilize; sometimes they disintegrated and became part of the dust the singing wind cast into your eyes or lay far down as silt in the strata of the decomposed of ages. To find evidence of a community that old in this location was still a career-maker.

Many great discoveries had been made while the industrious were busy seeking something else. A lot of earth-shaking finds had been accidents.

Just look at the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Jim was so intent on what he was doing that it hadn't even occurred to him that Louis Godard had left to find a rock to piss behind several hours ago. Well, they'd both had a mite more than usual to drink last night. Each had brought spirits—not the wind-borne kind. Godard had carried brandy up the mountain and Jim Singer had packed Scotch. They'd been celebrating. Up this high, a man didn't ignore the pressure of his bladder. Like the water for coffee, it boiled long before it got hot.

Jim followed the boy up out of the dig, asking, "What is it, Hassan? More skulls? Or tools?"

"No, sir. Dr. Godard find a cave," the boy replied, quick bare feet beginning a steep climb into the tumble of jagged rocks.

"Really! Here?" Jim exclaimed, having visions of a Middle Eastern Lascaux. The colleges would do better than accept them now; they would make them gods. "Has he been inside enough to see if there are paintings?"

“No painting, just dead,” the boy answered, hissing the words under his breath as if in awe. As this sort of thing was not what he’d signed on for.

The opening was a crevice, barely perceivable behind a limestone outcropping shaped like battlement of stone axes. The two wriggled into it, the boy snapping on a flashlight once within. But after getting through it, the cave quickly flared out, easily tall enough to stand up in, getting larger a hundred feet or so later. It was the kind of cave an entire community might have lived in. Or might have employed as a holy vault.

Louis was crouched with another flashlight over three figures, skeletons, laid out side by side near to a natural shaft into the bedrock. His eyes were bright blue, the color of lapis lazuli that the goddess Ishtar kept sacred. “Remember what Koshtan means in Persian?” he asked as Jim and the boy came up.

“Yes, it means *kill*,” Jim replied, frowning as he looked down at the ritually arrayed remains.

“Curious,” Louis stated, reaching down but not quite touching the first one. “What do you make of this?”

Jim knelt down, shorts crinkling stiffly, bare knees in the dirt. The well-preserved skeleton was female, belonging to a young woman in her late teens perhaps, on its back, the skull with jaws agape, remarkably whole for twenty to thirty millennia (providing these were to be included with the skulls they’d discovered outside)—as indeed every one of the three figures was in perfect condition. A clay phallus, shaped like a spherical sausage, was inserted into the mouth cavity, apparently applied with so much force that it had shattered most of the front teeth, and had been lodged into what would have been the woman’s throat. In addition, there were smaller phallus statues in the eye sockets and a particularly large one—almost half a meter, a good foot and a half by standard American measurements—inserted into the pelvis. The leg bones indicated a splayed position of about three feet apart.

“And then this.” Louis indicated the skeleton in the middle. Of another female, much younger than the first. A child of perhaps seven or eight. The jaws were also agape and the cavity filled with seeds that had fossilized in the arid environment. At least a hundred similarly dried primitive cherries lay scattered close to the bones, some fallen through the ribcage.

“And last but not least, this fellow,” said Dr. Godard.

The third skeleton was male, at least twenty flint spear points among the bones. But the most curious—and ghastly—thing about it was the second skull imbedded in its abdomen.

“Ritual sacrifice,” Jim muttered, scratching the dark whiskers on his chin. “Sex, harvest and war. I will guess that this man had an enemy’s head stuck inside him before or, well that is to say, after he was speared. Interesting how the killers found so many spear points expendable, isn’t it? A necessity for their hunting and self-defense, this must have been a very important ritual to give up something so precious.”

Godard smiled even as the boy standing behind them shivered.

“And the seeds, I suppose she must have choked to death on them, poor child, even as the other one might have on the phallus. Although I suppose the older female might have bled to death internally from the larger, vaginally inserted one. Unless she was alive when they put the ones through her eyes and thus into her brain pan. Brutal way to go in any case, I must say.”

Jim leaned very close to the child’s skeleton, examining the minute fossils of the cherries. Why, he could almost smell them. Sweet. The wind shifted direction, howled through the cave’s opening and echoed along the bends and turns of the chamber in the rock, sounding not unlike the faint weeping of a child.

“Judging from the placement of these, I’d guess our little harvest girl had these fruits sewn into her flesh. I’ve never seen anything like any of this. It’s quite exciting. To have evidence of this kind of

ritual murder so long ago. It by far beats any of the nasty things we know of the Scythians doing.”

(And it was hard to beat those Scythians. They had been masters of both dramaturgical and oblique violence. Ah, that was the way to secure one’s reputation forever in history.)

“And the way they’re lined up. Obviously a single offering, although multi-purpose in intent,” Jim agreed.

Hassan was horrified, not only seeing the grisly scenario depicted there but also hearing how enthusiastic the professors were about finding it. Shouldn’t someone say a prayer? Or do something to ward off whatever evil spirits might inhabit this place? (Is this what hissed in the wind? Angry spirits being disturbed without blood offered to placate?) Why would such things be done to someone if not to ward off demons?

The boy had sensed things ever since arriving at this spot on the mountain. Ever since the two men had pronounced, “This is definitely the place.” He’d glimpsed movement to the side, djinn who disappeared when he’d turn his head to try to see them straight on. He’d heard the most primitive music. He’d smelled the bittersweetness of death and what died to decay even within death. Hassan couldn’t believe the doctors didn’t perceive what he did, or—if they did—they approached it with foolish curiosity instead of more appropriate, self-preservational terror. Now he inched away from the men, a bit at a time, thinking he might easily leave the cave altogether without them noticing, focused on the skeletons were they. He could slip outside, get his horse, be halfway down the mountain before they realized he’d abandoned them. They didn’t really need him anyway. What use did two crazy foreigners have for a sane guide?

Hassan wasn’t watching where he backed up. Howling, he fell into the shaft in the rock.

“Hassan!” Jim cried out as both doctors jumped up. One tiny bone in the skeleton of the little girl moved a fraction of an inch, disturbed by dust moved from the toe of a boot. A single petrified cherry rolled like a marble.

They hurried over, Jim throwing the beam of his flashlight into the pit.

The boy had hit bottom at only about four feet down and didn’t appear to be injured. But he was screaming at what he’d landed beside. There was the back of a skull visibly emerging from the rock. A partially submerged skeleton was on its stomach, arms and legs evidently once bound together behind with a single thong: ulnas, femurs, tibias and fibulas sticking up like a fistful of breadsticks. Except this rock was a very different color from the limestone.

Godard carefully dropped into the pit. Singer had always been overweight and he would likely have trouble getting out. But the Frenchman was athletic—even if he was quite a bit shorter (and older) than his colleague. He helped Hassan climb back out. But he stayed in, examining the remains.

“How do you suppose it became enmeshed in the bedrock?” asked Jim, running his hand through his longish hair to push it back from his eyes. He had the strangest—the strongest—sense of place and electricity he’d ever had before. And it actually frightened him, almost as much as it seemed to compel him.

“Oh, this isn’t rock,” the older doctor mumbled, feeling just a bit queasy, despite his usual detached perspective.

Jim Singer tilted his head, rubbed his hands briskly up and down his arms. He felt dizzy, getting the sense that the shaft for the pit really went down much farther, miles maybe. Into a vast underground network. *Well, it couldn’t really be miles. It only felt that way, because that way came a sense of...no, hell, no. Although hell was close by it, perhaps as close as a single layer of gauze or a waterfall. Yes, he thought he heard a waterfall...*

Jim thought perhaps he’d better step back from the edge before he fell into the pit himself. “What is it then?”

If the others had been sacrificed to primitive deities of sex, harvest and war, then what possible

personification of power would require a woman be trussed up and pressed down to suffocate in... F
what even vaguely logical purpose?

Perhaps it was the beam of the flashlight but the Frenchman could have sworn he was seeing
womanly shadow flow across the stone. The corner of his eye, naturally. "It's fossilized sh
actually," Godard replied, suddenly wanting very much to get out of there.

««—»»

Buddhist doctrine esteems what is called "the foul sense". The student is enlightened while in the a
of meditating upon decaying corpses. Through this act, the student will understand the process of bir
and rebirth, realizing that what is pure and what is impure is interchanged.

—*Sacred Seps*
Dr. Louis Godard and Dr. James Sing

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SUBWAY TUNNELS,
1990

She woke up, hearing the rumbling on the other side of a wall. Parts of these tunnels had been begun and never finished; they started and then ended without tracks being laid or stations being erected. Vagrants lived here. Sometimes babies were born and grew up and died—without ever once seeing sunlight.

She'd seen a sign back there. So she must have been at the last platform. Perhaps she'd arrived at the platform on one of the trains. The sign said Myrtle Ave. To her, it wasn't quite like a map with an X on it, saying *you are here*. It was more like a signpost in a dream, identifying the dreamer. *This is you.*

But she never dreamed. Did she?

"I am Myrtle Ave." She said it several times to fix it in her head. "I am Myrtle Ave. I am Myrtle Ave."

It was as good a name as any.

She didn't know how long she'd been there. Well, she'd just left that platform and the sign which gave her what she'd call herself from now on. But before that platform? She wasn't blind or too pale, so she knew she couldn't have been down there since birth. She could see in what illumination there was where she now stood, seeping around a corner from whence the rumbling came, that her skin was slightly dusky. It was soft and smooth. She must be young.

What was she doing there?

(No place to go.)

Where was her family?

(Didn't have any.)

There could be countless reasons why she had no memory. She understood this was a big city with hosts of evildoers, capable of crimes extreme enough to traumatize any young girl into the need to forget everything. No, not countless reasons. How did the beginning to the old TV series go? She murmured, "There are eight million stories in the Naked City..."

Not that she recalled how she happened to know that. Perhaps it didn't matter.

Out of the corner of her eye, Myrtle caught movement. A shabby creature shuffled into that circle of weak light. He called to her with greasy fingers tweaked and bidding, "Come here, girlie."

His voice was thick with cheap booze, breath rancid. His skin was a liver-damage grayish-yellow. "Come here, girlie."

"Hey! I seen her first!" A second guy jumped out of another ragged shadow pile.

"Ya did not!" the first protested, swinging away from her, directing that vile air in his mouth toward this other man. The second man launched into him, bending low, swooping in like a combination wrestler and cat. They began to fight. They bit and scratched and punched, rolling in the filth on the ground. They rolled toward a wall. One ended up on top with the other at an awkward position with back on the ground and neck bent to place the back of the head against that wall. The one on top commenced to repeatedly cracking the other's skull against this wall. The muscles in the neck twisted and she heard the vertebrae pop, even as the man on the bottom managed to pull a sharp object from his pocket and stab it into the top man's shoulder and side, once—twice—three times. The fourth time seemed to be on reflex only, but higher, into the top man's face, skewering an already bloodshot

eye.

~~Myrtle hadn't backed off much, she was too mesmerized. She didn't move again until both men slumped, the top one tumbling sideways to the ground. She crept forward then, bending slowly in case one or both should show they'd only been playing possum and made a grab for her. She touched the neck of the top man. There was no pulse even though the body shuddered, causing her to jerk her fingers away. She noticed the object still embedded in the eye, not really deep but obviously far enough it had struck the brain. It was a fork.~~

She checked the bottom man. He still had a pulse but it was weakening. His mouth worked as if he was trying to say something, to cry for help perhaps. She wouldn't get close enough to listen. Whatever his last words were would never be recorded by anyone. They would enter the air as useless things, echoing down the tunnels forever in search of a confessor ear.

Myrtle went through their pockets. The top man had 27 cents and a piece of paper with a bright dot on it. The bottom man's wealth consisted of half a Payday candy bar and three quarters of a pint of rotgut gin. She ate the candy and the sugary dot, then drank down the gin.

Within an hour or so—time in the dark was hard to guess without a clock—she was hallucinating. She imagined herself with wings flying up and down the tunnels.

Myrtle found a pen somewhere and began to draw upon a concrete wall. Did she have any talent for it? No... But it was fun. It seemed to empty her mind out a little—even of things she didn't think she understood at all.

SHEOL'S DITCH,
1972

Mr. and Mrs. Cave were both so high neither parent even knew that three-year-old Jason was in the room, concealed in the closet, watching them get it on in their bed of tie-dyed sheets. They had illustrated each other in non-toxic, washable body paints, obscene with finger monkeys and knuckle sodomite clowns. Darker shades were changed to watercolor pastels as they smeared and diluted with saliva, sweat and semen. The room stank of whiskey sours, musk, Screaming Yellow Zonkers, and a stiffly unwashed pile of clothes in a corner reaching halfway to the cracking plaster ceiling. They grappled one another fiercely and languidly at turns, fingertips straying out to gesticulate dragons, trace invisible gorgons into the air. They babbled sappy Aquarian Age endearments, Sumerian blasphemies, hippie homily idiocies as the L.S.D. rocked them through the night hours.

The stereo blared out Arthur Brown (from *The Crazy World of Arthur Brown*). The record wobbled, scratched and skipping, the worn diamond needle playing over and over like a growling mantra, "I am the god of hellfire..."

"I am the god of hellfire..."

From time to time Jason would giggle, suppressing it behind his hand. Lord, wouldn't want them to catch him in here, seeing all sorts of paisley scorpions and polka dotted humdinger cobras watusi-ing across the topsy turvy rumps of his humping progenitors. He'd snagged a precious square of their best acid test paper and was tripping the spider bite fandango. They'd actually given him the good stuff a few times, just to watch him go strange and try to eat the cat. But after he'd freaked out bad on the last jaunt, Mom and Dad had decreed no more lysergia for the tyke.

"Welfare will come haul your tiny pink ass away, Beast," Mom had explained solemnly, using her nickname for her son, her eyes crinkling up to mere slits with lashes drawn around them in dayglo lime.

"Too many nosy straights reported your screams to The Man," Dad had added vehemently, remembering the humiliation of not being able to shut his own kid up.

"They'll put you in a foster home full of butt fuckers with coke bottle dicks. As soon as you're eighteen, Beastie, they'll pack what's left of you off to Vietnam, to get your arms and legs blown off and your face turned to oatmeal," Mom had offered as a further incentive, knowing he'd seen on the six o'clock news the sludge that soldiers became.

They had found him in the bathroom, during that seizure, flushing the toilet endlessly and letting out a scrotum scrunching shriek each time. They'd tried to make him stop, short of actually physically pulling him out of the bathroom. Well, it was a weird kick, seeing him stand there like that, pushing down on the handle.

Whoosh! Scream. *Whooshsh!* Scream. Eyes huge and dark as the centers to shit tornados. They had pinched him black and blue, slapped him, tweaked his little dinger, pulled out some of his babysock hair, getting no reaction from him but *Whwhoooooshsh!* Scream. Not even looking at them, just at the swirl of disappearing water.

Then it finally dawned on their own pharmaceutically enhanced mentalities that the child's friends were likely to rouse the neighbors into telephoning the fuzz. Because Jason was usually such a quiet kid.

Yeah, because they fed him downers so he'd sleep while they partied. Or stuffed him with speed s

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