

Metastasis

by Dan Simmons

Introduction

It's odd to think that within the walls of concentration camps such as Auschwitz and even in camps such as Treblinka and Sobibor where extermination of human beings was the *only* official activity, wives of the commandants kept gardens, children of the high-ranking German officers attended classes and competed at sports, musicians played Mozart and Bach and Mahler at dinner parties, wives worried about their figures while their husbands checked for receding hairlines ... all the banal preoccupations which constitute the human condition that we share today.

While all around them, humans were being starved and beaten and gassed and fed to the ovens. The ash that had been human flesh an hour before now lightly dusted the roses in the gardens. Barbed wire separated the boys' soccer fields from the killing fields. The music of Mozart carried to the barracks where former musicians and composers and conductors lay shivering with the other human skeletons there.

In the commandant's comfortable home, the administrator checked his hairline in the mirror and the administrator's wife looked in her mirror, pirouetted, pouted, and decided that she would have one less torte for dessert that night.

Did the mirrors reflect human beings?

Of course they did. People can adapt to almost anything.

During the days of the Black Death in the 13th Century, when entire villages were wiped out, when the death carts rumbled through the streets at night with the cry "Bring out your dead!" until there was no one left to bury them, there was much preoccupation with the macabre, many flirtations with death—skull-masked revelers danced nightly in the burial catacombs of Paris—but overall, the small wheel of daily life creaked along as usual.

Are we doing the same today?

I always flinch when I hear someone use the word *decimate* to mean "wipe out," as in, "The Sioux decimated Custer's men."

The word actually comes from the Latin and the action it implies from the Romans. When someone in an occupied province defied the Roman governor or killed a Roman soldier, the Romans would hold a lottery and kill every tenth person. (*Decimate* as in *Decimat(us)*, past participle of *decimare*.)

The Jews weren't decimated in Poland and Europe; they were almost wiped out.

The people of 13th Century Europe weren't decimated; a fourth to half of the entire

population was wiped out. And the plague returned—again and again. The people could not see the plague bacillus so in a sense it did not exist for them. They saw only the results piled high in the death carts each night, staring eyes and exposed teeth illuminated by the light of torches.

We're not being decimated by cancer in the latter part of the 20th Century—the odds are worse than that. The lottery calls one in six. Or perhaps it's already one in five. (It's been getting worse for a long time.)

Meanwhile, we grow our gardens, play our games, listen to our music, and look in our mirrors.

We just try not to see too much.

* * *

On the day Louis Steig received a call from his sister saying that their mother had collapsed and been admitted to a Denver hospital with a diagnosis of cancer, he promptly jumped into his Camaro, headed for Denver at high speed, hit a patch of black ice on the Boulder Turn-pike, flipped his car seven times, and ended up in a coma from a fractured skull and a severe concussion. He was unconscious for nine days. When he awoke he was told that a minute sliver of bone had actually penetrated the left frontal lobe of his brain. He remained hospitalized for eighteen more days—not even in the same hospital as his mother—and when he left it was with a headache worse than anything he had ever imagined, blurred vision, word from the doctors that there was a serious chance that some brain damage had been suffered, and news from his sister that their mother's cancer was terminal and in its final stages.

The worst had not yet begun.

It was three more days before Louis was able to visit his mother. His headaches remained and his vision retained a slightly blurred quality—as with a television channel poorly tuned—but the bouts of blinding pain and uncontrolled vomiting had passed. His sister Lee drove and his fiancée Debbie accompanied him on the twenty mile ride from Boulder to Denver General Hospital.

"She sleeps most of the time but it's mostly the drugs," said Lee. "They keep her heavily sedated. She probably won't recognize you even if she is awake."

"I understand," said Louis.

"The doctors say that she must have felt the lump ... understood what the pain meant ... for at least a year. If she had only ... It would have meant losing her breast even then, probably both of them, but they might have been able to..." Lee took a deep breath. "I was with her all morning. I just can't ... can't go back up there again today, Louis. I hope you understand."

"Yes," said Louis.

"Do you want me to go in with you?" asked Debbie.

"No," said Louis.

Louis sat holding his mother's hand for almost an hour. It seemed to him that the sleeping woman on the bed was a stranger. Even through the slight blurring of his sight, he knew that she looked twenty years older than the person he had known; her skin was gray and sallow, her hands were heavily veined and bruised from IVs, her arms lacked any muscle tone, and her body under the hospital gown looked shrunken and concave. A bad smell surrounded her. Louis stayed thirty minutes beyond the end of visiting hours and left only when his headaches threatened to return in full force. His mother remained asleep. Louis squeezed the rough hand, kissed her on the forehead, and rose to go.

He was almost out of the room when he glanced at the mirror and saw movement. His mother continued to sleep but someone was sitting in the chair Louis had just vacated. He wheeled around.

The chair was empty.

Louis's headache flared like the thrust of a heated wire behind his left eye. He turned back to the mirror, moving his head slowly so as not to exacerbate the pain and vertigo. The image in the mirror was more clear than his vision had been for days. Something was sitting in the chair he had just vacated.

Louis blinked and moved closer to the wall mirror, squinting slightly to resolve the image. The figure on the chair was somewhat misty, slightly diffuse against a more focused background, but there was no denying the reality and solidity of it. At first Louis thought it was a child—the form was small and frail, the size of an emaciated ten-year-old—but then he leaned closer to the mirror, squinted through the haze of his headache, and all thoughts of children fled.

The small figure leaning over his mother had a large, shaven head perched on a thin neck and even thinner body. Its skin was white—not flesh white but paper white, fish-belly white—and the arms were skin and tendon wrapped tightly around long bone. The hands were pale and enormous, fingers at least six inches long, and as Louis watched they unfolded and hovered over his mother's bed-clothes. As Louis squinted he realized that the figure's head was not shaven but simply hairless—he could see veins through the translucent flesh—and the skull was disturbingly broad, brachycephalic, and so out of proportion with the body that the sight of it made him think of photographs of embryos and fetuses. As if in response to this thought, the thing's head began to oscillate slowly as if the long, thin neck could no longer support its weight. Louis thought of a snake closing on its prey.

Louis could do nothing but stare at the image of pale flesh, sharp bone and bruise-colored shadows. He thought fleetingly of concentration camp inmates shuffling to the wire, of week-dead corpses floating to the surface like inflatable

things made of rotted white rubber. This was worse.

It had no ears. A rimmed, ragged hole with reddened flanges of flesh opened directly into the misshapen skull. The eyes were bruised holes, sunken blue-black sockets in which someone had set two yellowed marbles as a joke. There were no eyelids. The eyes were obviously blind, clouded with yellow cataracts so thick that Louis could see layers of striated mucus. Yet they darted to and fro purposefully, a predator's darting, lurking glare, as the great head moved closer to his mother's sleeping form. In its own way, Louis realized, the thing could see.

Louis whirled around, opened his mouth to shout, took two steps toward the bed and the suddenly empty chair, stopped with fists clenched, mouth still straining with his silent scream, and turned back to the mirror.

The thing had no mouth as such, no lips, but under the long, thin nose the bones of cheeks and jaw seemed to flow forward under white flesh to form a funnel, a long tapered snout of muscle and cartilage which ended in a perfectly round opening that pulsed slightly as pale-pink sphincter muscles around the inner rim expanded and contracted with the creature's breath or pulse. Louis staggered and grasped the back of an empty chair, closing his eyes, weak with waves of headache pain and sudden nausea. He was sure that nothing could be more obscene than what he had just seen.

Louis opened his eyes and realized that he was wrong.

The thing had slowly, almost lovingly, pulled down the thin blanket and topsheet which covered Louis's mother. Now it lowered its misshapen head over his mother's chest until the opening of that obscene proboscis was scant inches away from the faded blue-flower print of her hospital gown. Something appeared in the flesh-rimmed opening, something gray-green, segmented, and moist. Small, fleshy antennae tested the air. The great, white head bent lower, cartilage and muscle contracted, and a five-inch slug was slowly extruded, wiggling slightly as it hung above Louis's mother.

Louis threw his head back in a scream that finally could be heard, tried to turn, tried to remove his hands from their deathgrip on the back of the empty chair, tried to look away from the mirror. And could not.

Under the slug's polyps of antennae was a face that was all mouth, the feeding orifice of some deep-sea parasite. It pulsed as the moist slug fell softly onto his mother's chest, coiled, writhed, and burrowed quickly away from the light. Into his mother. The thing left no mark, no trail, not even a hole in the hospital gown. Louis could see the slightest ripple of flesh as the slug disappeared under the pale flesh of his mother's chest.

The white head of the child-thing pulled back, the yellow eyes stared directly at Louis through the mirror, and then the face lowered to his mother's flesh again. A second slug appeared, dropped, burrowed. A third.

Louis screamed again, found freedom from paralysis, turned, ran to the bed and the apparently empty chair, thrashed the air, kicked the chair into a distant corner, and ripped the sheet and blanket and gown away from his mother.

Two nurses and an attendant came running as they heard Louis's screams. They burst into the room to find him crouched over his mother's naked form, his nails clawing at her scarred and shrunken chest where the surgeons had recently removed both breasts. After a moment of shocked immobility, one nurse and the attendant seized and held Louis while the other nurse filled a syringe with a strong tranquilizer. But before she could administer it, Louis looked in the mirror, pointed to a space near the opposite side of the bed, screamed a final time, and fainted.

"It's perfectly natural," said Lee the next day after their second trip to the Boulder Clinic. "A perfectly understandable reaction."

"Yes," said Louis. He stood in his pajamas and watched her fold back the top sheet on his bed.

"Dr. Kirby says that injuries to that part of the brain can cause strange emotional reactions," said Debbie from her place by the window. "Sort of like whatshisname ... Reagan's press secretary who was shot years ago, only temporary, of course."

"Yeah," said Louis, lying back, settling his head into the tall stack of pillows. There was a mirror on the wall opposite. His gaze never left it.

"Mom was awake for a while this morning," said Lee. "*Really* awake. I told her you'd been in to see her. She doesn't ... doesn't remember your visit, of course. She wants to see you."

"Maybe tomorrow," said Louis. The mirror showed the reversed images of the three of them. Just the three of them. Sunlight fell in a yellow band across Debbie's red hair and Lee's arm. The pillowcases behind Louis's head were very white.

"Tomorrow," agreed Lee. "Or maybe the day after. Right now you need to take some of the medication Dr. Kirby gave you and get some sleep. We can go visit Mom together when you feel better."

"Tomorrow," said Louis, and he closed his eyes.

He stayed in bed for six days, rising only to go to the bathroom or to change channels on his portable TV. The headaches were constant but manageable. He saw nothing unusual in the mirror. On the seventh day he rose about ten A.M., showered slowly, dressed in his camel slacks, white shirt, and blue blazer, and was prepared to tell Lee that he was ready to visit the hospital when his sister came into the room red-eyed.

"They just called," she said. "Mother died about twenty minutes ago."

The funeral home was about two blocks from where his mother had lived, where Louis had grown up after they had moved from Des Moines when he was ten, just east of the Capitol Hill area where old brick homes were becoming rundown rentals and where Hispanic street gangs had claimed the night.

According to his mother's wishes there would be a "visitation" this night where Denver friends could pay their respects before the casket was flown back to Des Moines the next day for the funeral Mass at St. Mary's and final interment at the small city cemetery where Louis's father was buried. Louis thought that the open casket was an archaic act of barbarism. He stayed as far away from it as he could, greeting people at the door, catching glimpses only of his mother's nose, folded hands, or rouged cheeks.

About sixty people showed up during the two-hour ordeal, most of them in their early seventies—his mother's age—people from the block whom he hadn't seen in fifteen years or new friends she had met through Bingo or the Senior Citizens Center. Several of Louis's Boulder friends showed up, including two members of his Colorado Mountain Club hiking group and two colleagues from the physics labs at C.U. Debbie stayed by his side the entire time, watching his pale, sweaty face and occasionally squeezing his hand when she saw the pain from the headache wash across him.

The visitation period was almost over when suddenly he could no longer stand it. "Do you have a compact?" he asked Debbie.

"A what?"

"A compact," he said. "You know, one of those little make-up things with a mirror."

Debbie shook her head. "Louis, have you *ever* seen me with something like that?" She rummaged in her purse. "Wait a minute. I have this little hand mirror that I use to check my..."

"Give it here," said Louis. He raised the small plastic-backed rectangle, turning toward the doorway to get a better view behind him.

About a dozen mourners remained, talking softly in the dim light and flower-scented stillness. Someone in the hallway beyond the doorway laughed and then lowered his voice. Lee stood near the casket, her black dress swallowing light, speaking quietly to old Mrs. Narmoth from across the alley.

There were twenty or thirty other small figures in the room, moving like pale shadows between rows of folding chairs and dark-suited mourners. They moved slowly, carefully, seeming to balance their oversized heads in a delicate dance. Each of the child-sized forms awaited its turn to approach the casket and then moved forward, its pale body and bald head emitting its own soft penumbra of greenish-grayish glow. Each thing paused by the casket briefly and then lowered its head slowly, almost reverently.

Gasping in air, his hand shaking so badly the mirror image blurred and vibrated, Louis was reminded of lines of celebrants at his First Communion ... and of animals at a trough.

"Louis, what is it?" asked Debbie.

He shook off her hand, turned and ran toward the cas-ket, shouldering past mourners, feeling cold churnings in his belly as he wondered if he was passing *through* the white things.

"What?" asked Lee, her face a mask of concern as she took his arm.

Louis shook her away and looked into the casket. Only the top half of the lid was raised. His mother lay there in her best blue dress, the make-up seeming to return some fullness to her ravaged face, her old rosary laced through her folded fingers. The cushioned lining under her was silk and beige and looked very soft. Louis raised the mirror. His only reaction then was slowly to lift his left hand and to grasp the rim of the casket very tightly, as if it were the railing of a ship in rough seas and he were in imminent danger of plunging overboard.

There were several hundred of the slug-things in the coffin, flowing over everything inside it, filling it to the brim. They were more white than green or gray now and much, much larger, some as thick through the body as Louis's forearm. Many were more than a foot long. The antennae tendrils had contracted and widened into tiny yellow eyes and the lamprey mouths were recognizably tapered now.

As Louis watched, one of the pale, child-sized figures to his right approached the casket, laid long white fingers not six inches from Louis's hands, and lowered its face as if to drink.

Louis watched as the thing ingested four of the long, pale slugs, the creature's entire face contracting and ex-panding almost erotically to absorb the soft mass of its meal. The yellow eyes did not blink. Others approached the casket and joined in the communion. Louis lowered the angle of the mirror and watched two more slugs flow effortlessly out of his mother, sliding through blue material into the churning mass of their fellows. Louis moved the mirror, looked behind him, seeing the half-dozen pale forms standing there, waiting patiently for him to move. Their bodies were pale and sexless blurs. Their fingers were very long and very sharp. Their eyes were hungry.

Louis did not scream. He did not run. Very carefully he palmed the mirror, released his death grip on the edge of the casket, and walked slowly, carefully, away from there. Away from the casket. Away from Lee and Debbie's distantly heard cries and questions. Away from the funeral home.

He was hours and miles away, in a strange section of dark warehouses and factories, when he stopped in the mercury-arc circle of a streetlight, held the mirror high, swiveled 360 degrees to ascertain that nothing and no one was in sight, and then huddled at the base of the streetlight to hug his knees, rock, and croon.

"I think they're cancer vampires," Louis told the psy-chiatrist. Between the wooden shutters on the doctor's windows, Louis caught a glimpse of the rocky slabs that were the Flatirons. "They lay these tumor-slugs that hatch and change inside people. What we call tumors are really eggs. Then the cancer vampires take them back into them-selves."

The psychiatrist nodded, tamped down his pipe, and lighted another match. "Do you wish to tell me more ... ah ... details ... about these images you have?" He puffed his pipe alight.

Louis started to shake his head and then stopped sud-denly as headache pain rippled through him. "I've thought it all out in the last few weeks," he said. "I mean, go back more than a hundred years and give me the name of one famous person who died of cancer. Go ahead."

The doctor drew on his pipe. His desk was in front of the shuttered windows and his face was in shadow, only occasionally illuminated when he turned as he relit his pipe. "I can't think of one right now," the doctor said, "but there must be many."

"*Exactly*," said Louis in a more excited tone than he had meant to use. "I mean, today we *expect* people to die of cancer. One in six. Or maybe it's one in four. I mean, I didn't know *anyone* who died in Viet Nam, but *every-body* knows somebody—usually somebody in our family—who's died of cancer. Just think of all the movie stars and politicians. I mean, it's everywhere. It's the plague of the Twentieth Century."

The doctor nodded and kept any patronizing tones out of his voice. "I see your point," he said. "But just because modern diagnostic methods did not exist before this does not mean people did not die of cancer in previous centu-ries. Besides, research has shown that modern technology, pollutants, food additives and so forth have increased the risk of encountering carcinogens which..."

"Yeah," laughed Louis, "carcinogens. That's what I used to believe in. But, Jesus, Doc, have you ever read over the AMA's and American Cancer Society's official lists of carcinogens? I mean it's everything you eat, breathe, wear, touch, and do to have fun. I mean it's *every-thing*. That's the same as just saying that they don't know. Believe me, I've been reading all of that crap, they don't even know what makes a tumor start growing."

The doctor steepled his fingers. "But you believe that you do, Mr. Steig?"

Louis took one of his mirrors from his shirt pocket and moved his head in quick half-circles. The room seemed empty. "Cancer vampires," he said. "I don't know how long they've been around. Maybe something we did this century allowed them to come through some ... some gate or something. I don't know."

"From another dimension?" the doctor asked in conversational tones. His pipe tobacco smelled vaguely of pine woods on a summer day.

"Maybe," shrugged Louis. "I don't know. But they're here and they're busy feeding ... and multiplying..."

"Why do you think that you are the only one who has been allowed to see them?" asked the doctor brightly.

Louis felt himself growing angry. "Goddammit, I don't *know* that I'm the only one who can see them. I just know that something happened after my accident..."

"Would it not be ... equally probable," suggested the doctor, "that the injury to your skull has caused some *very* realistic hallucinations? You admit that your sight has been somewhat affected." He removed his pipe, frowned at it, and fumbled for his matches.

Louis gripped the arms of his chair, feeling the anger in him rise and fall on the waves of his headache. "I've been back to the Clinic," he said. "They can't find any sign of permanent damage. My vision's a little funny—but that's just because I can see *more* now. I mean, more colors and things. It's like I can see radio waves almost."

"Let us assume that you do have the power to see these ... cancer vampires," said the doctor. The tobacco glowed on his third inhalation. The room smelled of sunwarmed pine needles. "Does this mean that you also have the power to *control* them?"

Louis ran his hand across his brow, trying to rub away the pain. "I don't know."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Steig. I couldn't hear..."

"I don't know!" shouted Louis. "I haven't tried to *touch* one. I mean, I don't know if ... I'm afraid that it might ... Look, so far the things ... the cancer vampires—they've ignored me, but..."

"If you can see them," said the doctor, "doesn't it follow that they can see you?"

Louis rose and went to the window, tugging open the shutters so the room was filled with late afternoon light. "I think they see what they want to see," said Louis, staring at the foothills beyond the city, playing with his hand mirror. "Maybe we're just blurs to them. They find us easily enough when it's time to lay their eggs."

The doctor squinted in the sudden brightness but removed his pipe and smiled. "You talk about eggs," he said, "but what you described sounded more like feeding behavior. Does this discrepancy and the fact that the ... vision ... first occurred when your mother was dying suggest any deeper meanings to you? We all search for ways to control things we have no power over—things we find too difficult to accept. Especially when one's mother is involved."

"Look," sighed Louis, "I don't need this Freudian crap. I agreed to come here today because Deb's been on my case for weeks but..." Louis stopped and raised his mirror, and stared.

The doctor glanced up as he scraped at his pipe bowl. His mouth was slightly open, showing white teeth, healthy gums, and a hint of tongue slightly curled in concentration. From beneath that tongue came first the fleshy antennae and then the green-gray body of a tumor slug, this one no more than a few centimeters long. It moved higher along the psychiatrist's jaw, sliding in and out of the muscles and skin of the man's cheek as effortlessly as a maggot moving in a compost heap. Deeper in the shadows of the doctor's mouth, something larger stirred.

"It can't hurt to talk about it," said the doctor. "After all, that's what I'm here for."

Louis nodded, pocketed his mirror, and walked straight to the door without looking back.

Louis found that it was easy to buy mirrors cheaply. They were available, framed and unframed, at used furniture outlets, junkshops, discount antique dealers, hardware stores, glass shops and even in people's stacks of junk sitting on the curb awaiting pickup. It took Louis less than a week to fill his small apartment with mirrors.

His bedroom was the best protected. Besides the twenty-three mirrors of various sizes on the walls, the ceiling had been completely covered with mirrors. He had put them up himself, pressing them firmly into the glue, feeling slightly more secure with each reflective square he set in place.

Louis was lying on his bed on a Saturday afternoon in May, staring at the reflections of himself, thinking about a conversation he had just had with his sister Lee, when Debbie called. She wanted to come over. He suggested that they meet on the Pearl Street Mall instead.

There were three passengers and two of *them* on the bus. One had been in the rear seat when Louis boarded, another came through the closed doors when the bus stopped for a red light. The first time he had seen one of the cancer vampires pass through a solid object, Louis had been faintly relieved, as if something so insubstantial could not be a serious threat. He no longer felt that way. They did not float through walls in the delicate, effortless glide of a ghost; Louis watched while the hairless head and sharp shoulders of this thing struggled to penetrate the closed doors of the bus, wiggling like someone passing through a thick sheet of cellophane. Or like some vicious newborn predator chewing its way through its own amniotic sac.

Louis pulled down another of the small mirrors attached by wires to the brim of his Panama hat and watched while the second cancer vampire joined the first and the two closed on the old lady sitting with her shopping bags two rows behind him. She

sat stiffly upright, hands on her lap, staring straight ahead, not even blinking, as one of the cancer vampires raised its ridged funnel of a mouth to her throat, the motion as intimate and gentle as a lover's opening kiss. For the first time Louis noticed that the rim of the thing's proboscis was lined with a circle of blue cartilage which looked as sharp as razor blades. He caught a glimpse of gray-green flowing into the folds of the old lady's neck. The second cancer vampire lowered its ponderous head to her belly like a tired child preparing to rest on its mother's lap.

Louis stood, pulled the cord, and got off five blocks before his stop.

Few places in America, Louis thought, showed off health and wealth better than the three outdoor blocks of Boulder's Pearl Street Mall. A pine-scented breeze blew down from the foothills less than a quarter of a mile to the west as shoppers browsed, tourists strolled, and the locals lounged. The average person in sight was under thirty-five, tanned and fit, and wealthy enough to dress in the most casual pre-washed, pre-faded, pre-wrinkled clothes. Young men dressed only in brief trunks and sweat jogged down the mall, occasionally glancing down at their watches or their own bodies. The young women in sight were almost unanimously thin and braless, laughing with beautifully capped teeth, sitting on grassy knolls or benches with their legs spread manfully in poses out of *Vogue*. Healthy looking teenagers with spikes of hair dyed unhealthy colors licked at their two-dollar Dove bars and three-dollar Haagen-Dazs cones. The spring sunligty on the brick walkways and flower beds promised an endless summer.

"Look," said Louis as he and Debbie sat near Freddy's hot dog stand and watched the crowds flow past, "my view of things right now is just too goddamn ugly to accept. Maybe *everybody* could see this shit if they wanted to, but they just refuse to." He lowered two of his mirrors and swiveled. He had tried mirrored sunglasses but that had not worked; only the full mirror-reversal allowed him to see. There were six mirrors clipped to his hat, more in his pockets.

"Oh, Louis," said Debbie. "I just don't understand..."

"I'm serious," snapped Louis. "We're like the people who lived in the villages of Dachau or Auschwitz. We see the fences, watch the trainloads of loaded cattle cars go by everyday, smell the smoke of the ovens ... and *pretend it isn't happening*. We let these things take everybody, as long as it isn't us. *There!* See that heavysset man near the bookstore?"

"Yes?" Debbie was near tears.

"Wait," said Louis. He brought out his larger pocket mirror and turned at an angle. The man was wearing tan slacks and a loose Hawaiian shirt that did not hide his fat. He sipped at a drink in a red styrofoam cup and stood reading a folded copy of the *Boulder Daily Camera*. Four child-sized blurs clustered around him. One closed long fingers around the man's throat and pulled himself up across the man's arm and

belly.

"Wait," repeated Louis and moved away from Debbie, scuttling sideways to keep the group framed in the mirror. The three cancer vampires did not look up as Louis came within arm's length; the fourth slid its long cone of a mouth toward the man's face.

"Wait!" screamed Louis and struck out, head averted, seeing his fist pass through the pale back of the clinging thing. There was the faintest of gelatinous givings and a chill numbed the bones of his fist and arm. Louis stared at his mirror.

All four of the cancer vampires' heads snapped around, blind yellow eyes fixed on Louis. He sobbed and struck again, feeling his fist pass through the thing with no effect and bounce weakly off the fat man's chest. Two of the white blurs swiveled slowly toward Louis.

"Hey, goddammit!" shouted the fat man and struck at Louis's arm.

The mirror flew out of Louis's left hand and shattered on the brick pavement. "Oh, Jesus," whispered Louis, backing away. "Oh Jesus." He turned and ran, snapping down a mirror on his hat as he did so, seeing nothing but the dancing, vibrating frame. He grabbed Debbie by the wrist and tugged her to her feet. "Run!" They ran.

Louis awoke sometime after two A.M., feeling disoriented and drugged. He felt for Debbie, remembered that he had gone back to his own apartment after they had made love. He lay in the dark, wondering what had awakened him.

His nightlight had burned out.

Louis felt a flush of cold fear, cursed, and rolled over to turn on the table lamp next to his bed. He blinked in the sudden glare, seeing blurred reflections of himself blink back from the ceiling, walls, and door.

Other things also moved in the room.

A pale face with yellow eyes pushed its way through the door and mirror. Fingers followed, finding a hold on the doorframe, pulling the body through like a climber mastering an overhang. Another face rose to the right of Louis's bed with the violent suddenness of someone stepping out of one's closet in the middle of the night, extracted its arm, and reached for the blanket bunched at the foot of Louis's bed.

"Ah," panted Louis and rolled off the bed. Except for the closet there was only the single door, closed and locked. He glanced up at the ceiling mirrors in time to see the first white shape release itself from the wood and glass and stand between the door and him. As he stared upward at his own reflection, at himself dressed in pajamas and lying on his back on the tan carpet, he watched wide-eyed as something white rippled and rose through the carpet not three feet from where he lay: a broad curve of dead grub flesh followed by a second white oval, the back and

head of the thing floating up through the floor like a swimmer rising to his knees in three feet of water. The eye sockets were close enough for Louis to touch; all he had to do was extend his arm. The scent of old carrion came to him from the thing's sharp circle of a mouth.

Louis rolled sideways and back, scrambled to his feet, used a heavy chair by his bed to smash the window glass and threw the chair behind him. The rope ladder tied to the base of his bed had been left behind by a paranoid ex-roommate of Louis's who had refused to live on a third floor without a fire escape.

Louis looked up, saw white hands converging, threw the knotted rope out the window and followed it, bruising knuckles and knees against the brick wall as he clambered down.

He looked up repeatedly but there were no mirrors in the cold spring darkness and he had no idea if anything was following.

They used Debbie's car to leave, driving west up the canyon into the mountains. Louis was wearing an old pair of jeans, green sweatshirt, and paint-spattered sneakers he had left at Debbie's after helping to paint her new apartment in January. She owned only a single portable mirror—an eighteen by twenty-four inch glass set into an antique frame above the fireplace—and Louis had ripped it off the wall and brought it along, checking every inch of the car before allowing her to enter it.

"Where are we going?" she asked as they turned south out of Nederland on the Peak to Peak Highway. The Continental Divide glowed in weak moonlight to their right. Their headlights picked out black walls of pine and stretches of snow as the narrow road wound up and around.

"Lee's cabin," said Louis. "West on the old Rollins Pass road."

"I know the cabin," said Debbie. "Will Lee be there?"

"She's still in Des Moines," he said. He blinked rapidly. "She called just before you did this afternoon. She found a ... lump. She saw a doctor there but is going to fly back to get the biopsy."

"Louis, I..." began Debbie.

"Turn here," said Louis.

They drove the last two miles in silence.

The cabin had a small generator to power lights and the refrigerator but Louis preferred not to spend time filling it and priming it in the darkness out back. He asked Debbie to stay in the car while he took the mirror inside, lit two of the large candles Lee kept on the mantel, and walked through the three small rooms of the

cabin with the mirror reflecting the flickering candle flame and his own pale face and staring eyes. By the time he waved Debbie inside, he had a fire going in the fireplace and the sleeper sofa in the main room was pulled out. In the dancing light from the fireplace and candles, Debbie's hair looked impossibly red. Her eyes were tired.

"It's only a few hours until morning," said Louis. "I'll go into Nederland when we wake up and get some sup-plies."

Debbie touched his arm. "Louis, can you tell me what's going on?"

"Wait, wait," he said, staring into the dark corners. "There's one more thing. Undress."

"Louis..."

"Undress!" Louis was already tugging off his shirt and pants. When they were both out of their clothes, Louis propped the mirror on a chair and had them stand in front of it, turning slowly. Finally satisfied, he dropped to his knees and looked up at Debbie. She stood very still, the firelight rising and falling on her white breasts and the soft V of red pubic hair. The freckles on her shoulders and up-per chest seemed to glow.

"Oh, God," said Louis and buried his face in his hands. "God, Deb, you must think I'm absolutely crazy."

She crouched next to him and ran her fingers down his back. "I don't know what's going on, Louis," she whis-pered, "but I know that I love you."

"I'll tell you..." began Louis, feeling the terrible pressure in his chest threaten to expand into sobs.

"In the morning," whispered Debbie and kissed him softly.

They made love slowly, seriously, time and their senses slowed and oddly amplified by the late hour, strange place, and fading sense of danger. Just when both of them felt the urgency quickening, Louis whispered, "Wait a second," and lay on one side, running his hand and then his mouth under the folds of her breasts, up, lick-ing the nipples back into hardness, then kissing the curve of her belly and opening her thighs with his hand, sliding his face and body lower.

Louis closed his eyes and imagined a kitten lapping milk. He tasted the salt sweetness of the sea while Debbie softened and opened herself further to him. His palms stroked the tensed smoothness of her inner thighs while her breathing came more quickly, punctuated by soft, sharp gasps of pleasure.

There was a sudden hissing behind them. The light flared and wavered.

Louis turned, sliding off the foot of the bed onto one knee, aware of the pounding of his heart and the extra vul-nerability his nakedness and excitement forced on him. He

looked and gasped a laugh.

"What?" whispered Debbie, not moving.

"It's just the candle I set on the floor," he whispered back. "It's drowning in its own melted wax. I'll blow it out."

He leaned over and did so, pausing as he moved back to the foot of the bed to take in a single, voyeuristic glance in the mirror propped on the chair.

Firelight played across the two lovers framed there, Louis's flushed face and Debbie's white thighs, both glis-tening slightly from perspiration and the moisture of their lovemaking. Seen from this angle the dancing light illumi-nated the copper tangle of her pubic hair and roseate ovals of moist labia with a soft clarity too purely sensuous to be pornographic. Louis felt the tides of love and sexual ex-citement swell in him.

He caught the movement in the mirror out of the cor-ner of his eye a second before he would have lowered his head again. A glimmer of slick gray-green between pale pink lips. No more than a few centimeters long. Unde-terred by the dim light, the twin polyps of antennae emerged slowly, twisting and turning slightly as if to taste the air.

"I didn't know you had an interest in oncology," said Dr. Phil Collins. He grinned at Louis across his cluttered desk. "I thought you rarely came out of the physics lab up at the University."

Louis stared at his old classmate. He was much too tired for banter. He had not slept for 52 hours and his eyes felt like they were lined with sand and broken glass. "I need to see the radiation treatment part of chemotherapy," he said.

Collins tapped manicured nails against the edge of his desk. "Louis, we can't just give guided tours of our ther-apy sessions every time someone gets an interest in the process."

Louis forced his voice to stay even. "Look, Phil, my mother died of cancer a few weeks ago. My sister just un-derwent a biopsy that showed malignancy. My fiancée checked into Boulder Community a few hours ago with a case of cervical cancer that they're pretty sure also in-volves her uterus. Now will you let me watch the proce-dure or not?"

"Jesus," said Collins. He glanced at his watch. "Come on, Louis, you can make the rounds with me. Mr. Taylor is scheduled to receive his treatment in about twenty minutes."

The man was forty-seven but looked thirty years older. His eyes were sunken and bruised. His skin had a yellow-ish cast under the fluorescent lights. His hair had fallen out and Louis could make out small pools of blood under the skin.

They stood behind a lead-lined shield and watched through thick ports. "The medication is a very important part of it," said Collins. "It both augments and complements the radiation treatment."

"And the radiation kills the cancer?" asked Louis.

"Sometimes," said Collins. "Unfortunately it kills healthy cells as well as the ones which have run amok."

Louis nodded and raised his hand mirror. When the device was activated he made a small, involuntary sound. A brilliant burst of violet light filled the room, centering on the tip of the X-ray machine. Louis realized that the glow was similar to that of the bug-zapper devices he had seen in yards at night, the light sliding beyond visible frequencies in a maddening way. But this was a thousand times brighter.

The tumor slugs came out. They slid out of Mr. Taylor's skull, antennae thrashing madly, attracted by the brilliant light. They leaped the ten inches to the lens of the device, sliding on slick metal, some falling to the floor and then moving back up onto the table and through the man's body again to reemerge from the skull seconds later only to leap again.

Those that reached the source of the X-rays fell dead to the floor. The others retreated into the darkness of flesh when the X-ray light died.

"...hope that helps give you some idea of the therapy involved," Collins was saying. "It's a frustrating field because we're not quite sure of why everything works the way it does, but we're making strides all of the time."

Louis blinked. Mr. Taylor was gone. The violet glow of the X-rays was gone. "Yes," he said. "I think that helps a lot."

Two nights later, Louis sat next to his sleeping sister in the semi-darkness of her hospital room. The other bed was empty. Louis had sneaked in during the middle of the night and the only sound was the hiss of the ventilation system and the occasional squeak of a rubber-soled shoe in the corridor. Louis reached out a gloved hand and touched Lee's wrist just below the green hospital identity bracelet. "I thought it'd be easy, kiddo," he whispered. "Remember the movies we watched when we were little? James Arness in *The Thing*? Figure out what kills it and rig it up." Louis felt the nausea sweep over him again and he lowered his head, breathing in harsh gulps. A minute later he straightened again, moving to wipe the cold sweat off his brow but frowning when the leather of the thick glove contacted his skin. He held Lee's wrist again. "Life ain't so easy, kiddo. I worked nights in Mac's high energy lab at the University. It was easy to irradiate things with that X-ray laser toy Mac cobbled together to show the sophomores the effects of ionizing radiation."

Lee stirred, moaned slightly in her sleep. Somewhere a soft chime sounded three times and was silenced. Louis heard two of the floor nurses chatting softly as they

walked to the staff lounge for their two A.M. break. Louis left his gloved hand just next to her wrist, not quite touch-ing.

"Jesus, Lee," he whispered. "I can see the whole damn spectrum below 100 angstroms. So can *they*. I banked on the cancer vampires being drawn to the stuff I'd irradiated just like the tumor slugs were. I came here last night—to the wards—to check on it. They *do* come, kiddo, but it doesn't kill them. They flock around the irradiated stuff like moths to a flame, but it doesn't kill them. Even the tu-mor slugs need high dosages if you're going to get them all. I mean, I started in the millirem dosages—like the ra-diation therapy they use here—and found that it just didn't get enough of them. To be sure, I had to get in the region of 300 to 400 roentgens. I mean, we're talking Chernobyl here, kiddo."

Louis quit talking and walked quickly to the bathroom, lowering his head to the toilet to vomit as quietly as pos-sible. Afterward he washed his face as best he could with the thick gloves on and returned to Lee's bedside. She was frowning slightly in her drugged sleep. Louis remembered the times he had crept into her bedroom as a child to frighten her awake with garter snakes or squirt guns or spiders. "Fuck it," he said and removed his gloves.

His hands glowed like five-fingered, blue-white suns. As Louis watched in the mirrors snapped down on his hat brim, the light filled the room like cold fire. "It won't hurt, kiddo," he whispered as he unsnapped the first two buttons on Lee's pajama tops. Her breasts were small, hardly larger than when he had peeked in on her emerging from the shower when she was fifteen. He smiled as he remem-bered the whipping he had received for that, and then he laid his right hand on her left breast.

For a second nothing happened. Then the tumor slugs came out, antennae rising like pulpy periscopes from Lee's flesh, their gray-green color bleached by the brilliance of Louis's glowing hand.

They slid into him through his palm, his wrist, the back of his hand. Louis gasped as he felt them slither through his flesh, the sensation faint but nauseating, like having a wire inserted in one's veins while under a local anaesthetic.

Louis counted six ... eight of the things sliding from Lee's breast into the blue-white flaring of his hand and arm. He held his palm flat for a full minute after the last slug entered, resisting the temptation to scream or pull his hand away as he saw the muscles of his forearm writhe as one of the things flowed upward, swimming through his flesh.

As an extra precaution, Louis moved his palm across Lee's chest, throat, and belly, feeling her stir in her sleep, fighting the sedatives in an unsuccessful battle to awaken. There was one more slug—hardly more than a centimeter long—which rose from the taut skin just below her ster-num, but it flared and withered before coming in contact with his blue-white flesh, curling like a dried leaf too close to a hot fire.

Louis rose and removed his thick layers of clothes, watching in the wide mirror opposite Lee's bed. His entire body fluoresced, the brilliance fading from white to blue-white to violet and then sliding away into frequencies even he could not see. Again he thought of the bug lights one saw near patios and the blind-spot sense of frustration the eye conveyed as it strained at the fringes of perception. The mirrors hanging from the brim of his hat caught and scattered the light.

Louis folded his clothes neatly, laid them on the chair near Lee, kissed her softly on the cheek, and walked from room to room, the brilliance from his body leaping ahead of him, filling the corridors with blue-white shadows and pinwheels of impossible colors.

There was no one at the nurse's station. The tile floor felt cool beneath Louis's bare feet as he went from room to room, laying on his hands. Some of the patients slept on. Some watched him with wide eyes but neither moved nor cried out. Louis wondered at this but glanced down without his mirrors and realized that for the first time he could see the brilliance of his heavily irradiated flesh and bone with his own eyes. His body was a pulsing star in human form. Louis could easily hear the radio waves as a buzzing, crackling sound, like a great forest fire still some miles away.

The tumor slugs flowed from their victims and into Louis. Not everyone on this floor had cancer, but in most rooms he had only to enter to see the frenzied response of green-gray or grub-white worms straining to get at him. Louis took them all. He felt his body swallow the things, sensed the maddened turmoil within. Only once more did he have to stop to vomit. His bowels shifted and roiled, but there was so much motion in him now that Louis ignored it.

In Debbie's room, Louis pulled the sheet off her sleeping form, pulled up the short gown, and laid his cheek to the soft bulge of her belly. The tumor slugs flowed into his face and throat; he drank them in willingly.

Louis rose, left his sleeping lover, and walked to the long, open ward where the majority of cancer patients lay waiting for death.

The cancer vampires followed him. They flowed through walls and floors to follow him. He led them to the main ward, a blazing blue-white pied piper leading a chorus of dead children.

There were at least a score of them by the time he stopped in the center of the ward, but he did not let them approach until he had gone from bed to bed, accepting the last of the tumor slugs into himself, seeing with his surreal vision as the eggs inside these victims hatched prematurely to give up their writhing treasure. Louis made sure the tumor slugs were with him before he moved to the center of the room, raised his arms, and let the cancer vampires come closer.

Louis felt heavy, twice his normal weight, pregnant with death. He glanced at his blazing limbs and belly and saw the very surface of himself alive with the motion of maggots feeding on his light.

Louis raised his arms wider, pulled his head far back, closed his eyes, and let the cancer vampires feed.

The things were voracious, drawn by the X-ray beacon of Louis's flesh and the silent beckoning of their larval offspring. They shouldered and shoved each other aside in their eagerness to feed. Louis grimaced as he felt a dozen sharp piercings, felt himself almost lifted off the floor by nightmare energies suddenly made tangible. He looked once, saw the terrible curve of the top of a dead-child's head as the thing buried its face to the temples in Louis's chest, and then he closed his eyes until they were done.

Louis staggered, gripped the metal footboard of a bed to keep from falling. The score of cancer vampires in the room had finished feeding but Louis could feel his own body still weighted with slugs. He watched.

The child-thing nearest to him seemed bloated, its body as distended as a white spider bursting with eggs. Through its translucent flesh, Louis could see glowing tu-mor slugs shifting frantically like electric silverfish.

Even through his nausea and pain, Louis smiled. What-ever the reproductive-feeding cycle of these things had been, Louis now felt sure that he had disrupted it with the irradiated meal he had offered the tumor slugs.

The cancer vampire in front of him staggered, leaned far forward, and looked even more spiderish as its impos-sibly long fingers stretched to keep it from falling.

A blue-white gash appeared along the thing's side and belly. Two bloated, thrashing slugs appeared in a rush of violent energy. The cancer vampire arched its back and raised its feeding mouth in a scream that was audible to Louis as someone scraping their teeth down ten feet of blackboard.

The slugs ripped free of the vampire's shredded belly, dumping themselves on the floor and writhing in a bath of ultraviolet blood, steaming and shriveling there like true slugs Louis had once seen sprinkled with salt. The cancer vampire spasmed, clutched at its gaping, eviscerated belly, and then thrashed several times and died, its bony limbs and long fingers slowly closing up like the legs of a crushed spider.

There were screams, human and otherwise, but Louis paid no attention as he watched the death throes of the two dozen spectral forms in the room. His vision had altered permanently now and the beds and their human occupants were mere shadows in a great space blazing in ultraviolet and infrared but dominated by the blue-white corona which was his own body. He vomited once more, doubling over to retch up blood and two dying, glowing slugs, but this was a minor inconvenience as long as his strength held out and at that second he felt that it would last forever.

Louis looked down, through the floor, through *five* floors, seeing the hospital as levels of clear plastic inter-laced with webs of energy from electrical wiring, lights, machines, and organisms. Many organisms. The healthy ones glowed a soft orange

but he could see the pale yellow infections, the grayish corruptions, and the throbbing black pools of incipient death.

Rising, Louis stepped over the dying corpses of cancer vampires and the acid-pools which had been thrashing slugs seconds before. Although he already could see be-yond, he opened wide doors and stepped out onto the terrace. The night air was cool.

Drawn by the extraordinary light, they waited. Hundreds of yellow eyes turned upwards to stare from blue-black pits set in dead faces. Mouths pulsed. Hundreds more of the things converged as Louis watched.

Louis raised his own eyes, seeing more stars than any-one had ever seen as the night sky throbbed with uncount-able X-ray sources and infinite tendrils of unnamed colors. He looked down to where they continued to gather, by the thousands now, their pale faces glowing like candles in a procession. Louis prayed for a single miracle. He prayed that he could feed them all. "Tonight, Death," he whispered, the sound too soft for even him to hear, "you shall die."

Louis stepped to the railing, raised his arms, and went down to join those who waited.

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