

Alex Jablovkov's most recent novel is Brain Thief. His new story is set at the busy intersection of Modern Technology and Traditional Fantasy. The light just changed. Are you going to cross the street?

Plinth without Figure

By Alexander Jablovkov

1

SO FREDERICK WENT DOWN
to Carver Square himself to see the ghost.
Absurd, of course. It had to be a
statistical artifact of their sampling

methods. Too much data in one place bred superstitions. The mind always imposed patterns.

Still, it was good to get down to the site once in a while, out of the windowless office where he crunched the numbers. He'd once hung out around Carver Square, long ago, before he left the East Coast and really started his career.

Frederick remembered drinking coffee in that Dunkin' Donuts, eavesdropping, watching where powdered sugar finally settled on different people's bodies, thinking about what he might face when he got home. He'd learned a lot about urban spaces in those months, but it had taken some personal disasters and a move elsewhere for him to understand what he'd learned.

Now he stood in a quiet spot at the corner of the subway station and watched people move through the space. He was a big man, with thick fingers that concealed his artistic background. He could have been a roofer or a doctor, there was really no way to tell. No one paid attention to him. Carver Square was less seedy than it had been in those days, but it had never really become anything else. Despite being in a densely populated area, it seemed like something on the edge, a suburban strip with inadequate parking, the worst of both worlds. The city had hired him in the hopes that he could do something about that.

A small park by the station lay below grade and isolated, ensuring that only people with something to conceal would enter it. Nowhere was there a spot to stop and take stock, or talk to anyone.

It didn't seem that there would be any spot for a ghost either, but at least a dozen people coming through the square in the past few weeks had experienced...something. Frederick could see it in the data, and he always followed the data.

Anyone could stand around and watch people. What Frederick brought to urban-space planning was measurement and experiment. He collected huge amounts of data on individual reactions and impressions, all tied together with precise GPS locations.

Of course, it was easy to get distracted by those people instantly willing to wire themselves up and tell you their thoughts. Those were the people whose opinions you pretty much knew already. He was interested in everyone else. He found ways to gain the participation of older people, suspicious immigrants, poor people worried about being hustled out of the space. Once he persuaded them, people found it all fun, and he ended up with a high rate of cooperation.

Some volunteers got galvanic skin response sensors, heart-rate monitors, and myoelectric connections that measured muscle tension. Others wore glasses that detected iris dilation and contraction. Still others participated through their cell phones, responding to randomly timed beeps. In cooperation with local businesses, he could even offer incentives to respond to each beep. Some people were issued water-soluble stickers to stick on surfaces when they felt a certain mood — joy, puzzlement, nostalgia. A light rain would stain entire areas pink or purple, showing shared emotions.

People don't stop. They don't think. Almost everything they think they perceive is actually the recall of cached impressions. Their reactions to things come long before they have a conscious thought about them. They are concerned for their own safety, and won't enter public spaces they can't look into first.

So most of the reactions to what he had identified as a ghost were not conscious. People slowed down, stepped aside, shivered, or paused, seemingly to let something go by, without looking after it. He could see the patterns on the movement map of the square, but on their own they didn't mean anything.

Were they an unpredicted response to the experiments his team was performing here? In addition to seeing reactions to the space as it was, Frederick needed to see reactions to the space as it might be. So, once he and his team had a baseline, they rearranged things. They played with traffic signal timing, the color of the overhead lights at night...and the very configuration of the wide, windswept space.

Over the years, Frederick had refined a set of movement influencers: swooping concrete shapes covered with climate-appropriate plantings that changed pedestrian traffic patterns, cast shadows across the pavement at different times of day, and blocked sound from certain directions. Subtle changes in their number and arrangement could dramatically affect how long people lingered, and whether they were willing to talk to strangers. Experience had shown that, once his pieces were out in the space, they quickly receded into the background. Passersby no longer consciously perceived them. Once that happened, Frederick could move them around, like a kid at the beach building dams and channels, and watch the way life flowed.

As he glanced at them now, he caught a glint of white. They were a popular target of graffiti. He'd have someone check that out tomorrow.

But the ghost encounters, if that's what they were, did not really seem to correlate with the movement of the influencers. This was particularly true of the reactions that rose to the level of consciousness. The team now had thousands of spoken and written reactions to the various space configurations. Frederick had selected the most significant of these, and called them up now on his phone.

Some were spoken:

"Little running away...who...?"

"Chilly. Little chilly. Like grave cold and...hey, I see you. I see...no...."

"Look out! Oh, please...oh, okay. My mistake, sorry. Please disregard."

"Girl in faded red coat. Too warm. Hey...she must have gone into that store...."

Some were text:

"grl rd dress run stop stp stp gn"

"tchd me on the face on my face icicles"

He looked at the physiological responses for those people who had worn sensors. Skin and muscles indicated tension, pupils contracted, heart rates increased. Even if it was imaginary, their bodies acted as if it were real. The manifestations occurred mostly in the later afternoon and early evening, when there was still a little light in the sky, usually on this side of the square and even on a couple of streets beyond.

Whatever people were perceiving seemed to come from that direction, so Frederick headed that way.

THE NEIGHBORHOODS around Carver Square were a pleasant jumble. No one had planned what was back here, and the arrangement of buildings was completely noncompliant with any zoning regulation. Factory buildings, storage facilities, and an old Quonset hut were scattered amid workers' cottages, triple deckers, infilled apartment buildings, and a few more substantial houses.

He heard the sound of kids playing, quite clearly, but they didn't seem to be anywhere near him. Then a woman laughed. It was a quiet, intimate sound. But he was alone here.

A chilly wind sprang up. There was a clinking sound, like a line against a metal flagpole, but he couldn't see where it came from.

Light flashed in his eyes. He looked up, then finally saw where the setting sun reflected from a dormer. A few seconds, and it faded. Darkness was coming.

He heard kid sounds again. The laughter of little girls, from around the corner of the brick factory building, with its heavy lintels, everything seeming more massive than it needed to be.

He walked past the corner, careful not to look like he was lurking. He'd gotten close to serious trouble in the past, hanging around with no visible goal. People noticed rhythms of motion.

There was no one there, just a line of new townhouses, trendily set at angles to the street. Where had they gone?

But there was where the girls must have been: a playground. The climbing equipment was supposed to look like a pirate ship, with a prow and a line of portholes that were actually mirrors. Next to it was a sandbox.

It was raked smooth, boats and trucks pushed over to the side.

A tiny hand thrust out of the sand, its fingers splayed.

He took a startled step toward it. It was an infant's hand...a doll's. His heart was pounding.

He glanced behind him. Far off down the street was a single small figure, running. He thought it was a girl, wearing a long coat, but didn't know why he had that impression. She disappeared into the gathering dusk.

Frederick didn't know if it was an entire buried doll, or just the detached arm. He wasn't about to exhume it. Leave it for tomorrow's games.

The brick backside of a building formed one side of the little playground. He looked up at it, wondering at how it must have reflected the sound of the voices to him, around the corner.

A single watery spot of light glimmered there, then disappeared.

He spent an hour or so wandering the neighborhood, examining roofs crowded with decorations, finials, bent flashing letting water in to rot the rafters. Sunlight could have reflected on that spot, at that moment, only from a few places, but he couldn't find what had been responsible.

He returned to the square.

He watched traffic lights change, and the pedestrians and cars interact. What happened when someone got stuck in the left-turn lane into the shopping center parking lot? What stimulated the mob of pedestrians to move against the light? Watched too attentively, the whole thing was nerve-wracking. People in the area were bad drivers, but even worse pedestrians, and terrifying bicyclists.

No one dodged a ghost, and Frederick didn't see one himself. Something had pulled him back to the square when he should have been done, but he couldn't remember what it had been. Time to get to the hotel, grab a drink, call it a day.

He was turning to get to his own car when he saw it. Someone had carved a single vertical groove along the edge of a concrete movement influencer, and then lined it with ground gypsum that glittered white in the lights of the cars as they turned into the shopping center parking lot.

He'd noticed the glint before, but hadn't thought about who must have put it there.

He must have been thinking of Andrea the entire time. It had been right there in that Dunkin' Donuts that he had spent all those hours feeling like a loser because her career was going so well.

Now his was going well too. She had to know he was in town — it was a high-profile project, and there had been a couple of big articles in the local papers. He knew she lived in a nearby suburb, because the first thing he had done when he got the contract was look up her address.

He hadn't called. He told himself now that he'd been waiting for her to do it. She was the one who had ruined everything. Shouldn't she be the one who called?

Now, he supposed, she had.

That single precise carved line turned the meant-to-be-invisible concrete balk into quite something else, something that looked planned and deliberate, a meaningful gesture. It was a sly piece of aesthetic sabotage.

As was the ghost.

2

He knew Andrea's house as soon as he saw it.

It was just like her to move out to a suburban cul-de-sac and then subvert it. Frederick wondered what the neighbors thought. He was sure she didn't.

Her house was the newest, but, among the complex roofs and giant garages, looked the oldest. It was a serene cube with a symmetrical hipped roof, its sides covered with fiber-cement clapboards. It looked just like one

of the little models she had always made, cut from basswood or pear with an X-Acto knife, disdaining all of their CAD/CAM programs. Those models had always had that precise sense of edge, without hesitation or confusion.

And, of course, some Classical detail, in this case an entry porch with severe Tuscan columns, pilasters flanking the door, with its side and top transom lights of leaded crystal.

What had she said? "Classical architecture is the application of the Orders to buildings they were never intended for."

New Englanders before the Civil War had revived Greek Ionic temple architecture for their merchants' mansions. But the Greeks had held the Doric to be a more masculine Order than the delicate Ionic, and the Romans had kicked Doric's ass and come up with Tuscan, suitable for fortifications and prisons, which got rid of the fussy fluting on the shaft, cleaning things up the way an appointed Procurator simplified local politics.

He found himself thinking like her. That hadn't happened for a while, though there had been a strange time when it happened often. He looked at the house, the transoms glowing yellow from within, set in a garden, all fine gravel between balks of rough granite, rectangular beds of miscanthus grass and bamboo, with a few glazed pots, red and blue, where annuals were just sprouting, to give a little color.

He almost turned and walked away then. Why was he here? Did he really think she had something to do with a vague, random manifestation of a ghost in Carver Square, ten miles away and in a different world?

But that groove...it was her work, he was sure. She knew what he was doing, and she had been there to comment. He couldn't ignore it.

He crunched up the front walk, pausing for a moment to admire the way the house promised but did not reveal what was inside, and rapped on the door.

"I heard you were in town," she said. "Sit. Please. Sit."

The exterior was austere and edged, but the interior was luxurious, colored, even a bit barbaric. She'd upholstered the loveseat with an improbable shade of purple velvet and thrown thick tapestry blankets over wingback chairs and sofa so that their folds lay as rich and insistent

as the background of a still life. It was a luxury that looked like it languished for want of anyone capable of enjoying it.

Well, *he* was capable of enjoying it. He sank down into the couch and gathered the blankets around himself: he'd counted on warming up when he came in but the room was cold.

She looked down at him, large hands dangling by her sides. After all these years she was still growing into her looks: long face, hooked nose, dark eyes, dark hair with just a hint of red. He looked for dye — that couldn't be an easy color to match — but it looked just the way he remembered it. He wondered if it still smelled the same.

"You heard I was in town," he said.

"Well, yes. Of course. Big news. That's an interesting problem you have there, making Carver Square livable."

"You still don't approve."

"I don't think my approval matters."

He couldn't take it anymore.

"Andrea. You went down there in the middle of the night and managed to carve a groove along the edge of one of our pieces. Lined it with gypsum crystal too, like some kind of class demo."

"Did I?" She finally sat on the edge of a narrow chair and fiddled with the hem of her long skirt. It revealed her knees, carefully pressed together.

On an oak side table sat a bowl of pears. One of them was a light, and glowed low red on the side of her face. Were the others real, or wax? Frederick tried to figure it out without picking one of them up, but failed.

"You know you — "

"Yes!" she said. "Yes. Okay. I did. I just got irritated that everyone was meant to ignore them. Nothing should be ignored. So I added...a bit of grace. Some beauty isn't going to hurt anything, is it, Fred? It's not going to deform your process."

"There's more to it, Andrea. You know that. I can deal with a little art. I'm tough that way. I'm sure you remember. But people are seeing things there. Feeling things. Sometimes they're even afraid. I have to regard that as sabotage."

"It's not sabotage if there is really something there," she said absently.

"Come on!" He stood up, as furious as if they were still together. "I should have known you wouldn't play it straight. Even now."

"Oh, Fred. Please." She didn't move, though his move might have seemed threatening. "It's just that...I haven't liked the work I've been doing lately. Not at all. So it was nice to do a little thing that made a difference. It was like getting back to the kind of thing we used to do."

He looked around the house. "Looks like they've been paying you well enough. All those high-profile commissions. You're much in demand, I hear."

She shrugged, which raised her breasts. Irritated at himself for responding, he sat back down and pulled the blankets over him.

"It's all museums and memorials," she said. "M&Ms. A quick taste, and that's it. If you taste it again, it's just the same thing, only more cloying and annoying. A museum has to show up on the city's tourism brochures and make people want to go drop money there. A memorial's got to give it up to you right then and there, or people can't tell what it's for. It has to give it up in a photograph, on the website, behind the TV announcer's shoulder in a quick shot. It can't be allowed to hold anything back, or people get irritated with it, like it's playing tricks on them, being coy. So you end up with the pornography of mourning."

She did get commissions all over the world, he knew. A textile museum in Slovakia. A school-shooting memorial in Ohio. A gallery for a late-twentieth-century collection in Wyoming. A memorial to a terrorist bomb in Salonika. All well covered, well documented, well respected. And he had seen her hand in them, as well as he could given the committee intervention in any such process, the concerned neighbors, the pressure groups, the parents suing whoever involved had the most money, the zoning boards. To get art through that maze without knocking all the corners off took more than artistic ability, it took intensity, skill, and stubbornness.

"I liked that tower," he said. "In Ohio."

"It was supposed to be taller. But, thank you. We did pretty well." She looked at him, he thought maybe for the first time since she had opened the door and seen him standing there. "Oh, God, Fred. Sometimes it seems that the more people I'm trying to memorialize, the less it matters. That was a horrible day when all those kids died."

"A single suffering child pulls better for a charity than an entire population of them," Frederick said. "But it's worse than that. If you

include statistics along with the picture and story of that one child, the amount donated goes down. Same child, same story, just with some additional information about the number starving, orphaned, suffering. It cuts off an emotional channel, and you...care less."

She was about to say something to him then. But then she shook her head. "You were always good at understanding why people do things. What have you been working on lately?"

He was sure she knew, but he told her about a few recent projects, mostly mixed car and pedestrian layouts in the West and South. Developer projects. He was proud of them, and his team had a great reputation, but he found himself pointing up their architectural merits as he described them. That was ridiculous: they didn't have any architectural merits. They were always immense pastiches, symbols of past glories intended to be clearly visible at a minimum speed of thirty miles an hour.

"I don't see you in them," she said. "I was driving around Arizona and was in Scottsdale — "

"Kinsman Station. Sure, we did that. The traditional-styled residential area behind it too. Fifteen hundred units of low-rise multifamily, one thousand of single family, with xeriscaping and sidewalks. It won some environmental awards."

"It was quite...attractive," she said cruelly. "But, like I said, I didn't see you there."

"I wasn't there. I wasn't supposed to be there. I study what people do, Andrea. I see the unconscious way they bear themselves in the world. They turn right when they enter a building, and don't look to the left. You could put, I don't know, a Van Eyck to the left there, *Man in a Red Turban*, whatever, and even lovers of art won't look there, won't see it." She didn't seem impressed that he'd remembered one of her favorite paintings. "People dislike having other people brush behind them to get to something, and won't enter a location where that might happen. They won't know that's why they made the decision, so they can't explain it to you when you ask them. But if you design a space that doesn't take things like that into account, it will fail, and no one will be happy if they have to go into it. It's about how people react, not about me."

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "I thought I saw you there the other day.

Those big chess pieces of yours, trying to checkmate everyone coming through Carver Square. Fred's Opening. Irresistible."

Did she really always light her rooms so that, against that purple-gray wall, that one glowing pear in a bowl of maybe-real-maybe-fake decoys shining on the side of her face, she looked dark-eyed and desirable?

Between them it had always been perfect, except when it was unbearable.

"I do put them out there," Frederick said. "And I do play them. But it's so that everyone else can win. Once I see how the space works, I erase myself. Like backing out of a room while vacuuming a carpet." He looked around. "Do you still do that?"

Of course she did. She'd cheated on him for what must have been months, and he genuinely had had no idea. Not because he was dull or in denial. They'd had their fights, and he himself had come close to slipping with a graduate student in his program, so it wasn't that he couldn't accept the possibility. But he never had a clue. Not an odd receipt, a misarranged pillow, an hour or two of a day mysteriously unaccounted for. She'd polished every joint in her life until it was invisible.

They went on vacation to London, crawling around Stuart and Georgian buildings: Inigo Jones, Christopher Wren, John Soane, John Nash. She analyzed the buildings, he examined their urban surrounds.

The day they parted to go to opposite sides of the whispering gallery in St. Paul's was the last time they had seen each other. He'd come back from that trip alone. She'd gone on to Prague.

"Andrea," he said. "I know about your ghost."

"No," she said. "You just think you do. Let's go for a ride."

3

THE FIRST TIME Frederick met Andrea, she saved his life.

That's what he always said later, anyway. The chunk of plaster would most likely just have bruised his shoulder.

And, not mentioned, it was her poor construction that led to the problem in the first place.

He was done with his semester project, a study of post-last-call fights between the habitués of three different bars in a South Shore town. The town would reject his solution to redirect traffic patterns so they would run into each other less, and went for glaring lighting and Vivaldi blasted from speakers. But he was walking around to see who was still desperately charretting, so that he could feel superior, before going out to meet friends for beer.

The design studio was a series of staggered platforms beneath a sloping glass canopy. It always gave the maximum sunlight during the day, but had a slightly creepy, overexposed look at night, as if they were on display.

"Look out!" a woman yelled.

A strong arm yanked him out of the way, and something heavy smashed at his feet. Befuddled, he looked down to find a shattered visage sneering up at him: a giant plaster face, its forehead nothing but crumbled chunks.

Then he looked up at the model for the face: a woman with close-cropped reddish hair, strong shoulders, big hands. She wasn't looking at him. She was looking down at the shattered face.

"Could you get me a bin?" she said. "This is kind of a mess."

She was working at something of a Greek temple. But instead of classic Orders, it had limbs. That made it look like some kind of multi-limbed animal, but the limbs were human, carefully sculpted arms and legs, each one, he now saw, individual, with specific muscles, veins, hairs. The temple's roof was a back, with a line of spinal bumps. The front pediment was a chest, one nipple male, the other on a pert female breast.

"Please," she said. "This is really late. I guess I'll have to do without a head."

"Use it like this," he said. "Broken. Put it inside, give it a light, so you can just see it, if you peek in."

She glanced back at her structure. "That's not a half-bad idea. But I still have a lot of crap on the floor here. Speed it up."

He found a disposal bin and wheeled it back to her. By that time she had taken his suggestion, putting the face inside the temple, where the cult statue would have stood, and removing the erect penis that had stood

there. As he came up, she was holding it in her hand, looking down at it thoughtfully.

The sight made him think that maybe he should skip the beers tonight, and get to something else.

"Modeling this was a real bitch," she said, and threw it into the bin.

"Anyone I know?" He was up on rumors on most of the people, who was sleeping with who, who had work, who was falling apart under the stress of the constant assignments. But this one...he realized he knew almost nothing about Andrea.

"No."

Then he found himself standing there with nothing to do. Had he misread the signals?

"You're done with your project, right?" she said. "Don't stand around gloating. Jake and Rajiv must be waiting."

Later he realized that her knowing who he was meeting meant she'd been paying more attention to him than he ever had to her.

They slept together a month later. He'd taken to walking through the park area beneath the studios, where people sat in the summer, and looking up at the sloping black glass, seeing if her light was on. He'd counted, and knew exactly which workspace was hers. It was a drizzly night with a sky that pressed down low and her light shone out alone. Nothing was due, and Frederick was on his way to a party.

Maybe that was the problem. Andrea was popular with other students, considered friendly enough, but distant. Frederick himself liked hanging in the bar with his buddies and watching the game, and, he admitted it, was kind of loud. He supposed his voice echoed all through that stupid studio space, so that she could hear whatever inane things he was saying without him even knowing it.

She was crying at her desk, surrounded by sculptures, carved capitals, ink architectural renderings with delicate watercolor washes. She wore a long dark dress that left her wide shoulders exposed and looked like the spirit of Civilization mourning her own demise.

Looming above her was the Fleshly Temple. She'd been at it, adding, removing, detailing, something he'd learn was characteristic of her. Despite her innate sense of the precise gesture, she often couldn't leave things well enough alone and worried at them until they were in tatters.

But the temple changes weren't just repairs or afterthought improvements to the concept. The temple had been made of the firm flesh of youth when she submitted it, but now it had the bulges, sags, and age spots of someone much older. Then he realized that the camera clamped to the stanchion above must be to take a picture of it at regular intervals as it aged, lost tone, and ceased to be sexy.

Frederick was young. He was in no way ready for that.

She looked up at him. "I don't really have anything to save you from tonight, Frederick."

"That's okay. I can stand not being a dick in distress."

It wasn't that funny, but she laughed as if it was. She'd been dumped, she said. He'd never even known she was involved with someone. No one ever knew what she was working on, or if she had any job offers. He found that he wanted to know. But more than he wanted to know, he wanted to be one of her secrets.

When he saw her the next morning at Starbucks, it was like she barely knew him. She was irritable and short with him. Even a little rude.

He could have let it go then. Once didn't matter. Once was the trial size. It didn't oblige you to anything.

But he went to work on her. He charmed her. He wooed her. He wanted to see her melt.

He never saw that, but they became a couple. She did not keep him a secret, and he found himself vaguely disappointed by that. But they both immersed themselves in each other's work. Back then, they made up the hidden side of each other's obsessions. He placed her designs in a human context, and she made him toe the mark in designing the best-looking thing that solved the problem.

She got her first big commission just before graduation, and moved quickly from success to success.

He had trouble finding work, and wound up temping for marketing departments, doing brochures and postcards advertising various business services. He was just okay at those things, but he priced himself cheap, and always had work.

In between temp jobs he spent his time hanging out, in bars, looking through old jeans in the Goodwill, and eavesdropping on old ladies, in the Dunkin' Donuts at a table with addicts waiting for their methadone dose at the clinic.

She said the thing that annoyed her most was they had such a nice apartment, but neither of them spent much time in it. Someday they'd maybe need more space and they'd have to move, get a place with a yard. He, at least, should have been getting the benefit of the harbor views and the chef's kitchen while they lived there.

4

"Stop, stop!" she said.

He slammed on the brakes. "What?"

They were in an edge district: gas stations, auto parts distributors, equipment-rental places. The sidewalks were deserted under the buzzing yellow streetlights.

"Didn't Potage used to be over there?" She pointed at an older brick structure, which now housed a bakery.

"What?" For a while, that had been their default restaurant. The owner would always get them a table for four so that they could spread out their layouts and renderings and argue over them. "I think so."

Potage. Slightly Americanized French provincial food, lots of vin rouge in cheap decanters that mimicked cut glass, fresh rosemary and tarragon. He looked toward the light of the bakery and found himself remembering, not any particular night, but the way they had been then.

"Is that why we stopped?" Frederick said.

"No. No! Don't you remember?"

She got out of the car. He turned off the ignition and followed.

"Remember what?"

"When we killed that girl."

"What?"

"We thought it was a girl, I'm not sure why...nothing we found was from a girl...but we both saw her."

He looked along the concrete gutter and remembered. They really had both seen her.

It had been a drizzly night. He'd drunk a little more than he should have to be driving. She brought it up later, but she'd watched him drink and hadn't said anything.

She'd wanted to talk about things, like a job she wanted him to take, and whether they would always go along the way they were now, just the two of them, with their tasks and their dinners and their favorite shows.

"This discussion," he said, "it's like the Miss America pageant."

"How, exactly?"

"It keeps coming back, even though no one really wants it to."

"I didn't know our future was such a tiresome topic."

"I don't know. Maybe it isn't." He poured another glass of wine, slopping over the edge.

"It's not like it's such a terrible job."

"I didn't say it was terrible. I just said I didn't want to take it."

She looked at him. "You already told them 'no,' didn't you?"

He poured again. "Yes. I'll find one that's better for me. You know I'm good enough."

"I do. You know I do. I just worry that employers might not think so after you've been out of work for long enough."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

Had she mentioned she had an important new client that night? A guy from a foundation that wanted to build a little memorial to some nuns who had been killed in central Africa. A serious man. She'd made a joke about how he really seemed like someone who had missed the priesthood, no surprise he had a position with the foundation, he had that front cheeriness but back remoteness that she thought all the real ones had. "Father Client," she'd called him, not even giving him a name. That little "he's handsome but I really think he's gay"-style forward defense really should have alerted him.

He'd blown that dinner, without even knowing how important it was.

Then, sensing she was as tense and unhappy as he was, he'd pulled out of the gravel parking lot and accelerated down this road, trying to make that light, way down there, even as she was telling him it didn't matter how long you had to wait after it changed, it didn't matter —

And a little girl had run right in front of the car. Andrea gasped, Frederick slammed on the brakes, they slewed to the side, up on the curb, and almost into the light pole. The engine in their old Audi stopped on its own. For an endless instant there was silence. Then they both untangled themselves from their seat belts and flung open their doors.

The street was silent, except for the thumping and laughter of some far-away party.

"Oh my God." Frederick knelt.

"Get off her, get off her. Fred, we...pull the car back."

"But there's nothing — "

"Pull it back!"

She'd never screamed at him like that before. He got in, tried a couple of times, restarted the engine, put the car into reverse, and pulled back slowly.

There was nothing there. His headlights shone on the potholed edge of the street, with its traces of winter sand. But there was no sign of anyone.

Andrea stared down wide-eyed, as if seeing a stream of blood running slowly down the gutter to the sewer grate.

"I saw...." It took her a second to catch her breath. "What did you see?"

Frederick was no longer sure. Had it been her gasp that made him think he'd seen something?

He'd never felt a sense of relief this great. Not just because he hadn't killed someone, he realized, but because he had enough alcohol in his system to show up. He'd be arrested. It wasn't just an accident if you'd been drinking. He tried to feel ashamed of thinking that, but failed.

A few cars had driven past, but no one had stopped.

Frederick walked along the gutter, back toward the Potage parking lot, looking along the curb. Andrea watched him, but said nothing.

A little bit farther on, past the abandoned gas station, he found something. He knelt down and, reluctantly, reached out to touch it. They'd seen...whatever they'd seen, much farther up. This couldn't have been it. This wasn't a person.

He picked up the wad of old clothes. It must have fallen off a homeless person's shopping cart, or something. It really was wadded tightly. He could see jeans, a red wool jacket, a polyester blouse with a stain on the front....

"We must have seen this." He ignored how unpleasant the damp and cold clothes felt in his hand.

She looked at him. In the reflected glow of the headlights, she looked

like something come from beyond death herself, with deep, dark eyes, pale skin, and wild hair.

"We saw it and it made us think — "

"Oh, that poor girl," she said. "That poor girl."

Much later, he woke to hear Andrea sobbing. He put his arms around her to console her but she pushed him away. He lay awake and listened to her sobs stop as she fell asleep.

And now she stood at that same spot, the replacement halide streetlights brighter than those old sodium vapor ones that had given the scene such an eerie washed-out look, with none of the colors right.

"After that night, I searched around," she said. "Did a lot of research. Old newspapers. Personal reminiscences. Even old ladies at the Goodwill — I remembered you telling me about that." She gave him a brief smile, which he did not return. "I had to figure out who might have died here. A little girl. I was sure it was a little girl."

"Andrea. For heaven's sake." He wasn't sure why he was arguing with her. "It was just some clothes someone had dumped. We were both...in a mood."

"I guess we were. Fred. Dear Fred."

"What?" It came out more sharply than he intended, but she really was driving him crazy.

"I'm sorry."

Let her have her stupid ghost, if it was even hers. It was stupid to have sought her out. A ghost was a feature, something that made the space interesting. He'd never thought about the myths and legends that inhabited a designed environment, but, of course, the software was just as important as the hardware.

"That apology is a bit late, isn't it?" he said.

She looked down the street toward the lights of Carver Square, just a few blocks away, across the heavy railway bridge. "It happened in 1906. I found the newspaper. Just a brief notice, 'Sad Streetcar Accident.' The junior people who write those news items about unknown people had not yet learned to use the word 'tragic' to describe random death. A six-year-old girl named Kathleen McGorman, seventh of seven children of an Irish housebuilder named Connor who did most of his work here in the neighborhood."

"You think we saw the ghost of a little girl who died in 1906?" It wasn't like Andrea to be mystical. She had once said that she didn't really believe in anything you couldn't stub your toe against.

"I've stood on a stairway Connor laid the year after Kathleen's death," Andrea said. "It didn't look any different than any other stairway. It didn't contain any grief. Or, rather, it didn't contain any more grief than any other set of stairs, because someone has always lost something."

They found themselves walking toward the lights of the square.

"Take a look," she said. "People forget things, and then they come up through the asphalt."

It had been a particularly rough winter. Potholes were deep. At the busy turn into the square, the asphalt had worn away from the underlying paving stones. Two parallel lines took the corner more sharply than the traffic did. It took Frederick a couple of seconds to recognize what they were: streetcar tracks. When cars had come in, the street had been covered with asphalt. The foundation of hand-laid granite pavers had been superior to any conglomerate that could have been poured, so they just left it all, not even pulling out the tracks, now rusted and pitted. They'd simply paved over it.

"Oh, God," he said. "I hope the paving crews get here before anyone pays attention to it."

"Why?"

"Because then they'll make me, I don't know, stick it in somehow. These neighborhood committees love historical references. Not just plaques, but real pieces of old buildings, exhumed foundations, whatever. No one really pays attention to that crap. Everyone's just trying to get through their day. That's all. And my job is to make that day pleasant, not to lecture them about whatever forgotten thing used to be where they're walking."

The tracks were too rusty to gleam, but Frederick had a momentary sense that they did, that a light shone along a clean length of metal. His scalp prickled, but the feeling was gone almost before he had it.

"I even saw a picture of her, with her whole family," Andrea said. "A neighborhood lady had a whole collection, picked up at yard sales. She said her grandmother had played with Kathleen as a girl. And she was just a girl, nothing else. Her parents had put her in a nice dress for the picture. The

photographer didn't have enough light, so he took a long exposure. Kathleen moved her eyes while the shutter was open. Everyone else was nice and clear, and they figured no one would notice, or no one cared because she was the youngest. But if you look closely, you see that her eyes are blank marbles."

"She was already fated to be dead?" Frederick said. "I'll bet everyone in the picture is dead by now."

Andrea refused to be irritated. "I think Kathleen's who we saw that night, on our way home from Potage. We ran her over again."

There really wasn't much to say to that, Frederick thought.

"Whoever had laid out the tracks hadn't done a very good job." She pointed at a sharp curve where the tracks rounded the corner into the square. "Sight lines were bad, so the driver couldn't see the people waiting in the square until he was right on them. And the wheels squealed, every time. People complained, but it was too late."

"People romanticize the things," Frederick said. "But that's what they were like."

"It was how people around here got into town. This was the edge of things, back then. A week before Kathleen's death, a cat had gotten stuck under a moving streetcar. It panicked and tried to get out between the wheels. It didn't make it. It got cut in half. The boys talked about the guts, the way they had spilled out. Cut in half. They talked about it for years, decades even, at school, one class passing it on to the next. My local informant had even heard about it. They talked about it more than they talked about any human's death. More than Kathleen's, for sure.

"It was the last run of the night. The car barn was just up the avenue, another half-mile or so. The driver was probably anxious to get into the barn and go home. He came around that corner too fast. He probably figured no one would be out by that hour. But there had been some kind of speaker at the Masonic Temple, an inspirational Catholic come from missions abroad. Something fun to do, so a lot of the neighborhood had gone.

"Kids were running around. And some of the boys started chasing the girls. And it got a bit rough. Rougher than we'd allow around here nowadays. Younger kids got into the game too, not really knowing what it was about, and some boys started chasing Kathleen. Maybe she was the

prettiest, maybe she was a bit slow and kids made fun of her, maybe it was random. No one can say now, and believe me, I heard every version."

How much time had Andrea spent around Carver Square? She'd always been obsessive about detail, but this was getting ridiculous.

"Her mother was talking to a bunch of friends on the other side of the streetcar tracks. Kathleen ran toward her, to get away from the boys. She ran in front of the streetcar, cut it too close, and got hit. It knocked her right to her mother's feet, where she died. And that was it. The boys ran away. Some of them felt bad, but they really hadn't done anything they didn't do every day. She was buried three days later."

They walked through the current configuration of movement influencers, and she looked up at the concrete shapes, the things not meant to be seen. "Don't you ever want to impose your vision on things, Fred? Stamp yourself on the face of reality?"

"I do. By finding out what people feel, and tweaking it. You think that's easy? It's not. I let people tell their stories."

"But the architect's story is important too," she said. "One of the things that remains when everything else is forgotten is the architect's joy in his creation. Remember what it says there, on Christopher Wren's tomb in St. Paul's: *si monumentum requiris, circumspice*. 'If you need a memorial, look around.' I've always been impressed by the serene pride of that."

"Andrea." He was miserable, and she heard it. She turned around and looked at him. "It was there...you told me there. In the Whispering Gallery. Right under the dome. Tourists were all around me, saying stupid stuff to each other, laughing. And you said — "

"I told you I was cheating on you. With a client."

"Why?" He had tears in his eyes, as if it had just happened. "Why do it like that? I couldn't even see your eyes."

"It just came out. Like I was whispering it into a well, or something. Like no one would hear. It had become...intolerable. All of it."

"Well, I guess you no longer had to tolerate it after that."

They had been getting somewhere with each other, with the ghost, with what she had learned, but now they stood stiffly in the cold night air, late commuters pouring out of the subway station past them, as if they were just two more obstacles to getting home.

"Why her?" Frederick said. "Why did you pick her to bring back?"

"Bring...I didn't bring anyone back, Fred."

"Of course you did. You built a memorial here, to that long-dead individual little girl. I don't know how — it's your talent. Little things, here and there. A reflector on a dormer. A spot where someone gets distracted and in that moment thinks they see someone running out into traffic. I doubt anyone ever 'sees' a ghost."

"I did," she said.

He looked at her.

"One morning I was here," Andrea said. "Just after you guys showed up for your studies. I admit it. I came to see what you were up to. It was early morning, all gray. A couple of people were in line at the Dunkin' for their coffee before going to work, but that was about it. And I saw her."

"Who? Kathleen?"

"Go ahead and laugh. She wore a red coat, all faded. A hand-me-down, washed too many times. Lace-up boots. She ran..." She pointed. "She ran out there. Right into traffic. I screamed. But I looked again. Nobody. The car I thought had hit her stopped at the light. I tapped on the window to see if he'd seen anything, but he drove through the red to get away from me. He almost got T-boned, which would have served him right...."

"You saw her."

"Okay. Maybe I didn't, just like I didn't see her the first time. But she was there, even if I didn't see her. And I decided she should be commemorated. Remembered. She was nobody. I know that. She was just a girl. She didn't perform miracles. She wasn't a saint. She was from a big family, and most of the kids grew up to do well. Their great-grandchildren live around here, and out in the suburbs, and in Dubai. None of them remembers her. How many people died between 1906 and now?"

"Just listing the arguments you know I'm going to make doesn't make them less valid. And I don't believe you."

"So what do you think?"

"I think you created her."

"Really."

"You don't just see a ghost standing in front of you. Even if they're real, that's just made up. It's almost invisible signs. A chill. A glimpse of reflection in a window. A glimmer of light on a brick wall. A moment of

silence directly behind you, as if someone is standing there. And it's not just individual, not something just one person feels. Whatever odd quirk a space has gets communicated from one person to another, unconsciously. People react to what others are feeling. They add their own feelings to the mix. And, pretty soon, you have a ghost. Or maybe the Virgin Mary. You haven't seen the Virgin Mary?"

"No."

Frederick knew he should shut up. "I pissed you off. Working here. Back near our old place, where we used to live and be so happy. Changing things, making them work. So you decided to set this up, this ghost, to screw with me. You want people walking through the space to feel a chill, like someone's walking on their grave? Is that your critique of urbanism? I have to say, I never saw you as a critic."

"You saw her," she said.

"No. I didn't see her. I'll admit, I got a chill, here and there. But I didn't see Kathleen McGorman."

Sometimes when a gap in the noisy traffic coincided with a subway train going under them, they could hear its roar all around them. It seemed so loud when it happened that it was startling they didn't hear it all the time.

She reached up and touched the hulking concrete block, with the vertical white line she had carved into it. "You want to rearrange things so she disappears."

"I make spaces that are comforting to people," Frederick said. "Not terrifying."

"There's nothing terrifying about her," Andrea said. "She's just a lost little girl."

He barely heard the last words, because she was already walking away from him, head down, not looking at the traffic.

"Andrea!"

A puff of air directed by the surrounding buildings blew grit into his face. A loose shopping bag grabbed at his feet as he ran after her.

A car came around the corner, past the subway station ventilator, flaring xenon high-intensity-discharge bulbs.

Andrea became nothing more than a shrunken silhouette, and then, blinded, he couldn't even see that. He stumbled forward.

He heard a scream, had a sense of someone small running past him and into the path of the lights. He grabbed for the girl. He felt his fingers graze something, some fabric, some piece of a long-ago night, but they seemed incredibly stretched out, the tips distant mountains, heavy and inert.

Then he felt Andrea's hips in his hands. He yanked her out of the way of the car and they both stumbled to the curb. At the last moment Frederick lost his balance and fell to his knees. The car's horn blared past them, and then was gone, the driver not even slowing down.

Andrea looked down at him. "We each deserve a memorial, Fred. But if we each get one, parking will be hell."

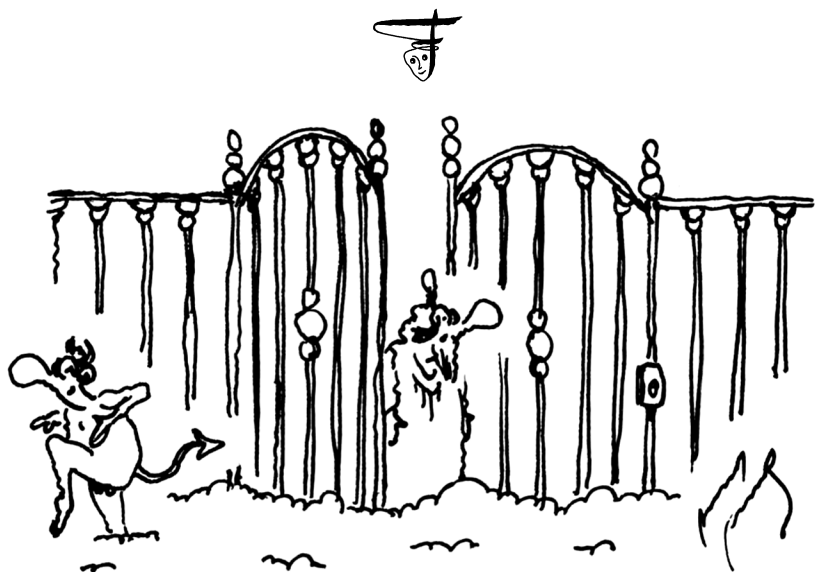
"I'll keep this one," Frederick said.

"You don't have to."

"Yes I do."

She helped him to his feet. "Thanks for saving my life there."

The subway roared beneath them, and again, for an instant, he felt the breath of the streetcar move past.



"That's funny, I'm sure I heard the doorbell."