

Gavin Rome's in Ice, a hunk of prose by Joey Madia (originally published in the *Poetic Inhalation* webzine, 2004)

I'm cold.

You're cold.

I'm cold.

Yeah, you're cold.

I'm sooo cold.

SO SHUT UP. It's not like the talking warms you.

My breath is ice—it feels like there's frozen cotton in my cheeks.

Exactly. So SHUT UP.

How am I supposed to type if I can't feel my fingers?

Just use your mind. That's the whole point.

[Confused silence]

Am I dead?

Yes. You're dead...you've been dead for quite some time. So SHUT UP. And get back to work.

But I'm sooo cold...

It's hard to say just how these things begin. You're walking down the street with a ratta-ta-tizzle heartbeat banging inside your chest and then it happens:

A single beat, breaking out of the march-step rhythm of the others, stretches itself, triggering a long-dormant part of your brain to throw out a new thought—a cortex pencil sketch, a razor slit of new poetic syntax, a spire of repeatedly heating and cooling magma poking up thru a J. Joyce cloud bank heavy with helix inspirations and twisting spirals of heretofore unsequenced language.

It feels so good, you go with it—let it instruct you, dictate how you spend your wide-eyed waking slabs of unmonitored time—long Quasimodo hours hunched over yellow legal pads and electronic keyboards turned black and grimy with your catch-a-bite-while-you're-typing fingertips.

The phone unanswered, bills unpaid, daily hygiene unscrubbingly left for later, and if you pay due homage on the slick-with-slime altar of your carved-wood Muse, the blips keep coming and the 20lb, 90 bright fills.

You produce new works, dance the iron folly of submit—[reject]—revise—submit and finally someone with a little IN gets your prosey pages into the printer's ink-stained circles and you're published.

Set. Goal. Match.

You're a writer now. And baby, ain't you fine. Things even out—you gain direction and momentum, even as you lope along on a fairly set trajectory, life and goals if not acid-etched in precious metals, then at least drawn in wavy lines in the sand above the tide line, and with enough medication, EST, and creative productivity, you eventually find yourself able to cope with the little forks in the road, the bees in the bonnet, the occasional ice-cold-poker-in-the-ass review—the slimy spots of rot on the otherwise perfect peach. It becomes a point of honor that your little makeshift boat, your hollowed out tree-trunk, is able to “go with the flow.”

The energy flow, the waterfall flow, your long-suffering wife's menstrual flow...

She's a person, you scold yourself (in between the painstaking microsurgery of comma insertion), and because of that peculiar crystalline state of being, she doesn't enjoying competing with, and mostly losing to, the stacks of inked-up paper and dog-eared card files of interviews and press clippings that represent your Purpose, Reason, confession, contribution, consternation, success, failure, wounds, scars, triumphs, proofs, and antitheses...part of you understands and part of you despises.

Such is the marriage between writer and NOT a writer.

Such is the mystic pathway of a madman with a pen.

I'm babbling—but the cherry-flavored truths that one can find in a long string of other-than-conscious words can be immeasurable.

Provided they've got the time.

Ah—*time*.

FACTS:

My name is Gavin Rome and I am 39 years old. Six years ago, in the midst of a 64-hour marathon of writing, scratching, writhing, slicing, and typing, I tripped on a Pink Pearl (the bastards have great grip) and put a pencil thru my hand.

For three days, I thought I was the Christ.

Then I rose from my head.

If I don't write, I don't breathe.

MORE FACTS:

After a yearlong courtship of consistent sex and frequent arguments, I married a New York fur-merchant's daughter. Leggy tennis-club type. A bit of a nag but otherwise tolerable. At the time (four eternally long years ago) I figured it said something about my well-roundedness, my ability to leave the creative cave, the *sanctum sanctorum* of my artistry, and be out in Society, and for her, it was a middle-finger-up to *Daaaddy* and access to a very cool, very twisted menagerie of hip young artists.

Mostly full of shit, but undoubtedly hip and cool.

I remember saying to her, the night we got engaged:

"I couldn't have written you, Kelly."

If only that were true.

Our unspoken agreement is as follows: as long as my little horror stories and demon treatises continue to rate good reviews, a "living wage," and invitations to the right parties, she won't bust my balls (too severely) about my occasional drinking binges, the three locks on my writing-room door, or the occasional lost temper and slap of her collagen-ed face when some prick hack of a journalist calls my work Trite or Cheaply Chill-Packed or worse yet, "the working man's Stephen King."

Screw them—I'm top of the box at what I do. Have been from the very first story I wrote, carefully (almost compulsively) printed in burnt umber crayon on 12 pieces of cheap, particle-pressed second-grade composition paper. I called it "Eater" and though my teacher, Mrs. Fagman, was concerned enough to call my folks to her classroom of thumbtacked laminate instructional cards for a little head-to-head, deep inside I could tell she dug it.

Though she feigned shock as per the District Handbook, I saw her hand moving under the desk.

Sex is just a spine's chill away.

It was the kind of attention and concern a kid like me craved, so I continued my crayoned compositions—story after story, gorier and darker with each passing year, until I was selling them to kids on the playground for a buck a pop and seriously considering writing as my Destiny.

It is clear to me now that I never had a choice, and the word Destiny is as inadequate as calling Wounded Knee a massacre.

I was *compelled* to write. To the very last word, it has always been that way. Like I said—If I don't write, I don't breathe.

What a gross set of ironic truths and smoky mirrored tricks *that's* turned out to be...

"You've got to be kidding," I pansy-scowled, clacking away at the keys of my computer with just enough force to let Kelly know I was pissed.

"Why should I be? All you do is sit at that stupid machine and pretend to know what's around the dark corners—this is a chance to really find out."

"I don't need to 'really find out,'" I hissed thru a half-chomped mouthful of an ice-cold breakfast burrito she had microwaved for me several hours before.

You're supposed to stop writing long enough to eat.

That's what the doctor said.

Condition of my release? Veiled threat from my agent?

Voice of the colon?

Damn my head is fuzzy...

"Are you listening to me?" I saw her hands had moved to her hips. Nice hips, but also an indication of an in-your-face exchange I just couldn't face. I was definitely onto something top-of-the-pops bizarre with my latest novel, and I was fighting the urge to push her forcefully out of the room.

Dozens of my best creations were continuously copulating and populating my newest book. It was a full four hundred pages longer than anything I had ever written (*ever*) and I still had the final section of the last chapter left to go.

Loose ends to tie up. And a young, buxom prom queen or two if I could work it in.

If maybe, just once, *they'd let me have a say.*

As the years have passed, my novels—termed Gothic by those whose job it is to put labels on every shittin' thing that passes over their laminated desks—have seemed to take their own direction, which I mostly don't mind. Especially when they sell as well as they have.

Just before Kelly had blitzkrieged into my own private Poland, fancy invitation waving in her newly manicured hand, two brand new characters—a demented Cryogenics expert and a vampiric Voodoo queen—had been birthed upon my 20" flatscreen and were now looking disapprovingly at me as if to say:

It's her or us, man. Seduce her, get rid of her, or we'll find some other writer with a deadline and a decent idea.

We'll leave you colder than that pig-flesh dripping from your chin.

"Don't go," I begged. "I'm dealing with it as best I can."

“If you are,” Kelly snapped, thinking I was talking to her, “I just can’t see it. I want you to do this for me. Paulette has been talking about this occult group for months, going on and on about the cool stuff that happens and promising to try her best to get us an invite. The world is not going to fold in on itself and collapse in a cloud of swamp gas if you don’t write for an evening. Call it research.”

“Since when are you so interested in the occult?” I asked, trying at the same time to create an atmosphere with words that would keep the scientist and voodoo vamp interested enough to stick around ‘til I could get rid of the NAG and get back to work. “You’ve never even read one of my novels. Not even a short story.”

“I always read the back covers—and the artwork is totally wild.” She was hovering over me, the edge of the invitation dangerously close to paper-cutting my cornea.

She wasn’t going to let this go.

“Fine,” I answered, watching my wonderful new creations stomping away with their hands ass-slapping their distain thru the shrinking light of the switched-off monitor. “But you know how you hate it when I stand in a room with my pen and pad, taking notes and elbowing drinks out of people’s hands.”

Though her lids were closed, I could see the eyeballs rolling around beneath them. “Just as long as you go, I don’t care if you interview every person there.”

Keep rolling those big brown eyes, Kelly, I thought.

One day they might fall out.

As she said, the invitation had come from one of Kelly’s socialite chums—one of those society tarts that fuck the lawn boy because they read a letter about it in *Cosmo*. She belonged to some mystical occult organization; one of those pseudo-secret things everyone at the tennis club knows about but no one truly believes exists. The kind of debauchery-laden, drugs-n-magick-sex funfest the devil films of the late sixties and early seventies always alluded to but never could get past the censors far enough to *show*. Many of our friends had attended their “open socials” from time to time, and my name-dropping bitter half [*sic(k)*] was going on and on about how many of them would be there tonight.

“You’ll have lots of people to bore...I mean, talk to tonight, *Love*,” she said, spreading a thick swath of mascara on her china-doll lashes.

I despise it when she calls me love. It’s like Hitler calling a Jew *Friend*, as in, “Wanna tour my ovens, Friend?”

She doesn’t just like to get her way—she takes any small acquiescence as an open invite to run roughshod over my psyche for the next several days.

“Just promise me we’re not going to get too deep into the sex and drugs thing with these people,” I asked, feeling the need to draw some type of line in the sand before the host’s castle-home came into view. “You know how I am about group anything...”

“I do indeed, *Love*,” she said, batting those Gothed-up eyelashes of hers and chewing on her bottom lip. “But maybe you’ll feel different tonight. Let’s not decide how far we’ll go ‘til we know where they’re offering to take us. After all, this is just one of their open socials—they have to decide if they like us before they ask us to join the really dark stuff.”

“In that case,” I answered, pulling into the driveway of a large Gothic-style house, “I’ll try my best to make a poor impression.”

“Knock it off.”

Kelly’s elbow buried itself deeply in my gut to cut off my giggles when the heavy oak door (complete with iron gargoyle knocker and roughly carved eye-peek crosses) was opened with a *Creeaakk* to reveal a midget in miniature Satyr’s costume.

“Welcome to the show,” he said, sounding like a nut-clipped hybrid of Hervé V. from *Fantasy Island* and Paul Stanley from Kiss.

Who the hell wouldn’t have laughed?

I bet you’re sitting there laughing right now at just the thought of it.

“You’re so inconsiderate,” Kelly said with a frown. “He can’t help it if he’s a height-challenged foreigner. How could you laugh?”

“I don’t know,” I said, rubbing my side. “Just nerves I guess.”

Gazing thru the Halloween ambience of the front hall (there was such a shortage of originality at work here, I was sure I’d come across one of those motion-activated plastic bats in the first doorway we passed), I saw my worst fears about the night were already being confirmed.

A dozen or so guests in various stages of undress were draped across cushions on the floor, the acrid-sweet smell and smoke of good weed dancing a fine cover coat over the mixing, dicing, heating, and consumption of an impressive array of high-quality drugs being attended to by richly costumed servants.

Perhaps they had invited the extras crew from *Eyes Wide Shut* and forgotten to tell my “need-to-know-these-things” wife.

Yeah—and the green shit in Gorgonzola cheese is probably parsley and thyme.

I could almost imagine Stanley Kubrick’s ghost wandering the halls and copping the ever-so-subtle tight-pantied feel as he sampled the wares.

Hell, there were enough blinking-red cameras around the room to actually *shoot* a stunningly multi-angled film and for a sublimely aural kick, hidden speakers pulsed the swirling violins and murderous horns of James Bernard’s *almost*-haunting soundtrack to Hammer’s *Scars of Dracula*.

I couldn’t decide if they were the bigger losers for *choosing* it or me for actually *knowing what it was*.

“Jesus, I could use a drink,” Kelly said, pulling me toward another miniature Satyr, this one carrying a tray of frosted martini glasses.

“I don’t think the son of God is tending bar tonight, *Love*,” I said, stepping over a pock-marked girl who looked no older than seventeen who was trying her very best to get a vein to come up in what looked like a very well-used arm.

“Why must you be such a *colossal asshole*?” Kelly asked, pushing a martini into my hand and taking two for herself. “If you screw this up for us tonight, I am gonna be *sooo* pissed. Now drink up. I think I see Paulette.”

Kelly’s friend Paulette, who came toward us with a howl that suited her she-wolf party-rental costume, interdicted herself between Kelly and I, bending her back to slurp up a tongue-full of one of my wife’s martinis.

“How are you, sweetie?” she said, kissing Kelly full on the mouth. “I am *sooo* glad you could come.” Then, half-turning to me, she added, “Gavin. How’s the new book? I hear it’s almost finished. I’m surprised you could pull yourself away.”

“I’m doing research,” I mumbled thru the lip of my glass. The martini was strong and instantly warmed my throat and stomach. A few (dozen) more of those and I would maybe be able to make it thru the night.

“We’re gonna mingle, Paulette,” Kelly said, taking me roughly by the hand. “Research?” she whispered. “Can’t you get a clue?”

“Come on, Kel,” I answered with as much defense in my voice as I dared. “These people are the clueless ones—this is such a put-on. There’s nothing happening here except a little overindulgence. I was at a critical place in my book.”

“You always are,” Kelly said, draining her second martini and flopping on a cherry-red divan. “Have a little patience and maybe we’ll get to see what’s behind the scenes.”

Kelly had a point. I mean, I wouldn’t put my best stuff on the back cover of my latest paperback (does anyone read that shit besides my wife??), so why should our unseen but otherwise gracious hosts spoil all the surprise in the front rooms of their mock Transylvanian homestead? I was willing to give her the benefit of the doubt. There were plenty of beautiful women revealing lots and lots of tanned and pampered skin and Kelly never seems to mind watching me watch.

Especially once the booze takes hold.

I was gazing intently at two petite, tight-bodied blondes sharing a pipe and a third girl’s pert, pierced breast when my vision was blocked by a purple velvet sleeve from which protruded a ruffled cuff and further along a delicate, pampered hand.

“Sorry to wreck the view.” The man-boy to which the arm belonged spoke in a voice vaguely hinting at Scandinavia and underwear that was a size or two too small. “My name is Count Eric. I own this house.”

Count Eric. A bland and unoriginal touch.

I just wanted to see some breasts.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Count Eric,” Kelly said, giving him a nice view of her black lace panties as she drunk-struggled up from the divan.

“And yours as well—Kelly,” he said, not shy about taking in a full eyeful of what my wife was inadvertently (?) offering. “And you must be Gavin.”

“Guilty as charged,” I answered, offering some bland unoriginality of my own. “Interesting party.”

“Oh, this is nothing,” Eric replied. “Just the little stretches and warm-ups before the dance begins.”

“I tooold you,” Kelly whispered excitedly. “Gavin’s being skeptical about all of this.”

“Good,” Eric said with a smile that reminded me of a French illustration I had once seen of Little Red’s wolf. “We never like the new ones to fall from grace too fast.”

Fifteen minutes later I was deep within the bowels of Eric’s home, having been volunteered by Kelly to help him “fetch more wine.”

“I love it down here,” Eric said, unlatching a wrought iron gate and switching on a light to reveal the musty rows of the wine cellar. “It reminds me of something from Poe.”

“Quoth the Merlot, *Nevermore*,” I said, not actually caring at this moment if he thought I was a shmuck or not.

“I was thinking more ‘The Cask of Amontillado’.”

“Of course you were,” I said, calling up my most disarming smile and accepting the bottles he was attempting to lay in my arms. “It was just a little joke.”

“You seem very fond of making jokes, Master Gavin,” Eric said, selecting two oddly shaped bottles from a deep recess and switching off the light. “Despite that little flaw, I think I’m going to enjoy you.”

We exited the basement in the middle of a long hallway. Instead of turning left toward the front rooms, Eric motioned me to the right, past several impressively rendered copies of Bosch and Pollock. “Symbols and abstractions,” he said, dragging his nails across an oversized reproduction of Pollock’s *Lucifer*. “Such are the whispers made by the madly flapping wings of the falling wayward angels.”

Perhaps it was the martini softening my mood, but I was beginning to like the Count.

“You might want to ready your pen, Master Gavin,” Eric said, opening a cherry wood door with a bright red ‘X’ painted on the upper left panel. “You’ve made it to the next level.”

“I should let Kelly know where I’ll be,” I said, more from habit than care, craning my neck to see beyond Eric’s shoulder and into the room. “I don’t want her to worry.”

“Don’t *you* worry, Fall of Rome. Kelly’s already here.”

She may have been in the room, but she was anywhere but in the chair where her body lay at rest.

Splayed out on a low table beside her were several piles of brightly colored pills. Judging by the way her pouty little mouth was turned down to the left and her unfocused eyes were barely holding a far-off glow, it was clear she had been sampling from all the rainbow colors she could find.

All around the room men and women in Mardi gras masks were pointing and giggling at the two of us.

Oh, I see...She goes with Him.

Aren’t they a lovely little match.

He’s the one you know—the one they told us was going to come.

I’d fuck him if only she’d wake up long enough to watch.

I heard this and plenty more—in my head.

Their mouths weren’t moving.

But Kelly’s suddenly was.

“Gavin—that you?” The words were thick and hard to decipher, as if her tongue had magically grown three sizes during her trip.

“Yeah, Kel. You partaking of the goodies a bit while I was gone?”

“Maybe just a bit.”

I noticed four of the women coming closer, panting and licking their lips more tantalizingly with each step and stroke of one another's thighs. As they turned I noticed on their bare shoulders a simple tattoo of a dove impaled by a sharpened cross.

God, that seems familiar, I thought. Like something I once drew on a World History book...

"I think it's time for Kelly to take a walk with us," one of them said, lifting her mask.

It was Paulette, a wicked little grin lighting up her eyes. "Wanna come with us, Mr. Rome?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. All-Roads-Lead-to-Rome," Eric chirped, waving a crystalline vial beneath his nose. "You really must come with us. You really, really must."

"Well, okay, sure," I said, my own natural curiosity coupling itself with my sense of having to protect Kelly from these dove-and-cross women. "Where will we be going?"

"To see the Priestess," Paulette whispered, flicking her tongue inside my ear.

Perhaps it was the hour, the booze, and my growing contact high, but it felt as though its tip was forked.

Following the group thru a rear gate, I found myself standing in a garden full of life-sized statues of mutilated angels and cackling wraiths locked in gruesome, mortal combat. Surrounding the Carrera marble carnage were flower-framed statuettes of women pleasuring themselves, their delicately wrought privates shooting forth a stream of steaming water from some hidden pump in a synchronized show of *la petite mort*. Crossing a footbridge that passed over a fishpond filled with a nasty-smelling liquid that I instinctively knew wasn't water, I noticed a miniature guesthouse that replicated the main house in almost every detail.

Except it had no windows.

Not one.

"This is where the ritual begins," Paulette said, opening a small door that led to a candle-lit room. "And the theatricals end."

From the piercing glance she threw my way, I could tell that tack-on was meant exclusively for me.

So be it. I felt full of juice and just ready enough to hook into whatever psychic stream they were preparing to attach us all to.

In the dim light of the room I saw the standard ritual accoutrements—candles of varying, symbolic widths and colors, rubber phalluses, bowls of water and salt, antique athames etched with long-forgotten runes, books of spells, astrological charts, wine and cakes, and the tired old Satanic pictures and imagery—Baphomets, paintings of the Fall, inverted crosses.

I was less than impressed, and yet there was a feeling in the air that was superbly charged, alive in a way I had often described in my stories as causing the hackles and the shorthairs to stand on edge in a primitive and tribal response to the deepest imprints of scrotum-shrinking Fear.

The kind of feeling I always gave my characters right before *the Presence* arrived.

Shit.

Come on, I admonished myself. You're letting your own overextended imagination and sense of horror craft get the best of you.

"Don't be so narrow-minded and provincial, Gavin Rome."

Count Eric. Talking without moving his mouth again.

"It's almost time," Paulette said. "He'll get it soon enough."

They were networked—sending messages back and forth along the higher plane and keeping Kelly and I as much in the dark as they wanted.

Kelly. Surely she wasn't still ready to submit to Whatever May Be as willingly and without question as they seemed to want?

"Whadya think, Kel?" I asked, not bothering to whisper.

"We've come this far," she said, though her voice was devoid of her usual condescension and annoyance.

It meant she was scared.

"I wanna meet the Priestess."

If I didn't know the quality of her voice so well, I would never have believed it was Kelly. She hadn't moved her mouth.

I needed a drink and a pill.

Bad.

Eric passed out glasses of wine poured from his exotic-looking bottles while Paulette handed everyone a heavy purple robe, positioning each of us by a candelabra in order to create a staggered pattern of shadows in the center of the floor. Aside from the Count and me the group consisted of all women—six of them, including Kel.

Hadn't there been only five when we had come in?

SHUT UP.

The words entered my head like a brain freeze after eating ice cream too fast. I had to laugh at the analogy—there was nothing fun and ice-creamy about what was happening here. Looking around the circle I was unable to identify who had admonished me. It certainly wasn't Kelly, who looked as though she was mesmerized by the candles.

It wasn't gentle Eric, nor was it the mix of sex and condescension that I knew to be Paulette.

DON'T BOTHER WITH GUESSES, GAVIN. JUST BE.

Will I know soon?

WE'LL SEE.

And one of the women was gone.

"We have come here to this house in this room in this hour to honor our dark and pulsing Soulselves," Paulette began, thrusting her arms into the air.

"We greet our Soulselves freely," Eric replied, echoed by the others in the club.

"We bring the Deluded among us tonight, so that he may see of what it is he truly consists and understand the work he's been made to do."

This came from Eric.

He was talking about me.

"What the hell are you mumbling about?" I asked him roughly.

"You see, Gavin, that's just the kind of bland, defensive attitude that has kept you from actualizing your true potential."

“I’ve had eight bestsellers on the *New York Times* list, and I’m not even forty!” I yelled, even as I realized it wasn’t my professional credentials Eric was talking about.

“Poor, poor Gavin,” Paulette said with a laugh. “You haven’t a clue what your work is about, do you?”

“It’s about release,” I said forcefully. “It’s about coping with the demons that play in my head. Putting them on the page to keep them from traveling up and down my spine. It’s about exorcism, and, in the end, I’ve made a few bucks and screwed some models, so I really can’t complain. Why—what do *you think* it’s about?”

This was a question I had asked countless times of my family, in-laws, professors, reviewers, and even the lurking, smarmy message-board addicts who nowadays pass as fans. It’s the great mystery of fiction writing that as soon as the work goes public, the writer doesn’t own the meanings and motivations at all. Everyone’s so out of touch they confuse what *you’ve* brought to the table with what *they’ve* brought.

And now I was about to hear Paulette’s little story, carefully disguised as mine. Fine.

“I don’t give a shit about your writing career,” she began, selecting an athame with a wicked-looking needle point from a low altar behind her. “And neither does *She*. Your stories have been a tool, a training ground for Bigger Things and Deeper Aims. And now it’s time to embrace them. To embrace Her. Only then can your most important work begin.”

She came toward me, the athame held before her like a divining rod. Before I could stand up to defend myself from what I knew was coming, Eric and one of the other women grabbed my arms and held me down, a second woman reaching across the circle and tearing my sleeve at the shoulder.

“Hey, what the—”

“*Hell*, Fall of Rome?” Eric asked, laughing softly. “You’re obsessed with Hell. That’ll have to change...”

“You’re really pissing me off with the stupid wordplays on my name,” I said with a growl, hoping the anger would give me enough added strength to break free of the woman holding my right arm.

Christ, she was strong.

The point of the athame entered my arm just enough to bring a steady stream of blood, which I half-expected Paulette or one of the others to feast upon.

Instead, they began to take off my clothes, and Kelly’s as well.

Though the thoughtform in my mind was a forceful protest, by the time it got to my tongue, I said, “She’s a hottie, ain’t she?”

The blade of the athame must have been coated with some potent drug—I had done the very same thing in one of my stories.

Shit. I had written about almost *all* of this in my stories.

At least the early ones—*the ones I never thought good enough to publish*.

“They were better than publishable, Gavin,” Eric said, pulling my genitals free of their cotton holding pen. “They were *life-giving*, and we thank you much for that.”

“We thank you, we thank you,” came the staggered echoes from all around the room—more voices than could be accounted for with a count of bodies.

“Eric,” I said, feeling myself beginning to lose touch with whatever passed for reality in this place. “You’re not gonna *do stuff* with me, are you?”

“You mean like ‘When in Rome’ and all that? No, no—that’s not quite my thing.” Then, glancing down at my flaccid equipment, he added, “nor would I say it’s yours. This is about you and Kelly—we’ll just watch.”

And watch they did—with a kind of intensity and secondhand lust that despite my drug-induced haze I found somewhat offensive. Kelly and I performed as though we were alone—I went down on her and she on me and then we fucked. And that’s when things got lively. Kelly began to moan, and her passions began to lift the room’s energy, potent as it already was, to another level.

I looked into the eyes of those in the circle and saw them begin to light with a hunger that only our coupling could satiate.

And I suddenly saw them as they were.

Sexual vampires—somehow unable to bring themselves to orgasm anymore because so many years of debauchery and perversion had rendered any simple sexual act incapable of arousing a nipple or getting the nether-bloods to flow...but they still had their needs. Indeed, their lust had been amplified a thousand-fold with each passing year.

How the hell did I *know* all this?

“Chapter 4 of *The Stranglers*,” Eric said, panting and rolling his eyes as he watched my thighs grind against the backs of Kelly’s. “Your first attempt at a novel—don’t you remember?”

And all at once I did. A novel I had written in high school trigonometry class when it was clear I would fail the year no matter what I did in the way of homework and study.

I’d thrown it out years ago.

“Only the paper, Gavin,” Eric answered, barely able to get the words out. “But the characters remain forever.”

“Your thumb, Gavin—use your thumb—that calloused, twisted thumb Kelly’s always tickling my bush about,” Paulette begged, as though she were the one I was thrusting in and out of. “Finish her off, you bastard, pleeeaaase. Just like you had the lawn boy do to the big-titted rich girl in *Drowning Pool*.”

I was beyond fighting—I did what I was told and as the muscles of Kelly’s vagina tightened and released in the waves of her orgasm, I got my release as well.

And the room got very still.

That’s when She came in.

I recognized her instantly.

She had come to me in a feverish bout of creation just before I was finished with college. Unlike my other characters, who started deep within my gut and made that infinite jump, clawing and kicking from my pen or tongue or typing fingers into my stories, she had come from within the fiber of the stories themselves, nestling inside of me, dormant and waiting, until my next piece of work.

She, the unseen Presence never revealed.

She, the driving force behind every demon and monster and new Satan I had ever created.

She was the Priestess, and I was the actualization of her most potent spell.

“You’re here,” I said weakly, holding out my hands to indicate my wish for an embrace.

I AM.

“I don’t understand,” I said, curling into a fetal position when she made no move to take me into her arms.

“We’re your children,” Paulette whispered, running a finger along the rivulet of blood that had begun to dry on my arm. “You and the Priestess have birthed us and we shall carry on your work and serve you as a god and father should be served.”

“Your work here is done, Rome-Father,” Eric said, genuflecting before me. “You needn’t waste your potent energies writing stories any more. There are enough of us now to go out into the world and make known to the masses what must be done to prepare the way for the Priestess. It is almost time for her to shine, and you have given us the power to complete our task.”

“I still don’t understand,” I said pitifully, feeling more like a turd than the god who shat it. “There are only a few of you. Hardly enough to spread any kind of word, even if I did hold the power you claim I do. I don’t want to head your little cult. And I DON’T WANT TO STOP MY WORK. My words are all I have.”

STOPPING BEING A CHILD. IT IS TIME TO ASCEND.

“*Descend*, don’t you mean?”

“You’ll understand this all in time, Rome-Father,” Eric said, gently stroking my sweat-soaked hair. “You’ve given Kelly to us, and she will be our Minister—she who has loved you in the way that we cannot. She who has heard your thoughts as you lay in sleep, dreaming the ideas that have given birth to so very many of us. It is Kelly who will keep your latest novel out of the hands of the agents and publishers who will want it once they know you’re dead.”

The last word had barely left Eric’s lips when he had fallen to the floor, clutching at his ears as though a high-pitched whistle was trying to burst his drums. “I’m sorry Priestess!” he squealed, rolling around the floor and knocking candlesticks every which way. “I said too much too soon—I see that. Please forgive! Please forgive!”

SHALL I, GAVIN-MATE? SHALL THAT BE MY WEDDING GIFT TO YOU?

“Let him go,” I said, unsure as to what the right answer might be.

“It is time for us all to go,” Paulette said, lifting Eric effortlessly to his feet and gathering Kelly’s clothes. “We will be missed in the main house. They must be running low on wine and pills by now, and they will want to see a Mass before they go. It’s finally time to bring them into the fold.”

“What about me?” I asked. “And Kelly?”

Dressing Kelly, who was still in a flame-induced trance, as she spoke, Paulette said, “She will join us in the enactment of our ritual Mass for the paying guests, though she will remember very little of what takes place. At least this first time. She will awaken in her bed, and beside her will be a terse but loving note from you, explaining how you can no longer live with the torments of your writer’s life and how you’ve decided to end it away from prying eyes.

“She’ll be upset at first—though not because of your death.”

“How dare you say that!” I yelled, more concerned, as usual, with the insinuations than the validity of the truths that generated them.

“Let’s be honest, Rome-Father, your marriage was a union more of mutual convenience than anything that could be called positive emotion.”

“I tried hard to love her,” I said, sure that it was true.

“Of course you tried,” Paulette answered, annoyed at the interruption. “But you were beholden to your true love—one patient enough to wait for you to give yourself freely to her, as you offered moments ago.”

“Then I have no choice?”

“No *further* choice. You and she will soon be one. But back to Kelly. She will of course call me within an hour of finding the note—and she’ll want to get your latest piece of—*fiction*—to your agent, but I will talk her out of it—I’ll talk her out of and into so many things in the coming months—and once the manuscript is locked away in some forgotten drawer in the front house, all the many characters you’ve contained in there will join us in our rites and our evangelism. You shall be worshipped Gavin-Father, as you most rightly deserve.”

“But that’s never what I wanted,” I said in tears.

“Then that will be the last lie you ever tell.”

They walked out—Paulette and Eric and the others, helping Kelly, who I think, for one split second, turned back as if to say goodbye.

Then she was gone. And the Priestess was coming toward me, her arms outstretched in the final invitation I’d receive.

And before I could protest, our consummation had begun.

I’m cold.

You’re cold.

I’m cold.

Yeah, you’re cold.

I’m sooo cold.

SO SHUT UP. It’s not like the talking warms you.

My breath is ice—it feels like there’s frozen cotton in my cheeks.

Exactly. So SHUT UP.

How am I supposed to type if I can’t feel my fingers?

Just use your mind. That’s the whole point.

[Obstinate silence]

Am I really dead?

Yes. You’re really dead...you’ve been dead for quite some time. So SHUT UP.

And get back to work.

But I’m sooo cold...

THEN YOU SHOULD HAVE CHOSEN HELL.