

Miranda's Kitchen
by Shane NORWOOD

Prologue.

Even at this hour of twilight, the failing light hurts her eyes, and they begin to weep as she peers through the shutters into the garden below. Overhead, a slow churning fan stirs the dense air, ruffling her yellow curls, and adding its creaking to the steady rhythmic clicking sound that emanates from beneath her window. She moves over to an ornate mahogany dresser, and sitting before the mirror her dimly reflected image stares out at her in the darkened room, through rabbit's eyes, the pupils a watery pink, as though boiled.

Her features are Negroid, but her skin is a mottled fungal white, which glows with a weird kind of light in the dimness, exaggerated by the black lace nightdress she wears. She takes up from the dresser a pair of thick wire rimmed spectacles, without which she is almost sightless, and through which she perceives the world in uninterrupted gray, a confusing shadow land of vague and contrast-less images. Wearing her glasses, she moves back to the window, and her pale white hands fumble with the brass catch on the shutters as she pushes them open.

The clicking sound stops. Under the window, half obscured by dense foliage, a muscular Negro arrests the swinging of his machete, stands from his task, and looks up. Heavy veins stand out in stark relief on his arms, and sweat glistens on his torso and face. He stares up to where the woman stands, motionless as a portrait framed by the heavy wooden beams that surround the window.

Slowly, the woman reaches to her throat, to the laced bow that secures the folds of her nightdress, and pulls it loose, and as the garment falls open she takes one lapel in each pale hand and draws them apart, revealing her heavy freckled breasts, sickly white against the black sating of her gown. Staring directly down at the man through her opaque lenses, she cups one breast in each hand and lifts them towards him, as though in supplication. The man lets fall his machete to the grass, and strides though the open portal beneath the window.

Chapter 1.

He knew at once that the house was perfect. It was as if it had always been there, at the periphery of his dreams, just waiting for him to find it.

Riding his motorcycle down to the sea at what had begun as a sedate pace but which had become, under the seductive influence of the winding and tree lined beach road, an exhilarating and somewhat cavalier slalom, he suddenly, for no apparent reason, felt compelled to stop. The impulse leapt into his head, unbidden and with such command, that he hit the brakes hard, almost losing the back wheel as he skidded to a halt. It was the strangest thing. He could have sworn that he heard the actual word. '*Stop!*' He could still hear it, reverberating in the recesses of his mind.

Glancing around to see if anyone had witnessed his escapade, he saw no one. The road was empty in both directions, and strangely silent. The hot tarmac shimmered in the brutal sun, evaporating into mirage at its farthest extremity, and not the slightest breeze ruffled the wilted leaves of the palms as they hung limp and heavy in the humid air. He sat for a moment regarding the black smear that his hot tire had made, feeling a vague and inexplicable uneasiness.

Without the cooling wind from the passage of the bike the midday heat was oppressive, and removing his faded black shirt he mopped his face and neck, and tucked it into the waistband of his jeans. Nearby, a dusty mango tree spread its branches against the unremitting blue of the sky, and wheeling the machine over to it, and propping it in the shade beneath, he considered his surroundings.

The tropic sun, standing at its zenith, appeared to leach the color from the land, and in the heat and stillness, the air seemed to audibly vibrate, like a string stretched to breaking. Beside the mango tree, a red dirt track wound through the palms, interspersed with drab limes and close pressing casuarinas, in the direction of the ocean, and the man shaded his eyes and gazed down it to the point where it vanished into shadow.

Taking a few tentative steps down the darkening trail, he was beset by another sudden compulsion, like a hidden wind blowing him forward, or as if the end of the path were a point, far below, to which he was falling. Almost as if some other was inside his head, some siren voice singing to him, luring and beguiling, impelling him like the voice that had compelled him to stop.

He was not a man accustomed to such fanciful ideas and even alone at that unpopulated crossroad he felt disconcerted and self-conscious, and he spoke aloud as if to dispel his uneasiness.

"Get a grip, man."

His words hung in the still air, sounding hollow. Feeling suddenly silly, he started back towards his bike, then stopped, and turning back towards the trail, studied it for a long moment. Shaking his head, he sat on the warm earth, pulled off his boots, and tossing them out of sight into the undergrowth, headed for the sea.

After a while, the trail narrowed and the vegetation grew more luxuriant. Huge ferns appeared and overhead broad leaves reached out to touch each other, and he found himself walking though deep shade down a cool and sunless tunnel. The dark compact earth felt good under his bare feet, and as he strolled along, enjoying the stillness and listening to the occasional small sounds from the forest, he contemplated the fact of his stopping, and the weird sensation he felt of being lead, or rather, accompanied, by something elemental, something behind his eyes, just beyond his ability to put into words. Dismissing it from his mind, as nonsense, he continued through the dim pergola, his sharp eyes picking out details

in the verdant gloom, the veins of a leaf, the glisten of trapped water in the bract of a flowering vine, the delicate pattern of a fallen feather.

Presently he became aware of a rhythmic exhaling sound which he recognized to be the distant waves, whispering onto the beach, and realized that he had subconsciously matched his step to their meter. And then he heard a sound not of the forest, not of the sea. Something quick and sharp, from somewhere behind him, and he spun around. There was nothing. He strained his ears, but only the sea spoke to him.

The trees began to thin out and the sky opened up overhead, and soon he walked through tall grass, where the path disappeared and the sun fell unimpeded onto the baked earth. The hissing of the sea was much louder, and somewhere a bird sang with a strange clanging sound, like a cracked bell. In front of him a solitary pine stood sentinel on a slight eminence, and as he approached he felt the first salt breath of the ocean on his face. It was when he climbed the rise, to place his hands against the smooth bole of the tree, that he first saw the house.

He was presented with the prospect of a small idyllic cove, narrow at its apex like a fluted glass, with a submerged reef visible at its mouth, and the surface of its cerulean protected waters ruffled by small waves that rolled onto the shore in neat lines. Beyond the reef, the darker wilder sea roiled and churned, and at the farthest end of the short beach, palms and sea grape and tropical almond, and the broad leaves of the autograph tree, flourished at the base of a high jagged rock which towered a hundred feet into the air, overgrown with creepers and lianas that protruded from its crevices and hung, pendulous, against its sheer face.

From a fissured and striated outcrop at the foot of the monolith, which carried the approximate shape of an hour glass, a dilapidated two story wooden house faced its blind and empty windows to the sea. It was built partially onto the stone, and at the front, a sagging verandah protruded out over the sand, supported on weathered barnacled pilings, their wood a skeletal white above the high tide mark. A balcony, with most of its railing broken or missing, encircled the second floor and at the far end, closest to the rock, a coconut palm thrust its trunk through the actual floorboards, draping its fronds upon the tiled roof, so that it appeared, from his vantage point, to be growing out of the very balcony itself. A rusted iron staircase led from the balcony down to the beach.

The slates of the roof had once been red, but had faded in the wind and sun to indeterminate shades of bone white and cameo pink. Many were cracked and others lay fallen and strewn in the sand below. Before the house, a crippled sway backed jetty stood in the gentle surf, resting its collapsed belly in the shallows. Behind the building, rebellious and unconstrained hibiscus and bougainvillea rioted in the remnants of a garden, and in one corner, a tall serpentine frangipani stood aloof. Further back, a stand of jacarandas carpeted the ground with a lilac shower of petals, and a towering mango tree cast its lesser neighbor, a spreading rain tree, into shadow.

There remained no discernible trail down to the house, and so the man clambered down over the dunes in front of him, and crossing the hot sand, entered through the main portal, which had long since been relieved of its door. He discovered a realm of spiders and geckos, of bats and mice and the myriad small creatures that inhabited the crumbling plaster and the spaces between the bare rotting floorboards, in whose gathered detritus, tenacious weeds and grasses grew. Cobwebs festooned the rafters like dry Spanish moss, and in a corner, the desiccated skeleton of some unidentifiable scurrying thing lay stripped by ants.

Every vestige of habitation had been removed, and no trace of anything personal or cherished remained to speak for those who had been before. The fixtures and fittings were long gone, bare wires hung from the ceiling, and in what must have been a bathroom, tortured and twisted pipes protruded from the wall like petrified snakes. There were three large rooms downstairs, and from the smallest, the iron frame of a spiral staircase, with neither step nor rail, wound up to the floor above, and this he gingerly ascended. It creaked and swayed as he climbed, and the rusty iron edges dug into the soles of his bare feet.

The upstairs floor was riddled with gaping holes through which he could see down into the rooms below, and likewise ruined was the floor of the attic above, through which he could see into the rafters, where sharply defined sunbeams pierced the punctured roof, revealing the motionless figures of sleeping bats hanging in the shadows of the apex. The staircase brought him out onto a small landing, from which a doorway led out onto the balcony, and from either side of which, two sea facing rooms opened.

The landing was all that remained of a narrow corridor that had once led to three more rooms at the back of the house, but here the flooring was entirely missing, and he had no access to them other than to perform a tightrope walk rope across the exposed central beam, which he declined to do out of respect for the rusty nails embedded in its length. Instead, he stepped out onto the balcony and sat on the peeling floorboards, with his feet dangling over the edge, staring between the broken rails at the perfect azure line of the sea. He closed his eyes and concentrated his other senses, absorbing the stillness and the heat, listening to the breathing of the waves, inhaling the perfumed wind, smelling the sea air and the scents from the garden.

Opening his eyes, he saw upon the horizon the bowed white sail of a yacht, and the minute distant sparkle of its bow spray, and he watched as it pranced and struggled into the wind. A movement distracted him, and he looked down to see a large red dog race across the beach and disappear around the corner of the house, in pursuit of, or pursued by, some invisible shadow foe. The man stood, and leaned against the doorway, looking back into the house, trying to imagine what it had looked like, and picture what it could look like again.

To his right, the room that occupied the front corner of the house was closed off by a heavy door, as far as he could tell the only one remaining in the house, and this he pushed against, opening it with no resistance. Save for the light from the opened door, the room was in almost complete darkness, what meager light there was filtering in through shutter covered windows in the two outer walls. Allowing a second for his eyes to adjust he stepped across to the one facing the sea, and attempting to open it, discovered that it would not move, and that it was covered with some dark heavy fabric, like canvas or burlap. Trying the other, he found that this also was fastened and similarly covered, admitting no light except for where small rents and tears punctured the cloth. He leaned against the wall, watching the bright motes of newly disturbed dust floating in the thin horizontal bars of light that intersected the room.

Starting to leave, something prevented him. Again, a sudden unnerving compulsion, and instead he slumped down and sat with his back against the wall, next to the door. He realized that he could no longer hear the sea, wondering if the padded shutters would account for it, and trying to identify what was peculiar about this room. There was definitely something, an atmosphere, and ambience, a subtle difference in temperature or pressure. Although it was completely empty of any artifact, there was about it a strange heaviness, not the presence of something but rather the absence of it, a lack of resonance and an unnatural quietude. He closed his eyes, feeling the beating of his heart in the stillness, and tried to summon the ghost voices of those who had been there before.

My heart counts out the minutes and hours of my time, as so were measured the spans of those that preceded me here, and what brief and unremembered tales have unfolded within these weathered walls? The shades of whose despair and joy am I walking through, and what tumultuous passion and laughter have played out at the top of these rickety stairs? What love has unfolded on any moon bright night, up on this balcony in the lilting Caribbean wind? How many have breathed their first, and last, in these dim and shuttered rooms. How came they to abandon this place to disrepair and ruin?

To his questions there was no answer but silence, and smiling wryly to himself, he stood and walked out of the door, closing it behind him, and carefully negotiated the precarious staircase down to the ground floor, where he crossed the verandah and leapt down onto the beach.

The wet sand at the tide's edge was the color of demerara, and the man stood upon it with tepid foam bubbling over his feet, gazing back towards the house with an unfocused intensity in his eyes, as if something mesmeric dwelt within. He was motionless, as if fixed in place and time by equal and opposite forces that each exerted similar weight and influence. He was deep in thought.

He was Ship Kilgallen, descended from Gaels, with their sad and fierce faces, the son of a proud and profane Celtic fisherman, and a genteel Dublin schoolteacher. At thirteen years old, with ten pounds from his father's pocket, and the kiss from his mother's lips still wet on his cheek, he had stood, solitary and forlorn in his thin rags and baggy cap, as the howling siren of the Liverpool ferry echoed in the cold Irish fog, and the boat carried him away to the shipyards of Merseyside.

By his mother, he had been christened Ulysses, after Joyce rather than Homer, although his life spent largely as a mariner since that distant frozen December morning had emulated his illustrious Greek namesake rather more than the Irishman. At school, his lawless and tattered classmates, long since dispersed and forgotten, had called him, with uncontested schoolboy logic, 'Kilgalleon' later truncated to 'Galleon'. As he fetched and carried, swept and swabbed, made tea, and ran messenger to bookmaker and public house in his days as apprentice in the yards, he had become simply 'Ship' and henceforth, to all except his mother to whom he would ever be Ulysses, he was Ship Kilgallen, and let no man say otherwise.

Ulysses 'Ship' Kilgallen was a man at issue with himself, who had arrived at the threshold of middle age feeling ambushed by it, feeling it to be a thing arrived, not slowly and predictably, by increments, but which had appeared suddenly, complete and accomplished, leaving him unprepared for its burden of wisdom and sorrow. He had reached the age of regret, of the limitation of possibility, the age when the knowledge of mortality, of the ephemeral nature of life, existed not as the detached and scarcely considered hypothesis of youth, but in his very bones, in everything he did that was infinitesimally more difficult than it had been the day before.

He had come to this island as an animal secretes itself to lick its wounds, to consider his life's progress, to identify the source of his confusion and malaise, his sense that he had in some way become unsynchronized with some greater design. To try to locate the place and time where he had taken a wrong turn, where he had chosen the wrong strand of an infinite number of possible existences, and come, somehow, to inhabit a place where he was not supposed to be.

Whether it was his age, or fatigue, or disenchantment with a world that was becoming increasingly uniform, where one place was indistinguishable from the next, he could not say, but he understood that the journey had, of itself, ceased to be enough, and that he was coming to the end of something. And so he had come to this place, randomly chosen for its smallness and relative seclusion, to try to understand why, and what he needed to do about it.

And now, looking at a derelict house, on a beach in the middle of nowhere, feeling, however fleetingly, the same kind of unthinking happiness he remembered feeling as a young man standing on his home doorstep after a long journey, he was thinking that perhaps the answer was right in front of him.

All his adult life, throughout his ceaseless albatross wandering, as he quartered the compass, crossing and re-crossing the main, he had harbored the fond but no doubt delusionary idea that there was a place somewhere, around the next seductive bend in the road, or on the horizon hidden behind the blinding sunrise, that was his right and proper place in the world, and that when he saw it, he would know. It would be by the ocean, because the love of the sea that was in him made his proximity to it almost a spiritual necessity, and in a place perennially warm, somewhere between the tropics of Capricorn and Cancer. But it had been a beguilement and no more, a love at first sight fantasy of the woman behind the opening door, or a face seen through an open window. Something to entertain his thoughts through long nights at the watch, pondering the majestic wheeling of the constellations, watching the immense waves looming out of the midnight darkness, or standing at the stern, seeing the remembrance of some brief encounter fading beyond the wake.

And yet now, improbably, he felt he might be looking at its incarnation. Lacking the inherent superstitiousness of both his race and his profession, and after half a lifetime of observation of the randomness and capriciousness of fortune and existence, any concept of fate or destiny was alien to him. But also, given his current frame of mind, the days when he was prepared to make a categorical statement upon the certitude of any proposition were well behind him. The impulse that had caused him to stop, bizarre and faintly ridiculous as it had been, was undeniable, and neither had he imagined the compulsion he had felt to follow the trail to its end, nor his sensations as he did so. And the culmination had been the discovery of this place.

Such a place have I imagined, and are now the tangled and confused lines of my life to finally resolve themselves here, in this little visited archipelago, unraveled by blind chance, or prescience, or the hand of some evasive and unknowable agency? Am I supposed to be here, blown by some inexorable wind, or guided by some unsuspected ancestral instinct to the conclusion of the meandering journey of my existence, carried to this windswept tropic shore for a reason?

He turned back to face the water, and was staring out to sea, or rather beyond it, when an uncanny feeling of being watched came upon him, like the almost imperceptible touch of cool fingers. Turning to face the house again he ran his eyes over the windows and doorways, and up to the roof, and around the wild ragged garden beyond, but saw no one.

As he turned back again to the sea, he thought he heard a noise, but listening intently, heard only the wind and the waves. And then he heard it again, definite this time, and identifiable. It was laughter. He took a couple of steps towards the house, and as he did so, a small thin figure emerged from the deep gloom beneath the verandah.

It was a boy of about ten, wearing only a pair of tattered red shorts. His skin was the color of dark amber, his long unruly hair writhed as if a current passed through it, and sand adhered to his face and his chest and his knees. He wore a broad bold smile, and the sun caught his even white teeth and lit up his eyes, impossibly green, like jade. He was as beautiful as a girl.

“Hi kid,” said Ship, smiling.

“Hello,” replied the boy, looking down and digging his brown toes into the sand.

“Who are you?”

“Guppy.”

“Guppy who?”

“Just Guppy.”

“That’s a funny name.”

“You’re funny,” said the boy, looking up suddenly with his startling green eyes.

“Oh yeah? Why is that?”

“You nearly fell off your bike,” said Guppy, starting to giggle.

“You saw that, huh?”

Guppy nodded.

“And you thought it was pretty funny?”

Guppy nodded again.

“It would have been funnier if you fell off,” he said, giggling again.

“Well, what if I had hurt myself?”

The boy shrugged, and stood there smiling. Ship remembered the noise on the trail.

“You followed me, right? Down the track?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t see you.”

“Nobody can see me if I don’t want them to.”

“Is that right?” said Ship, laughing.

Guppy laughed as well.

“How old are you?”

“Twelve.”

“No you’re not. How old?”

“Nine,” said the boy, chuckling.

He suddenly sprinted towards the sea, all elbows and knees. He leapt towards an incoming wave, and doing a complete forward somersault, plunged his angular dark frame, like an independent and animate shadow, into the foaming white. He reappeared seconds later, bouncing up and down, shaking his mass of tangled hair like a wet terrier. He looked at Ship with an enormous grin on his face. Ship applauded.

“Bravo.” He shouted.

Guppy came lollaping towards him.

“That was very impressive, Guppy.”

The boy smiled.

“Do you play cricket?”

“I like football. I am a good player.”

“Like the great Pele?”

“Better.”

Ship pulled a face.

“Where do you live?”

Guppy pointed with his thin matchstick arm, up into the hills behind the town, just visible across the bay.

“Where’s your mother?”

“She works.”

“And your father?”

Guppy shrugged his shoulders. There was nothing to say. Ship turned and walked back towards the house. The boy followed him

“Don’t you go to school?”

Guppy grinned.

“Sometimes.”

Ship returned his smile.

“Listen, Guppy,” he said, “I’m going back to town now. Do you want a ride?”

“On your motorbike?”

“Well I’m not going to carry you, am I?”

“You’ll fall off.”

“Don’t be silly, kid. I never fall off.”

“You nearly did.”

“Nearly isn’t did, is it? You want a ride, or what?”

“Okay.”

“Come on then.”

They passed through the dilapidated house, with their feet leaving wet prints on the dusty floorboards, and out of the back door and up the sandy bank towards the road. Behind them, their footprints slowly evaporated, from the outside in, like tiny receding lakes, and then were gone.

Ship carried his beer to a table in the shade, and sipped it slowly, watching the shutters come down in the closing market. The sun advanced the elongate shadow of the clock tower over the worn flagstones of the square, and it crept slowly towards him like the menacing arm of some beast in an old silent movie. The noise level in the bar rose as the weary and begrimed market workers started to file in. There was a powerful end of day smell, of wood smoke, and overripe fruit, of fish left too long in the sun.

He regarded the condensation on his tall brown bottle. Glass circles stained the scarred surface of the wooden table, and flies buzzed around some nameless piece of offal. He liked it that way. The bar was called Traders, and it was a place of fishermen and market workers and artisans. A place rude and real and alive, far removed from the perfumed and sanitized boutique hotels up the coast.

He had been drinking steadily all afternoon, and he liked it that way too. Ship Kilgallen drank a great deal. He remembered when he first started to drink and he remembered when he started to drink a lot, but he did not remember when he had started to drink for the wrong reasons. His profession lent itself to some hard drinking, and over the years he had enjoyed riotous bacchanals in taverns and grog shops everywhere from Spitzbergen to Tierra del Fuego, from Sydney harbor to Dar Es Salaam. But that had been different, and he had been different. A sailor among sailors, at large on all the meridians of the world, he drank for the pleasure and the society that was in it.

He knew not when his drinking had become solitary, and habitual, nor when the joy had gone from it, but he knew that he drank now to seek refuge from himself. To take the edge from his mind that harried and nagged him through the days. He knew that he drank to assuage the want of some uncertain thing or circumstance that had grown into the emptiness

that was inside him, and to deaden the undefined sorrow that had come to reside in his heart. And he knew too, that he must be free of it.

The light was fading, and flaming ember clouds slowly bled their color into the Western sky. The lights flickered on in Traders, a juke box started up, and pounding relentless reggae belted out above the loud voices and laughter and occasional shouts in the now crowded bar. Ship held the empty black bottle up to one of the blue lights that hung in the canopy above him. A purple genie stared out at him.

“Hello ghost,” he said. “How’s the haunting business? Listen, ghost, if you were me, would you have another drink?”

The ghost said nothing. Ship rubbed the bottle vigorously.

“Listen. You’re supposed to appear and say ‘*Your wish is my command.*’ Do you want to be a genie, or what?”

The ghost maintained its enigmatic silence.

“Alright then. Since you steadfastly refuse to appear, I shall be compelled to make the decision for myself. And the decision, my vaporous and reluctant friend, is in my favor.”

He returned from the bar with two bottles of stout, and banging one down hard onto the table, took a long pull from the other. He sat down heavily, watching the foam bubble from the top of the slammed bottle and spill down its side, forming a small pool in which the blue reflected canopy lights sparkled and glittered. A shadow fell across it. Ship looked up, and saw Guppy, perched on the bar wall, grinning like a satyr.

“Hey Guppy. What’s the deal?”

“I bet you’d fall off your bike now.”

“Never happen, Guppy, my boy. Never happen.”

“You can’t even walk.”

“Spying on me again, huh? What are you, James Bond or something?”

“How many beers have you had?”

“Four.”

Guppy started laughing.

“Sure,” he said. “How many?”

“As many as there are good intentions on the road to hell. Why aren’t you at home?”

“My mother is still working.”

Ship peered at his watch, steadying it with his free hand.

“It’s almost ten o’clock. Where does she work?”

“At the factory. They have to work when they can.”

Ship said nothing. He stared at the boy and drained the bottle he was holding. He picked up the second.

“What’s your name?” the boy asked.

“You mean what’s my name, or how am I called?”

“It’s the same thing.”

“Not always.”

“Alright then,” said Guppy. “What are you called?”

“Ship.”

The boy burst out laughing.

“What’s so funny, kid?”

“Your name.”

“Oh yeah? And why would that be?”

Guppy could barely speak through his giggles, and he put his hand over his mouth.

“It sounds like another word,” he managed to say.

Ship grinned at him, shaking his head, and took a long draught from his beer.

“I’m playing football tomorrow,” Guppy said, as his laughter subsided. “Do you want to watch me?”

“Where?”

“In the park, behind the post office.”

“What time’s kick off?”

“Three o’clock.”

“Deal me in. I’ll be there. But you’d better win.”

“I always win.”

“Nobody always wins, kid.”

“Three o’clock?” Guppy said.

“Three o’clock, sirrah,”

“Sure?”

“Sure.”

Guppy laughed and hopped down from the wall. He stood there, smiling, then laughed again and abruptly turned and raced off into the darkness. Ship watched his angular figure as, like some night stalking animal, it flitted into the shadows between the market stalls and disappeared. Then, standing, he downed his beer, and climbing over the wall, headed with a slow purposeful tread towards the bright lights of the Rum Runner Hotel, on the opposite side of the square.

The blades of the bamboo fan stirred the heavy morning air, rustling Ship’s wet straw colored curls as he slept with their cool imposter wind. The fan was slightly off kilter on its rotor, and each revolution brought forth a soft rhythmic creak, like a small sigh. Out at sea, the sun was about to breach the line of the horizon and black clouds roosted upon the rim of the world, like an immense murder of crows. Ship lay naked on the big bed, sprawled across it diagonally on his back. Beside him, his sheets lay in a crumpled heap where he had kicked them off in his fitful and restless sleep.

Despite his excesses, the record of his days was etched but faintly upon him, and his lithe frame retained the definition of a man younger than his forty three years. The gathering light revealed the body of a man accustomed to resting for his living with his hands, his powerful arms and shoulders sculpted with muscles born of capstan and wheel, rope and hammer, and not the weighted baubles of some suburban health club.

The hour approached six, and from somewhere down in the harbor the evocative wail of a ship’s horn dragged him, reluctant, from the embrace of his dream. He rose up, and walked over to the open window and gazed at the quickening daylight. The breeze from the sea put goose bumps upon his flesh, and as he stretched, the snapping of his sinews was loud in the quiet room. He strode into the bathroom and urinated in a long satisfying cascade. Scrubbing his teeth, he regarded his image in the mirror. His ice blue eyes stared back from the lined and weathered mask of a face, as if from some distant place. He needed a shave. He had needed a shave days ago. He spat.

“What are you looking at?” he said.

He continued to regard himself. His face was interesting, good looking without actually being handsome, and his gaze was steady and unwavering. In repose his expression was as stony and enigmatic as some Pacific idol, but when in laughter, a mystic light shone in his eyes, and the deep creases which radiated from the corners of his eyes crinkled like the forehead of a puppy. He had the high cheekbones of a Tartar, and hair the color of a wheat

field in the rain that fell almost to his shoulders. He had about him a kind of eye of the hurricane calmness, that some people found unnerving, and others magnetic, and which people who did not know him thought sad.

He stepped into the shower, and the frigid water took the breath from his lungs. He ordered black coffee from room service, and wrapping a towel about his waist, went out still wet onto the balcony, where the droplets stood like dew upon the hair on his chest and glistened in the russet light of the new risen sun. He studied the light on the water. Two hundred yards off shore, a flock of terns swirled and circle, a single darker gull in their midst. Below them, the surface of the sea began to glitter. The birds rained into the water, and silver fish leapt, sparkling, into the sunlight. Ship smiled. The doorbell rang.

He opened the door and admitted an enormously fat waitress, already perspiring in the constraints of her starched uniform, a tray gripped precariously in her pudgy hands. Ship reached out to take it from her, and noticed the patina of sweat above her full lips. A powerful floral scent wafted around her, and on her prodigious breast, a badge read, *'Gladys.'*

"Lord it goin' be hot today," she said, "You goin' sign?"

"No. I'll pay cash, thanks Gladys. How much?"

"Tree dollar."

Ship felt her eyes upon him as he placed the tray upon the bed and retrieved his jeans from the floor where they had spent the night. Removing his roll of bills, he extracted a five and handed it to her. Gladys made a show of fiddling in her apron pocket for change.

"That's okay, Gladys," Ship said, smiling.

Gladys smiled back, a great radiant sunny grin.

"Hey, t'anks man."

"You're welcome."

Gladys paused, eyeing him.

"Need anyt'in' else?"

"Not right at this minute."

"Well you do, you jus' ax for me. Okay?"

She gave him a big theatrical wink.

"Okay Gladys," ship said, closing the door behind her. He took his coffee out onto the balcony, shaking his head and grinning to himself.

"Jaysus," he said, under his breath.

Ship leaned on the rail of the jetty, listening to the ringing of the windblown shrouds as they slapped against the masts of the fishing piroques bobbing at anchor. He stared down into the calm transparent water at a raft of tiny blue fish floating in the shade of the pier, and watched among the pilings, where long strands of virulent green weed clung to the struts and writhed hypnotically in the gentle current.

"Siren's hair," he said to himself, with a sardonic grin, recalling his episode on the trail down to the house, "I'd better tie myself to the mast."

Some nameless shadow, as from a cloud, passed over the surface of the water, and he looked up, but in all that robin's egg sky there was nothing save the tiny cruciform figure of a jet, scurrying across the floor of heaven trailing its wake of virginal white, like the mirror image of a fast boat racing across the cyan waters. He reflected upon the fact that a passenger, peering down from the window of a plane would be treated to much the same sight as a passenger on the boat, peering skywards.

A series of deep melodic growls echoed across the bay, and he looked up to see the predatory prow of a cruise ship sliding past the heads at the entrance to the harbor. It headed towards the new terminal, whose brilliant white walls and red roof stood bright and discordant against the green hills beyond, like some stark modernist folly. The high passenger pier marched out into the bay on angular centipede legs, and a row of liners leaned their painted flanks against its stanchions with their gaudy company colors flapping in the sea breeze like the flags and banners of some merry and victorious armada.

The jetty upon which Ship was standing was rustic and wood hewn, and knew no paint save for the blood of fish and man, and the rude embellishment of diesel spill and oil stain and guano. The sea showed blue through the holes where pieces of plank were missing, and from its rails, old tires, long strangers to wheel or road, hung from frayed ropes and rusted chains. The landward end led directly onto an unpaved road, with its unruly row of chandlers and boat yards, fish fries and rum houses.

One such disreputable gin mill stood hard by the beach at the foot of the jetty, and it was towards this that Ship headed, slapping his bare feet on the rough hot boards. The building was cobbled together ineptly from flotsam, and gave every indication that the next big wind would be its last. Daubed across its lintel, formerly the post beam of a skiff, was the sardonic legend, 'The Yacht Club.'

Ship wore a pair of crudely fashioned white canvas pants and an ancient formerly olive green military t shirt from which a knife's edge had roughly tailored away the neckpiece and the sleeves, and he sported a battered and sweat stained Panama hat from which a bite sized piece was missing, and as he stepped up to the bar, against which were propped a rugged and motley gathering of mariners and fishermen, among that dissolute crew he was not misplaced.

The bar was built at right angles to the opening that passed for a window, and harsh light from the sea rendered the faces of his neighbors invisible, but he could see a row of dark shiny forearms laid across the counter, and the amber glow of bottles grasped in horny fists. No one was speaking. Behind the bar, an immense Negro with a cruelly fire scarred face leaned against a stack of crates in monolithic silence.

Ship held up one finger and the man peeled himself ponderously from the crates and approached slowly, like the coming of night.

"Banks," Ship said.

"Banks." Repeated the giant, in a deep subterranean rumble.

"Yeah. Two," said Ship, holding two fingers forward like the peace sign.

Without speaking, the man moved away. Ship leaned his elbows on the bar. At the feet of the man next to him, like a dog asleep at the feet of its master, and enormous tuna lay, staring out at the unforgiving world with its black lifeless eye.

The giant lumbered over with the beers and set them down. Ship handed one back to him and he nodded and tipped back the bottle and poured the beer down in one. He slammed the empty down, belched loudly, and aimed what was intended to be a grin at Ship.

"Pretty, ain't I?" he said.

"Yeah. Shame I forgot my camera," replied Ship, drinking his beer, but not taking his eyes off the tortured face.

The man laughed, and held out his massive calloused hand.

"Dey calls me Beth," he announced.

Ship reached out and watched his hand disappear into one that looked like a bunch of overripe bananas. The grip was surprisingly gentle.

"Ship," he said, "Beth?"

“Yeah Mahn. Short for behemoth.”

I was Ship’s turn to laugh.

“Set ‘em up, Beth,” he said, making the peace sign again.

Beth trundled back with the beers.

“You on vacation, mahn?”

“I don’t know Beth. Am I?”

“Well, you don’ look like no tourist I ever seen. More like one o dese fellas,” Beth said, nodding towards the others.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Ship said, smiling.

“So?”

“So maybe I’m staying. There’s a house I like.”

“Oh yeah? Where?”

“Over the other side. Governor’s Reef.”

“De ol’ abandoned place?”

“Uh huh.”

There was a sibilant hissing sound as Beth sucked the air in through his teeth.

“Hey mahn. Dat place supposed to be bad news.”

“Why?”

“Dunno for sure. Local people say somtin’ real bad happen der. Some o dem don’ go near, ‘specially at night.”

“What are they scared of? Zombies?”

“Could be,” Beth said, giving his wracked grin again.

“Well I didn’t see any. The only zombies I’ve seen so far were in Traders.”

Beth laughed.

“Yeah, I seen a few in der myself mahn.

“So what happened?”

“I tol’ you. I dunno. I ain’t from here.”

“Oh no? Where?”

“Guyana, Mahn,” said Beth, proudly, “Bes’ lookin’ women in de Caribbean.”

Ship grinned and raised his bottle.

“I’ll drink to that.”

He drained the bottle, and dropped the money for the beers on the bar.

“You goin’ mahn? Don’ want one for de road? On de house.”

“No thanks Beth. Next time. I have to go and watch a friend play football.”

The big man nodded and Ship started to leave. Stopping in the makeshift doorway, he turned around to look at Beth, who was watching him go.

“Hey Beth.”

“Yo.”

“You afraid to go there?”

“Hell no. I ain’t afraid a nothin’ mahn. Every t’ing I’s ever afraid of already happened.”

As Ship walked away from the Yacht Club, pulling his hat brim down to shade his gloom accustomed eyes from the sudden brightness, he could hear Beth laughing.

He parked his bike by the tower, and ambled through the buzzing market place towards Traders with a Herald Tribune under his arm. The spidery filigree arms of the clock informed him that he had sufficient time for a drink and a read of the paper before he had to be at the park to watch Guppy play.

He sat at what had become his customary table, watching the kaleidoscope changes of color and shape in the thronging market seeming to pulsate, flexing and writhing, coiling and uncoiling like some bizarre living thing. A hundred tinny radios competed for preeminence with the shrill and haranguing cries of the hawkers, and polyester clad tourists milled about in tight nervous groups, garish flowers even in this riotous garden. Everywhere, elegant solemn egrets padded about among the feet of the people with their slow syncopated strut, and on the corrugated roofs of the stalls crows scratched and scabbled, their coal black wings shiny in the midday sun. Charred fish and fowl crackled on the charcoal fires, the dismembered carcasses of pigs seeped fluid among uncountable flies, and wet vegetables shone with an electric glow. The air was humid and heavy, potent with the smell of ripe fruit, seeming to flow into Ships lungs of its own volition without the necessity for him to breathe.

A pretty waitress brought him a beer, and her beaded braids brushed against his face as she placed them before him. Her hair smelled of copra and smoke, and it reminded him of something, but he could not remember what it was. He opened his newspaper. It was almost a week old.

What difference does it make? Some people are dead, and some are not. Some are in pain, for no reason. Here, the rain falls, and here it does not. Some survive and some are extinguished, random and senseless as the destruction of ants in the path of the unheeding footfall. Shrill hysterical demagogues screeching without wisdom sufficient to comprehend that their words are of no consequence, even to themselves. That I, knowing little, still know. And in what esteem are they held who pretend to be somebody else? The tyranny of the ego. I am right and therefore you are wrong, about everything, and mine eye is the one and only true all seeing eye, and all others are blind and their prophets false dissemblers. And, the humblest and the most exalted alike, the greatest and the least pass through this transient vale, believing and hoping, but never knowing. And what is there in this tired journal, or any other, to give us answer?

He flung the paper down on the chair next to him, consulted his watch, picked up his bottle and drained it, and rubbed the empty across his forehead, enjoying the delicious coolness of the condensation. He put a five dollar bill on the table, weighted it down with the empty bottle, and was just standing to leave when he heard the sound of breaking glass.

Just in front of where he sat, a woman had dropped her shopping basket. He could see her long black glossy hair falling forward almost to the pavement as she bent over to gather her things. It was one of those frozen in time moments, a cameo that would stay with him with photographic clarity, a pattern indelibly printed on the fabric of his mind.

The woman wore an emerald green sarong, and as she bent forward, one long dark thigh was exposed. Her breasts hung against the cloth of the sleeveless white t-shirt she wore, and her nipples protruded through the thin material. The muscles in her slender coffee colored arms rippled as she replaced her things into her bag with her long slender fingers. Her right wrist was encircled by three fine silver rings, and on her left she wore a heavy copper bracelet. She had taken a strand of her hair and braided a red ribbon into it, and this braid now brushed against the fruits that had spilled from her bag and lay strewn in front of her. On her feet she wore a pair of cheap pink flip flops, and around her left ankle, a string of carmine beads.

Her bag was made of raffia, and he could see that one of the handles had snapped. A pool of dark liquid seeped from the bottom of the bag, and a large red mango had had rolled

forward and come to rest at the foot of the wall in front of the bar. Before he had even thought about it, he had climbed over the wall, picked up the mango, and stepped towards her. As he approached, there was the powerful smell of dark rum, and he would never again encounter the aroma of rum without thinking of her.

His shadow fell across her, but she did not pause from her gathering, nor did she look up. For some inexplicable reason, Ship felt embarrassed. He held out the mango, while on the hot path at his feet his shadow self likewise held out the shade fruit to the shadow woman.

“Excuse me,” he said, “you dropped this.”

She raise her head and stared up at him. Ship Kilgallen found himself looking into the most exquisite eyes he had ever seen. The girl, for now he could see that she was barely out of her teens, said nothing, nor did she make any move to retrieve her mango. Ship squatted down in front of her and held out the fruit on the palm of his hand.

“Here,” he said, softly. “Take it.”

He gazed at her expressionless face. She was inexpressibly lovely. Her skin was the color of old honey, and glowed with the same kind of light. Her hair was raven black and fell around her shoulders in heavy sinuous curls. Her cheekbones were high and sculpted, and her lips full and perfectly defined. From just above the corner of her mouth, to the middle of her left cheek, ran a thin raised scar, but somehow, it strangely enhanced her beauty rather than diminished it. Otherwise, her smooth face was entirely free of line or blemish.

But it was her eyes that were truly special. Almond shaped, they were the color of ancient jade, and carried within them the fire of ages, a light that appeared to him to emanate from somewhere far away.

With one hand, she brushed the hair from her face. She had a large fine silver hoop though each lobe, and tiny droplets of sweat stood out on her brow. She slowly extended her other hand towards him, with her palm upwards. Her face was an ebony mask, conveying nothing. Ship was mesmerized. As if held by the fearful fascination of an animal caught in the light. Continuing to stare into her eyes, he gently placed the mango in her hand. Their fingers brushed, and the coolness of her skin surprised him.

And then he heard his own voice, as if coming forth involuntary and disembodied, saying to her,

“If the eyes be truly mirrors of the soul, then how beautiful your soul must be.”

The faintest hint of a smile played at the corners of her mouth, and he imagined that he saw a flicker of light in the cool depths of her eyes. And then she abruptly stood, snatching her bag from the ground in a fluid motion, and brushed past him. He studied her as she walked away, noticing first the drops of rum dripping from the bottom of the bag and running down her calf, and then the grace of her movement, despite her heavy and awkward burden.

He watched her swaying, with her flowing midnight hair hanging almost to her waist, until she disappeared around the corner at the end of the street. He hoped that she would turn around, but she did not.