TERRY BISSON

NECRONAUTS

THE FIRST TIME I DIED was an eye-opener. Literally.

I got a call from a researcher at Duke. He said he had seen my paintings in the National Geographic and Smithsonian magazines and wanted to engage me as illustrator for an expedition he was planning.

I explained that I was blind and had been for eighteen months.

He said he knew; he said that was why they wanted me.

* * *

The next morning, I was dropped in front of the university's Psy Studies Institute by my ex. You can tell a lot about a space by its echoes, and the one I entered was drab and institutional, like a hospital waiting room.

Dr. Philip DeCandyle's hand was moist and cold, two qualities that don't always go together. I form a mental picture of those I am dealing with and I saw an overweight, soft man, almost six feet tall; later I was told I was not far off.

After introducing himself, DeCandyle introduced the woman standing beside him as Dr. Emma Sorel. She was only a little shorter, with a high-pitched voice and a cold, tentative touch that told me she was more skilled at withdrawing from the world than engaging it; a common quality in a scientist, but curious for an explorer. I wondered what sort of expedition these two could be planning.

"We're both very excited that you could come, Mr. Ray," said Dr. DeCandyle. "We saw the work you did for the undersea Mariana Trench expedition, and your paintings prove that there are some things that the camera just can't capture. It's not just a technical problem of lack of light. You were able to convey the grandeur of the ocean depths; its cold, awesome terror."

He did all the talking. It was my introduction to a manner of speech that struck me as exaggerated, almost comical—before I had experienced the horrors to which he held the key.

"Thank you," I said, nodding first to his position and then to hers, even though she had said nothing yet. "Then you both undoubtedly also know that I lost my eyesight on the

expedition, as a result of a decompression incident."

"We do," said Dr. DeCandyle. "But we also read the feature in the Sun; and we know that you have continued to paint, even though blind. And to great acclaim."

This was true. After the accident, I learned that my hand hadn't lost the confidence that almost forty years of training and work had built. I didn't need to see to paint. The papers called it a psychic ability, but to me it was no more remarkable than the sketcher who watches his subject and not his pad. I had always been precise in how I lined up and laid on my colors; the fact I was still able to sense their shape and intensity on my canvas had more to do with moisture and smell, I suspected, than with ESP.

Whatever it was, the newspapers loved it. I had discussed it in several interviews over the past year; what I hadn't told anyone was how badly the work had been going lately. An artist is not just a creator of beauty but also its primary consumer, and I had lost heart. After almost two years of blindness, I had lost all interest in painting scenes from my past, no matter how remarkable they might appear to others. My art had become a trick. The darkness that had fallen over my world was becoming total.

"I still paint, it's true," was all I said.

"We are engaged in a unique experiment," said Dr. DeCandyle. "An expedition to a realm even more exotic and beautiful—and dangerous—than the ocean depths. Like the Mariana Trench, it is impossible to photograph and therefore has never been illustrated. That is why we want you to be a part of our team."

"But why me?" I said. "Why a blind artist?"

DeCandyle didn't answer. His voice took on a new authority. "Follow me and I'll show you."

Ignoring the awful irony of his words, and somewhat against my better judgment, I did.

Dr. Sorel fell in behind me; we passed through a door and entered a long corridor. Through another door, we entered a room larger and colder than the first. It sounded empty but wasn't; we walked to the center and stopped.

"Twenty years ago, before beginning my doctoral work," said DeCandyle, "I was part of a unique series of experiments being performed in Berkeley. I don't suppose you are familiar with the name of Dr. Edwin Noroguchi?"

I shook my head.

“Dr. Noroguchi was experimenting in techniques for reviving the dead. Oh, nothing as dramatic and sinister as Frankenstein. Noroguchi studied and adapted the recent successes in reviving people who had drowned or suffered heart attacks. Learning to induce death for as long as an hour, we—I say we, for I joined him and have since devoted my life to the work—began to explore and, you might say, map the areas of existence immediately following death. LAD, or Life After Death experience.”

My aunt Kate, who raised me after my parents were killed, always told me I was a little slow. It was only at this point that I began to understand what DeCandyle was getting at. If I had been nearer the door, I would have walked out. As it was, in the middle of a room where I had no bearings, I began backing away.

“Using chemical and electrical techniques on volunteers, we were able to confirm the stories those who had been revived told about their spirits looking down on their own bodies; about floating toward a light; about an intense feeling of peace and well-being—all this was scientifically investigated and confirmed. Though not, of course, photographed or documented. There was no way to share what we discovered with the scientific world.”

I had reached the wall; I started feeling along it for the door.

“Then legal and funding problems intervened, and our work was interrupted. Until recently. With the help of the university and a generous grant from the National Geographic, Dr. Sorel and I have been able to continue the explorations that Dr. Noroguchi and I began. And your ability to paint will enable us to share with the world what we discover. The last unexplored frontier, the ‘undiscovered country’ of which Shakespeare wrote, is now within the reach of—”

“You’re talking about killing yourselves,” I interrupted. “You’re talking about killing me.”

“Only temporarily,” said Dr. Sorel. It was the first thing she’d said; I felt her hand on my arm and I shuddered. “Dr. Sorel has been to LAD space many times,” DeCandyle said, “and as you can see—forgive me; I mean tell—she has returned. Can it be called true death, if it is not final? And the compensations are—”

“Sorry,” I interrupted again. Feeling behind me for the door, I was stalling for time. “What with insurance and royalties, I’m pretty well fixed.”

“I am not speaking of money,” Dr. DeCandyle said, “although you will of course be paid. There is another and, perhaps for you, more important compensation than money.”

I found it. The door. I was just about to go through it when he said the only words that could have turned me around:

“In LAD space, you will once again be able to see.”

* * *

By two that afternoon I had completed my physical and was being strapped into what DeCandyle and Sorel called “the car” for my first mission into LAD space.

Of all the scenes of heaven and hell and the regions between which I was to witness, the one I most wish I was able to paint is that empty-sounding room and the car that was to carry me beyond this life. All I had was DeCandyle’s description of the car. It was a black (appropriately) open fiberglass cockpit with two seats: I visualized it as a Corvette without the wheels.

Dr. Sorel strapped me in, while DeCandyle explained that the frame contained the electroshock revival mechanism and the monitoring systems. Around my left wrist, she fastened a Velcro gauntlet, which contained the intradermal injector for the atropine chemical mix that would shut down my sympathetic nervous system.

In what I realized later was a shrewd psychological move, I was seated on the left: the first time I had been in a driver’s seat since I had lost my sight.

“Give you a lift to the cemetery?” I joked.

“You must take this first trip alone,” Sorel said; I was to learn that she had no sense of humor whatsoever. This brief orientation trip (or “LAD insertion”; DeCandyle was fond of NASA-type jargon) was supposed to be perfectly safe; it was to provide a chance for me to experience LAD space, and for them to evaluate my reaction, both physical and psychological, to induced death.

Sorel clipped the belt over my shoulder with her big, cold hands, and I heard her footsteps walking away. I had the image of her and DeCandyle hiding behind a lead curtain like X-ray technicians. The car’s monitoring systems started up with a low hum.

“Ready?” DeCandyle called.

“Ready.” But I had to say it twice before the word came out.

I felt a brief sting in my wrist. “Mr. Ray? Can you hear me now?” asked DeCandyle, who had somehow acquired a high, tinny edge to his voice, like Sorel’s. I tried to answer but couldn’t, wondering why, until I realized that the injection was working,

that the trip was beginning.

That I was dying.

I felt an instant of panic and reached to pull off the wrist cuff, but my reflexes were slowing and by the time the impulse reached my left arm, I was too weak to lift it. Dr. Sorel (or was it DeCandyle?) was saying something now, but the voice was receding from me. I tried again to lift my hand; I can't remember whether or not I succeeded. I felt a sudden strong sense of shame, as if I had been caught doing something terribly, irrevocably wrong; then the shame was gone. It had blown away. There seemed to be a wind blowing through the room as if a new door had opened. My skin grew cooler and seemed to be expanding; I felt like a balloon being inflated.

In those first moments, I didn't have the experience of which so many have spoken, of floating upward and looking down on their own bodies. Perhaps because of my blindness I had lost the impulse to "look" back. I was conscious only of floating upward, faster and faster, with no desires and nothing tying me to what was below: I felt myself dwindling, and there was a gladness in it, as if I were dwindling toward some tiny bright point which all of me had always yearned to be.

My naturalist's instincts, which I have carefully nurtured over the years as an essential balance to my artistic vision, were somehow missing in all this: I had no objectivity. I was what I was experiencing, which is just another way of saying there was no "me" to experience my experiencing it. Somehow this pleased me, like an accomplishment.

It was as I was becoming conscious of this pleasure that I saw the light, a lattice of light, toward which I was floating, as if it were the surface of a pond in which I had been submerged so long, and so deeply, as to forget that it had a surface at all.

I saw! I was seeing! It seemed perfectly natural, as if I had never stopped; and yet a great joy filled me.

I grew closer to the light and I seemed to slow; I felt myself spinning and "looked" back, or "down." For the first time, all in a rush, I remembered the car, my blindness, my life, the world. I saw specks floating like dust in shafts of light and wondered if that was all it had ever amounted to. Even as I puzzled over this I was turning back toward the lattice of light, which drew me toward it almost like a lover.

In their preliminary briefing, Sorel and DeCandyle had warned of the "chill" of LAD space; but I didn't feel it. I felt only awe and peacefulness, like the feeling one gets gazing down from a mountaintop onto a sea of clouds. Perhaps my experience was moderated by the wonderful new gift of vision; or perhaps somewhere in my bones I knew that this death was not final and that I would soon return to Earth.

I turned back toward the lattice of light (or was it turning toward me?) and saw that it was a display of light and light, no shade. I bathed in it, floating under it with a kind of bliss that I can only compare with that of orgasm, though it lasted for a long time, never peaking, never diminishing—a never-ending climax of quiet joy.

Was this, then, Heaven? Whether I asked that question then, or later, on reflection, I have no way of knowing; for memory and experience and anticipation were one to me then.

“After” (there is no sense of time in LAD space) I had bathed in this glory for what seemed an eternity I felt myself drifting back, down, away from the light. The light was receding and the darkness below was growing closer. I could see both in front and behind as I “fell” and I was vaguely conscious (or did memory add this later?) of the darkness reaching up toward me, like welcoming arms.

And I was blind again. Blind! I pulled back, toward death—and the light—and suddenly felt a sharp shock, and the outrage that pain brings. Reeling, I felt another shock; both, I learned later, were from the electroshock system built into the car, bringing me back to life.

I was vaguely conscious of hands on my face. I tried to raise my own hands but they were tied. Then I realized they weren’t tied, but dead.

Dead.

To describe what I felt as “fear” understates the wave of terror that filled me. Though something—my consciousness? my soul?—had been revived, my body was dead. I had no sensation and couldn’t move. My mouth was open, but not by my own will, nor could I close it.

It was only when I tried to scream that I realized I wasn’t breathing.

The third electroshock came as a friend: I welcomed its violence as it ripped through me. I felt, for the first time in my life (or was this my life?), my heart stir in my breast as it clutched itself inward, sucking for blood greedily, like a child sobbing; I heard it bubbling as it filled. Then the blood flooded into my brain, ice cold, and I could hear screaming all around me.

It was my own scream, echoing.

* * *

I must have lost consciousness again, or perhaps there was an injection to smooth out the reentry process. When I awoke I was breathing smoothly, relaxed, lying on a

two-person wheeled gurney. It was 4:03 P.M. according to my Braille watch; only two hours since my trip had begun.

I heard voices and sat up; a paper cup of hot tea laced with bourbon was thrust into my hand. My lips were numb.

“That first retrocution can be rough,” DeCandyle said.

“How do you feel?” Sorel asked, at the same time: “Are you with us?”

I hurt all over but I nodded.

Thus began my journey to the Other Side.

* * *

“There’s something creepy about those two,” my ex said when she picked me up at 5:00 P.M. as arranged.

“They’re okay,” I said.

“She has no chin but her nose makes up for it.”

“They’re researchers, not models,” I said. “It’s an experiment where I paint dream-induced images. Perfect job for a blind man.” This was the agreed-on lie; there was no way I could tell the truth.

“But why a blind man?” she asked.

My ex is a cop. It is to her that I owe the independence I have enjoyed since the accident that blinded me. It was she who brought me home from the hospital and stayed with me, commuting daily from Durham where she works. It was she who managed the contractors and used the financial settlement from the Mariana Institute to rework my mountainside studio so that I was able to move (at first on ropes, like a puppet, and then independently) from bed to bath, from kitchen to studio, with as little hassle as possible.

Then it was she who went ahead with the divorce she had been planning even before the accident.

“Maybe they want somebody who can paint with his eyes closed,” I said. “Maybe I’m the only fool who’ll do it. Maybe they like my work; though I realize you would find that a little far-fetched—”

“You should see her hair,” she said. “It’s white at the roots.” She turned off the highway up the short, steep driveway to my studio. The low-slung police cruiser scraped on the high spots. “This driveway needs fixing.”

“First thing in the spring,” I said.

I couldn’t wait to get to work. That night, I began my first new painting in almost four months—the one that appeared on the cover of the “Undiscovered Country” issue of the National Geographic and now hangs in the Smithsonian as “The Lattice of Light.”

* * *

One week later, at 10:00 A.M., as arranged, Dr. Sorel picked me up at my studio. I could tell by the door handles that she was driving a Honda Accord. It’s funny how the blind see cars.

“You’re probably wondering what a blind man’s doing with a shotgun,” I said. I had been cleaning mine when she came. “I like the feel of it even though I don’t shoot. It was a gift from the Outer Banks Wildlife Association. I did a series of paintings for them.”

She said nothing. Which is different from not saying anything.

“Ducks and sand,” I said. “Anyway, it’s real silver. It’s English; a Cleveland. Eighteen seventy-one.”

She turned on the radio to let me know she didn’t want to talk; the college FM station was playing Roenchler’s “Funeral for Spring.” She drove like a bat out of hell. The road from my studio to Durham is narrow and winding. For the first time since the incident, I was glad I couldn’t see.

I decided I agreed with my ex; Sorel was creepy.

Dr. DeCandyle was waiting for us in the lobby, eager to get started, but first I had to stop by his office to “sign” the voiceprint contract; that is, affirm our agreement on tape. I was to join them on five “insertions into LAD space” one week apart. National Geographic (which already knew my work) was to get first reproduction rights to my paintings. I was to own the prints and the originals and get a first-use fee, plus a fairly handsome advance.

I signed, then said, “You never answered my question. Why a blind artist?”

“Call it intuition,” DeCandyle said. “I saw the Sun article and said to Emma—that’s Dr. Sorel—‘Here’s our man!’ We need an artist who is not, shall we say, distracted by

sight. Who can capture the intensity of the LAD experience without throwing in a lot of visual referents. Also, quite frankly, we need someone with a reputation; for the Geographic, you understand."

"Also, you need somebody desperate enough do it."

His laugh was as dry as his palms were moist. "Let's just say 'adventurous.' "

Sorel joined us in the hall on the way to what DeCandyle called the "launch lab." I could tell by the rustling sound of her walk that she had changed clothes. I later learned that she wore a NASA-type nylon jumpsuit on our "LAD insertions."

I was pleased to find myself in the driver's seat again. Sorel strapped herself in beside me this time.

My left hand was left free but my right hand was guided into an oversized stiff rubber mitten.

"The purpose of this glove, which we call the handbasket," DeCandyle said, "is to join our two LAD voyagers more closely together. We have learned that through constant physical contact, some perceptual contact is maintained in LAD space. The name is our little joke. To hell in a handbasket?"

"I get it," I said. Then I heard a click and realized he had not been talking to me but into a tape recorder. "How long will this trip last?" I asked.

"Insertion," DeCandyle corrected. "And we have found it's best not to discuss duration; that way we avoid clashes between objective and subjective time. As a matter of fact, we prefer that you not verbalize your experiences at all, but commit them strictly to canvas. You will be driven home immediately after retrocution, or reentry, and not expected to participate in any debriefings with Dr. Sorel and myself."

Click.

If I had any further questions, I couldn't think of them. How much can you want to know about getting yourself killed?

"Good," DeCandyle said. I heard his footsteps walking away, and then I heard the drawing of the curtain that meant the trip—insertion—was about to begin.

"Ready, Dr. Sorel?" The car's monitoring systems started up with a low hum, like an idling engine.

Sorel said, "Ready." Her hand joined mine in the glove. It felt awkward. Rather than

hold hands, we turned them so that only the backs of our hands touched.

“Series forty-one, insertion one.” Click.

Again I felt the tiny sting; the sudden sense of shame and then the wind from somewhere else; and I was floating once more upward toward the lattice of light. This time, alarmingly, I could “see” a dark shape below that could only be the car, with two bodies slumped forward hideously, one of them mine— But I was gone. Then far off I saw the Blue Ridge, and beyond it Mount Mitchell, which I had painted from every side in every season, even though I knew it was not visible from Durham. The mountains are lost forever to the blind and I felt a sharp sorrow; then my sorrow, with my mountain, was lost in the light. The light! A shadow, chasing from below, drew closer and flowed into me, and then out again as light. I felt it as an other: a presence not quite separate, womanly yet part of me, linked to me like two fingers on one hand as under the lattice of light we spun. Again I felt the sweet warmth like unending orgasm—only there was no “again”: Each moment was as the first. The lattice of light stayed always at the same distance, almost close enough to touch, and yet as distant as a galaxy. Space was as indistinct and undifferentiated as Time. The presence linked with me somehow doubled my own ecstasy; I felt, I was, twice everything.

Then something pulled me downward, and I was alone, unlinked (unwhole?) again, spinning away from the light, feeling the warmth fade behind. Life from here looked as dark and lonesome as the grave. As before, there was the shock, the insult of pain, the agony as the cooled blood with its cold understandings rushed in . . .

Bringing another darkness.

“Retrocution at five thirty-three P.M. Click.”

I was on the gurney again. Sorel must have revived (or “retrocuted”) first, for she was helping DeCandyle. I sat dazed, silent, numb, while they recorded my vital signs. Her fingers felt familiar and I wondered if we had held hands while we were dead.

“How long?” I asked, finally.

“I thought we weren’t going to ask that question,” DeCandyle said.

“I’ll drive him home,” said Sorel. She drove even faster than before. For the twenty-minute ride we listened to the radio—Mahler—and didn’t speak. I didn’t invite her in; I didn’t have to. We both knew exactly what was going to happen. I heard her steps behind me on the gravel, on the step, on the floor. While I knelt to light the space heater—for the studio was cold—I heard the long pull of the zipper on her jumpsuit. By the time I had turned around she was helping me with my clothes, silent, efficient, and fast, and her mouth was cold; her tongue and her nipples were cold; I

was naked like her and falling with her into my own cold unmade studio bed, exploring that body that was so strange and yet so utterly familiar. When I entered her it was she who entered me: We came together in a way that I had forgotten was possible.

Forgotten? I had never known, never dreamed of passion like this.

Twenty minutes later, she was dressed and gone without a word.

* * *

My ex came by on Thursday with her boyfriend—excuse me, partner—to drop off some microwavables. She left him in the cruiser with the engine idling. “You’re painting again?” she said. I could hear her shuffling through my canvases, even though she knows it annoys me. “That’s good. They say abstract art’s good therapy.”

She was looking at “Lattice of Light,” or perhaps “Spinners.” My ex thinks all art is therapy.

“It’s not therapy,” I said. “Remember the experiment? The dreams? The professors at Duke?” I felt a sudden foolish impulse to explain myself to her. “And it’s not an abstract, either. In the dreams, I can see.”

“That’s nice,” she said. “Only, I had those two checked out. I have a friend in the dean’s office. They’re not professors. At least, not at Duke.”

“They’re from Berkeley,” I said.

“Berkeley? That explains everything.”

* * *

On Monday at ten, Sorel picked me up in the Honda. I offered her my hand, and from the tentative, almost reluctant way she shook it, I could tell that our sexual encounter had taken place in another realm altogether. That was fine with me. I found the university’s FM station on the van’s radio and we listened to Shulgin all the way to Durham. “The Dance of the Dead.” I was beginning to like the way she drove.

DeCandyle was waiting impatiently in the launch lab. “On this second insertion, we’re going to try and penetrate a little deeper,” he said. Click.

“Deeper?” I asked. How could you get deeper than dead?

He spoke to me and the tape at the same time. “So far on this series we have seen only the outer regions of LAD space. Beyond the threshold of light, there lies yet another

LAD realm. It, also, seems to have an objective reality. On this insertion we will observe without penetrating that realm." Click.

Sorel entered the room; I recognized the swishing of her nylon jumpsuit. I was strapped into the car and my hand was guided into the glove—and I recoiled in disgust. Something was in there. It was like putting my hand into a bucket of cold entrails.

"The handbasket now contains a circulating plasma solution," DeCandyle said. "Our hope is it that will keep a more positive contact between our two LAD voyagers." Click.

"You mean necronauts," I said.

He didn't laugh; I hadn't expected him to. I slid my hand into the handbasket. The stuff was slick and sticky at the same time. Sorel's hand joined mine. Our fingers met with no awkwardness; even with a kind of comfortable, lascivious hunger. DeCandyle asked: "Ready?"

Ready? For a week I had thought of nothing but the intensity, the excitement—the light of LAD space. The lab's machines started with their low harmony of hums. It seemed to be taking forever. The solution in the glove began to circulate while I waited for the injection that would free me from the prison of my blindness.

"Series forty-one, insertion two," DeCandyle said. Click.

Oh death, where is thy sting? My heart was pounding.

Then it stopped.

I could feel my blood pool, grow thick, grow cool. My body seemed to elongate—then suddenly I was gone; peeling away, up from the car, away from my body, into the light.

I was rising as if being pulled. There was no time to look back at my own body, or the mountains. Faster and faster, we were ascending into the realm of the dead: LAD space. I say we, for I was a shadow pursuing a shadow, yet together we were a circle of light, spinning in a dance harmonious. I ached for Sorel like a planet aches for its sun. The light loved us—and we spun, basking in its sweet climactic endless glow, luxuriating in a nakedness so total that the body itself has been stripped off and set aside. I felt like the gods must feel, knowing that the world we lurch through in life is only their cast-off clothes. We rose into the lattice of light and it opened before us . . .

And I felt a sudden fear. It was slight, like the chill on the back of your neck when a door opens that shouldn't be opened. The light was darkening around me and the presence at the end of my fingertips was suddenly gone. I was alone. I thought (yes,

dead, but I “thought”!) something had gone wrong in the lab.

All was still. I was in a new darkness. Only this was a darkness unlike the darkness of blindness: Here, somehow, I could see. I was alone on a gray plain that stretched forever in every direction, but instead of space I felt claustrophobia, for every horizon was close enough to touch. The chill had become a deep, cruel, vicious, bone cold. I tried to move and the darkness itself moved with me . . .

“Retrocution at three oh seven,” DeCandyle was saying; Sorel was slapping my cheeks. “We lost contact,” I heard her say.

I wasn’t in the car; I was lying down on the wheeled gurney. I was freezing. “Duration one hundred thirty-seven minutes,” DeCandyle said. Click.

I sat up and held my face in my hands. Both cheeks were cold. Both hands were shaking.

“I’ll drive him home,” Sorel said.

“Where were we?” I asked, but she wouldn’t answer me. Instead she drove faster and faster.

My studio was cold and I knelt to light the space heater. I fumbled with the damp matches, afraid she would leave, until I felt her hand on the back of my neck. She was undressed already, pulling me toward the bed, toward her plump, taut, cool breasts; her opening thighs. I forgot the chill I had felt in her womb, as cold and sweet as her mouth. How backward romance’s metaphors are! For it is the flesh, scorned in song for so many centuries, that leads the spirit toward the light. Underneath our nakedness we discovered more nakedness still, entering and opening one another, until together we soared like creatures that cannot fly alone, but only joined; the naked flesh going where our naked spirits had been only hours before. What we made was more than love.

“Does he know?” I asked, afterward, when we were lying in the dark. I like the darkness; it equalizes things.

“Know? Who?”

“DeCandyle. Who do you think?”

“What I do is none of his business,” she said. “And what he knows, is none of yours.” It was the end of our first and longest conversation. I slept for six hours and when I woke up she was gone.

* * *

“Turns out I have a friend at Berkeley too,” my ex said when she came by on Thursday to drop off some microwavables. Cops have friends everywhere; at least they think of them as friends.

“DeCandyle was in the medical school until he was kicked out for selling drugs. The other one was in comparative lit until she was kicked out in her junior year. All very hush-hush, but it seems she was using drugs to recruit students for experiments. I think there was even a death involved. I have another friend who’s checking the PD files.”

“Dum de-dum dum,” I said.

“I’m just giving you the facts, Ray. What you do with them, if anything, is up to you.” She was shuffling through my stacked canvases again. “I’m glad to see you’re doing mountains again. They were always your best sellers. And what have we here? Pornography?”

“Eye of the beholder,” I said.

“Bullshit. Don’t you think this is a little—gynecological—for Natural Geographic? I know they show tits and all, but—”

“It’s National,” I said. “And do me a favor—” I nodded toward her partner, who was standing just inside the door, foolishly thinking that if he stood perfectly still I wouldn’t know he was there. “As long as you and your boyfriend are playing Sergeant Friday, check out one more name for me.”

* * *

On Monday I was supposed to deliver the first batch of paintings in the series. DeCandyle sent a hired van to pick me up. I knew the driver. He was a local part-time preacher and abortion-clinic bomber. I was careful to keep the paintings covered as we loaded them in.

“I hear you’re working with the Hell Docs,” he said.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about; I’m just going in for a treatment,” I lied. “I am blind, you know.”

“Whatever you say,” he said. “I hear they’re sending a man and a woman to Hell. Sort of a new Adam and Eve.”

He laughed. I didn’t.

* * *

“Magnificent,” said DeCandyle, when he unwrapped the paintings in his office. “How can you do it? I could understand touch, sculpture; but painting? Colors?”

“I know what it looks like while I’m working on it,” I said. “After it’s dry, no. If you need a theory, my theory is that colors have smells; smells that are pitched too high for most people. So I’m like a dog that can hear a high-pitched whistle. That’s why I paint in oil and not acrylic.”

“So you don’t agree with the article in the Sun that it’s a psychic ability?”

“As a scientist, surely you don’t believe that crap.”

“As a scientist,” DeCandyle said, “I don’t know what I believe anymore. But let’s go to work.”

There was something different about the echoes in the launch lab. I was led directly to the gurney, and helped onto it. “Where’s the car?” I protested.

“We are dispensing with the car for the rest of this series,” DeCandyle said. I knew he was only partly talking to me when I heard the click of his recorder. “With this insertion we will begin using the C-T, or Cold Tissue, chamber developed while I was in Europe. It will allow us to penetrate deeper into LAD space.” Click.

“Deeper?” I was alarmed; I didn’t like lying down. “By staying dead longer?”

“Not necessarily longer,” DeCandyle said. “The C-T chamber will cool the home tissue more rapidly, allowing faster LAD penetration. We hope on this insertion to actually penetrate the threshold barrier.” Click.

By home tissue he meant the corpse. “I don’t like this,” I said. I sat up on the gurney. “It’s not in my contract.”

“Your contract calls for five LAD insertions,” DeCandyle said. “However, if you don’t want to go—”

Just then Sorel came into the room in her jumpsuit. I could hear the swishing of the nylon between her legs.

“I didn’t say I didn’t want to go,” I said. “I just want—” But I didn’t know what I wanted. I lay back down and she lay down beside me. I heard the snap of tubes being

attached; guided by hers, my hand slid into the smelly, cold mash of the glove. Our fingers met and entwined. They were like teenagers, getting together in secret, each with its own little libido.

“Series forty-one, insertion three,” DeCandyle said. Click.

The gurney was rolling and we were pushed into a small chamber. I felt rather than heard a door close just behind my head: a softer click. I panicked, but Sorel clutched my hand and the smell of atropine and formaldehyde filled the air. I felt myself falling—no, rising, with Sorel, linked, hand in hand, toward the light. This time we went more slowly and I saw our bodies laid out, spinning, naked as the day we were born. We rose into the lattice of light and it parted around us like a song.

And it was gone.

All around was the gray darkness.

We were on the Other Side.

I felt nothing. It filled me. I was frozen.

Sorel’s presence now had a form; she who had been all light was all flesh. I find it impossible to describe even though I was to paint it several times. She had legs, but they were strangely segmented; breasts, but not the breasts my lips and fingers knew; her hands were blunt, her face was blank, and her hips and what I can only call her mind, were bone white. She moved away into the gray distance and I moved with her, still linked “hand” to “hand.”

I felt—I knew—I had always been dreaming and only this was real. The space around me was a blank and endless gray. “Life” had been a dream; this was all there was.

I drifted. I seemed to have a body again, although it was not in my control. For hours, centuries, eternities we drifted through a world as small as a coffin, yet never reached an end. At the still center of it all was a circle of stones. I followed Sorel down toward them. Somebody—or something—was inside.

Waiting.

She passed through the stones toward the Other, pulling me with her. I pushed back; then pulled away, filled with terror. For I had touched stone. Nothing here was real and yet—I had touched stone. Suddenly I knew I was awake because everything was dark, only I could no longer see.

Beside me was her body; its dead hand clutching mine. I had never before

awakened—retrocuted—before Sorel. I reached up with my left hand, fearfully, tentatively until I felt the lid of my coffin just where I knew it would be. It was porcelain or steel, not stone. But cold as stone.

I tried to scream but there was no air. Before I could scream there was a shock, and I fell into another, a darker, darkness.

* * *

“What you felt was the roof of the C-T chamber,” DeCandyle was saying. “It enables you to remain in LAD space longer without damage to the home tissue. And with ultrasonic blood cooling, to cross directly to the Other Side.” It was the first time I had heard the term, yet I knew exactly what he meant.

Someone was clutching my right hand; it was Sorel. She was still dead. I was lying on the gurney; it rocked on its wheels as I struggled to sit up.

I shuddered as I remembered. “Before I touched the lid, while I was still dead, I touched stone.”

DeCandyle went on: “Apparently there are realms in LAD space whose accessibility depends on residual electrical fields in the home tissue.” I waited for the click, which never came, and realized he was talking only to me. “There is a magnetic polarity in the body that endures for several days after death. We want to find out what happens as the electrical field decays. The C-T chamber allows us to explore this without waiting on the actual mortification of the flesh.”

Mortification. “So there’s dead and then there’s deader.”

“Something like that. Let me drive you home.”

I was still holding Sorel’s hand. I pried my fingers loose.

* * *

I couldn’t sleep. The horror of the “Gray Realm” (as I was to call it in a painting) kept leaking back in. I felt like a man halfway up the Amazon, afraid to go on but afraid to turn back, because no matter what horrors lay ahead, he knows too well the horror that lies behind. The Devil’s Island of blindness.

I ached for Sorel. We blind are said to be connoisseurs of masturbation, perhaps because our imaginations are so practiced at summoning up images. Afterward, I turned on the lights and tried to paint. I always work in the light. Painting is a collaboration between the artist and his materials. I know paint loves light; I figure

canvas at least likes it.

But it was no good. I couldn't work. It wasn't till after dawn, amid the harsh din of the awakening birds, that I realized what was bothering me.

I was jealous.

* * *

My ex came by a day early (I thought) to drop off some microwavables. "Where have you been?" she asked. "I was trying to call you all day."

"I was at the university on Monday, as usual," I said.

"I'm talking about Tuesday."

"Yesterday?"

"Today is Thursday; you've lost a day. Anyway, we struck paydirt with your other name. Noroguchi was the real thing, a tenured professor at Berkeley, in the medical school, no less. That is, until he was murdered."

I could hear her flipping through my canvases, waiting for me to respond. I could imagine her half-smile.

"Don't you want to know who murdered him?"

"Let me guess," I said. "Philip DeCandyle."

"Ray, I always said you should have been a cop," she said. "You take the fun out of everything. Manslaughter. Plea-bargained down from Murder Two. Served six years at San Rafael. The creepy one was an accessory but she never went to jail."

"I thought you said they were both creepy."

"She's creepier. Did you know her tits are different sizes? Don't answer that. Did you know you have a blank canvas here in the finished pile?"

"It belongs there," I said. "It's called 'The Other Side.' "

* * *

On Monday, it was DeCandyle who picked me up in the Honda. "Where's Sorel?" I asked. I had to know. Even if she was dead I wanted to be with her.

“She’s okay. She’s waiting for us at the lab.”

“I’m dying to see her,” I said. I didn’t expect DeCandyle to laugh and he didn’t.

He drove maddeningly slowly. I missed Sorel’s breathtaking speed. I asked him to tell me about Noroguchi.

“Dr. Noroguchi died during an insertion; that is, failed to retrocute. I was blamed. But I get the distinct feeling you’ve heard the whole story.”

“And he’s still there.”

“Where else?”

“But why him? Millions of people are dead but we don’t see them.”

“You’ve seen Edwin?” DeCandyle stopped and there was a scream of brakes as someone almost hit us from behind. He stepped on the gas. “We don’t know why,” he said. “Apparently the connection persists when it’s strong enough. He and Emma were partners on many insertions. Too many. Emma’s convinced that it’s possible to penetrate deep enough to find him.”

“To bring him back?”

“Of course not. He’s dead. Edwin always insisted on going deeper and deeper even though we didn’t have the C-T Chamber then. It’s Emma’s obsession now. If anything, she’s worse than him; than he was.”

“Were they —”

“Were they lovers?” It wasn’t what I was going to ask, but it was what I wanted to know.

“Toward the end, they were lovers,” he said. He laughed; a bitter little laugh. “I don’t think they knew I knew.”

* * *

When we got to the institute I heard rhythmic shouts and the unfamiliar crunch of gravel.

“We’ll have to enter through the back,” DeCandyle said. “We have demonstrators out front. A local preacher has been telling the natives that we are trying to duplicate the

Resurrection in the laboratory."

"They always get it backwards," I said.

We entered through a side door, directly into the lab. I sat on the gurney waiting to hear the swish of Sorel's nylon jumpsuit between her legs. Instead I heard the suss of rubber tires and the faint ringing of spokes.

"You're in a wheelchair?"

"Temporarily," she said.

"Thrombophlebitis," said DeCandyle. "The blood clots when it pools in the veins for too long. But don't you worry; the C-T chamber diffusion fluid now contains a blood thinner."

We lay down together, side by side. My hand found the glove, which was between us. Was the solution getting old? There was a funny smell. Sorel's hand found mine and our fingers met in their familiar lascivious fond embrace, except—

She was missing a finger. Two.

Stumps.

My hand froze, wanting to pull away; the handbasket started gurgling and we were rolled forward, then stopped.

"Ready?"

"Ready." A part of me was scared; another part of me was amazed at how impatient a third part of me was to die. We were rolled forward again, feet first, into the cold, slightly acrid air of the chamber. A door closed behind my head. Before I had time to panic, Sorel's fingers found mine and comforted them, opening them like petals, and there was the sting. My heart stopped, like a TV that has been turned off.

Or on. For there came a kaleidoscope of colors, through which I arose, faster and faster. There was no floating, no looking back, no basking in the lattice of light; for no sooner had I seen—no, glimpsed—the familiar splendors of LAD space than they were gone and we were in that other darkness.

The Other Side.

It stretched around us endless and yet enclosing. The "sky" was low like a coffin lid. Sorel and I moved stiffly, drifting, no longer spirit but all flesh. I was dead awake. I

was conscious of her buttocks, the flesh on her arms which was fluted somehow like toadstool skin; the cold insect smell as we circled the stone pillars that pinned the low sky down.

We seemed to get no closer as we circled “The Pens” (as I was to call them in a painting): They spun slowly in the center of our immobility, like a system of stone stars. Again someone, some Other, waited inside. Under the lattice of light there was no sense of time’s passage, perhaps because the spirit (unlike the body) moved at time’s exact speed; but here, on the Other Side, time no longer buoyed us in its stream. There was no movement. Every forever was inside another forever, and the moments were no longer a stream but a pond: concentric circles that went nowhere.

There were other differences. In LAD space I had known, even dead, that I was alive. Here I knew that I was dead. That even alive, I was dead: that I had always been dead. That this was the reality into which all else flowed, from which nothing came. That this was the end of things.

My terror never diminished, nor did it grow: A still panic filled every cell of my body like uncirculating blood. Yet I was unmoved; I watched myself suffer as dispassionately as a boy watches a bug burn.

Sorel was dead-white. She was somehow closer to the pens, and when she reached out, the stone was right there. She turned toward me and her face was blank, a gaze of bone. Mine back at her was the same; our nothingness was complete. We were at the standing stones and through them I could see a figure. He (it was a he) beckoned and Sorel passed through the stones, but I pulled back: Then I, too, touched the stone (colder than cold) and I was with her again. We were inside the pens and now there were three of us, and it was as if there had always been. We were following Noroguchi (it was surely he) into a sort of dark water, which grew deeper. It was I who stopped; it took all my will. I turned away and this time Sorel, her face bone-blank, turned away with me.

I woke up in darkness, the blind darkness of the world.

I touched the lid of our coffin. It was porcelain, smooth and cold. I felt Sorel’s hand locked in mine in the steel grip of the dead. I felt not panic but peace.

There was a shock, then another shock, and darkness came over the darkness, and all was still.

* * *

“We made contact,” I heard Sorel’s voice say. I was glad. Wasn’t I?

I was on the gurney. I sat up. My hands were burning; my fingertips were on fire.

“The pain is just the blood coming back around,” said DeCandyle. “You were inserted into LAD space for over four hours.”

It was unusual for him to volunteer a duration. And there was no click. I knew he was lying.

“I’ll take him home,” Sorel said. Her voice sounded tinny and far away, as when we were dying. “I can still drive.”

It was morning. Dawn may not “come up like thunder” as Kipling put it, but it does have a sound. I rolled down the Honda’s window and bathed in the cold air, letting the new day cover over the night’s horror like a fresh coat of paint.

But the horror kept bleeding back through.

“We were gone all night,” I said.

Sorel laughed. “Try two nights,” she said. It was the first time I had heard her laugh. She seemed happy.

She pulled up in my drive but left the engine running. I reached over and turned the key off. “I’ll come in if you want me to,” she said. “You’ll have to help me in the door.”

I did. She could hop on one leg okay. Under her nylon NASA-style jumpsuit I was surprised to find smooth silk underwear with lace through the crotch; I could tell by my fingertips that it was white. One leg was puffy like a sausage. Her skin was tight and cool.

“Sorel,” I said. I couldn’t call her Emma. “Are you trying to bring him back or go with him?”

“There’s no coming back,” she said. “No body to come back to.” She pressed my hand to the stumps of her fingers, then to her cold lips, then between her cold thighs.

“Then stay here with me,” I said.

We fumbled for each other, our lips and fingers numb. “Don’t take my bra all the way off,” she said. She pulled one cup down and her nipple was cold and sticky and sweet. Too sweet. “It’s too late,” she said.

“Then take me with you,” I said.

That was the end of our last conversation.

* * *

“Sort of a Stonehenge,” my ex said when she came by on Thursday with some microwavables. She was shuffling through my paintings again. “And what’s this? My God, Ray. Porn is one thing; this is, this is—”

“I told you, they’re images from dreams.”

“That makes it even worse. I hope you’re not going to show these to anybody. It’s against the law. And what’s that smell?”

“Smell?”

“Like something died. Maybe a raccoon or something. I’m going to send William over to check under the studio.”

“Who’s William?”

“You know perfectly well who William is,” she said.

* * *

Saturday night I was awakened by a banging on the studio door.

“DeCandyle, it’s two in the morning,” I said. “I’m not supposed to see you till Monday anyway.”

“I need you now,” he said, “or there won’t be a Monday.” I got into the Honda with him; even when he was hurrying he drove too slowly. “I can’t get Emma to retrocute. She’s been in LAD space for over four days now. This is the longest she’s ever gone. The home tissue is starting to deteriorate. Excessive signs of morbidity.”

She’s dead, I thought. This guy just can’t say it.

“I let her go too often,” he said. “I left her inserted too long. Too deep. But she insisted; she’s been like a woman obsessed.”

“Step on it or we’ll get hit from behind,” I said. I didn’t want to hear any more. I turned up the radio and we listened to Carmina Burana, an opera about a bunch of monks singing their way to Hell.

It seemed appropriate.

* * *

DeCandyle helped me up onto the gurney and I felt the body beside me, swollen and stiff. I quickly got used to the smell. Tentatively, with a feeling of fear, I slipped my hand into the handbasket.

Her hand in the glove felt soft, like old cheese. Her fingers, for the first time, didn't seek mine but lay passive. But of course—she was dead.

I didn't want to go. Suddenly, desperately, I didn't want to go. "Wait," I said. But even as I said it, I knew I hadn't a chance. He was sending me after her. The gurney was already rolling and the small square door shut with a soft click.

I panicked; my lungs filled with the sour smell of atropine and formaldehyde. I felt my mind shrink and grow manageable. My fingers in the glove felt tiny, miserable, alone until they found hers. I expected more stumps but there were only the two. I made myself quiet and waited like a lover for the sting that would— Oh! I floated free at last, toward light, and saw the dark lab and the cars on the highway like fireflies and the mountains in the distance, and I realized with a start that I was totally conscious. Why wasn't I dead? The lattice of light parted around me like a cloud and suddenly I was standing on the Other Side, alone; no, she was beside me. She was with the Other. We drifted, the three of us, and time looped back on itself: We had always been here.

Why had I been afraid? This was so easy. We were inside the pens, which were a ring on the horizon in every direction, so many, so much stone; close enough to touch yet as far away as the stars I could barely remember . . . and at my feet, black still water.

Plenty of darkness but no stars on the Other Side.

I was moving. The water was still. I understood then (and I understand now) what physicists mean when they say that everything in the universe is in motion, wheeling around everything else, for I was in the black still water at the center of it all: the only thing that doesn't move. Was it a subjective or an objective reality? The question had no significance. This was more real than anything that had ever happened to me or ever would again.

There was certainly no joy. Yet no fear. We were filled with a cold nothingness; complete. I had always been here and will be here forever. Sorel is in front of me and in front of her—the Other—and we are moving again. Through the black water. Deeper and deeper. It is like watching myself go away and get smaller.

This is no dream. Noroguchi is going under. Sorel grows smaller, following him into the black water: and I know that there is another realm beyond this one, and other

realms beyond that, and the knowing fills me with a despair as thick as fear.

And I am moving backward, alive with terror, ripping my hand from Sorel's even as she pulls me with her; then she too is gone under.

Gone.

I reach up with both hands and touch the lid of my coffin. My hand out of the glove drips cold plasma down on my face. I am screaming soundlessly without air.

Then a shock, and warm darkness. Retrocution. When I woke up I was colder than I'd ever been. DeCandyle helped me sit up.

"No good?" He was weeping; he knew it.

"No good," I said. My tongue was thick and tasted bad from the plasma. Sorel's hand was still in the handbasket, and when I reached in and pulled it out her flesh peeled off like the skin of a rotten fruit, and stuck to my fingers. Outside, we could hear the protesters' chants. It was Sunday morning.

* * *

That was two and a half months ago.

DeCandyle and I waited until the demonstrators left for church, and then he drove me home. "I have killed them both," he said. Lamented. "First him and then her. With twenty years in between. Now there is no one left to forgive me."

"They wanted it. They used you," I said. Like they used me.

I made him let me off at the bottom of the drive. I was tired of him, sick of his self-pity, and I wanted to walk up to the studio alone. I couldn't paint. I couldn't sleep. I waited all day and all night, hoping irrationally to feel her cold touch on the back of my neck. Who says the dead can't walk? I paced the floor all night. I must have fallen asleep for I had a dream in which she came to me, naked and shining and swollen and all mine. I woke up and lay listening to the sounds coming through the half-open window over my bed. It's amazing how full of life the woods are, even in the winter. I hated it.

* * *

The next Wednesday I got a call from my ex. A woman's body had been found at the Psy Studies Institute and there was a chance that I might be brought in to help identify it. Dr. DeCandyle had been arrested. I might be asked to testify against him, also.

As it turned out I was never questioned. The police aren't eager to press a blind man for an identification. "Especially when the university is trying to hush up the whole business," my ex said. "Especially when the body is as erratically decomposed as this one," said her boyfriend.

"What do you mean?"

"I have a friend in the coroner's office," he said. " 'Erratically' is the word he used. He said it was the most peculiar corpse he had ever seen. Some of the organs were badly decomposed and others almost fresh; it was as if the decedent had died in stages, over a period of several years."

Cops love words like "decedent" and "corpse." They, doctors, and lawyers are the only ones left that still speak Latin.

Sorel was buried on Friday. There was no funeral, just a brief graveside procedure so the proper papers could get signed. She was buried in the part of the cemetery set aside for amputated limbs and used medical school cadavers. It was odd mourning someone I had known better dead than alive. It felt more like a wedding; when I smelled the dirt and heard it hit the coffin lid I felt I was giving the bride away.

DeCandyle was there, handcuffed to my ex's boyfriend. They had let him come as the next of kin.

"How's that?" I asked.

"She was his wife," my ex said as she led me to her cruiser so she could drive me home. "Student marriage. Separated but never divorced. I think she ran off with the Jap. The one he killed first. See how it all fits together? That's the beauty of police work, Ray."

* * *

The rest of the story you already know, especially if you subscribe to the National Geographic. The story was a Ballantine Prize nominee: the first pictures ever from the other side, the far realm, or as Shakespeare put it best, the Undiscovered Country. DeCandyle even made it into People magazine:

The Magellan of the Styx

Speaks from his Prison Cell

and my gallery show in New York was a huge success. I was able to sell, for an astonishing price, a limited edition of prints, while donating (for a generous tax break)

the paintings to the Smithsonian.

My ex and her boyfriend picked me up at the Raleigh-Durham airport when I flew back from New York. They were getting married. He had checked under the studio but found nothing. She was pregnant.

* * *

“What’s this I hear about your fingers?” my ex asked when she called last Thursday. She no longer has time to stop by; a country woman cooks for me. I explained that I had lost the tips of two fingers to what my doctor claims is the only case of frostbite in North Carolina during the exceptionally mild winter of 199-. Somehow my touch for painting has gone with them, but no one needs to know that yet.

It’s spring at last. The wet earth smells remind me of the grave and awaken in me a hunger that painting can no longer fill, even if I had my fingers. I have painted my last. My ex—excuse me, the future Mrs. William Robertson Cherry—and her boyfriend—excuse me, fiancé—have assured me that they will send a driver to pick me up and bring me to the wedding next Sunday.

I may not make it, though. I have a silver shotgun behind the door that I can ride like a rocket anytime I want to.

And I hate weddings. And spring.

And envy the living.

And love the dead.