

TIM PRATT

Jen at the Crossroads

Jen was a woman unfolded, having made her life into a crystal rose, exquisite and delicate and too inflexible to endure. Her destruction began with a letter she found in her mailbox, a rough brown envelope sealed with a dollop of green wax. She broke it open with her fingernail. For the romantic (and she had once been a romantic) there is always a moment of beautiful uncertainty when receiving an unexpected personal letter—will it be a special invitation, a love letter from a heretofore unnoticed stranger, a dispatch from a long-forgotten friend? Usually that hope goes unrewarded, as almost anything seems mundane compared to such half-articulated fancies, but sometimes...

After breaking the seal, she looked for a moment at her name on the front of the envelope, written in dark brown ink with a calligraphy pen. The calligraphy was not very well done, but she appreciated the thought. She slid the note, a single folded sheet of heavy paper, from the envelope. An address was printed in that same inexpert calligraphy, a location in the city twenty minutes from her home. The writer also provided a date, the next night, and a time, nine p.m. Nothing else, no clue as to the message's provenance. Jen turned the paper over, looking for some sign of its origin. She found nothing identifying. Nor was the envelope postmarked, she noticed. Someone had slipped it into her box by hand.

I won't go, of course, she thought. Her sense of caution far outweighed her curiosity. That caution had allowed her to achieve perfect calm in her life. She wanted for nothing that she could not lay her hands on. Her fulfillment was so fundamental that she seldom thought of it anymore. This letter, with its too-deliberate attempt at mystery, could not tempt her.

Inside, she left the letter on the low table by her front door and went to work.

Jen's home reflected her personality—a neat, simple space of porcelain vases, comfortable yet functional furniture, and indirect lighting. Jen had never studied interior design or feng shui, though visitors might assume she had, if she ever had visitors. She'd long ago learned that a carefully crafted environment could soothe inner turmoil.

In her studio she turned on the stereo, playing a disc of violin concertos composed by a man she'd loved in college. Her most recent work had much to do with love. She had another few month's worth of money from her last grant, and she'd attracted the attention of two private collectors, each vying for her new works. She refused commissions, but in exchange for a small dispensation she'd promised one of them first look at her new piece. She could go on this way indefinitely. The path to living her life as an extension of her art had been a long and arduous one, which she would not care to repeat or even much remember. She seldom allowed herself to dwell on the past, except in the studio, where her experiences provided form and embellishment for her work. Her time in college, the jobs she'd held, the lovers she'd known, the drugs she'd done—she felt that she'd packed plenty of “living” into the first thirty years of her life. The rest she gave to art.

The morning's work did not go well. She'd planned to cut shapes from flat sheets of copper, but her hands were clumsy with the metal shears. Her unfinished sculpture, standing eight feet high in the center of the studio, loomed over her like an ungainly bird, an ugly flightless thing. Parts of the piece were made of ornamental ironwork, such as you might find on palace gates, but for now the gates hung askew, and the strange weathervanes topped with lightning rods looked tacked-on. The lopsided, skeletal structure of iron arms and aluminum stalks seemed a long way from the final beauty she envisioned. Literally envisioned; before beginning a new piece, Jen would purify herself with a fast, and go without sleeping, until the shape of her next work came to her. Jen attributed nothing mystical to this practice, but she believed the ritual brought her closer to her subconscious, a necessary foray into the darker, less ordered parts of her mind, territories she would not usually care to visit. In the course of her work Jen normally had eyes only for the potential of a sculpture, seeing it complete and perfect in her mind, progressing with measured steps toward her goal. But today something distracted her, kept her in the moment.

She went into the front room and picked up the letter. Turned it in her hands. Put it to her nose, sniffing. It smelled of jasmine, and coffee, and... copper. She knew that scent well, from her recent work on this sculpture. So faint, so much more subtle than the scent of iron. What a strange concoction of scents. Perhaps...

Nonsense, she thought. I shouldn't go.

But who could have left the invitation? Who knew where she lived? She guarded that information closely. She tapped the envelope against her lips and sighed. Why had this intrusion come?

Thinking back on the morning's work, and the seeming ugliness of her latest sculpture, she smiled and shook her head. Perhaps it was a mistake, to craft yet another work from that long-gone affair. She hadn't seen Allen in years, and playing songs he'd composed long after they parted ways did not recreate the feelings she'd once had for him.

Am I out of touch? she thought. *Am I too isolated here, have I lost heart?*

I'll go to the city, she decided. Getting away from the house would be good for her. She'd go to a jazz bar, or visit a gallery, or... she looked at the envelope again. She remembered the address. It was on one of the main streets.

If I pass by, I'll give it a glance, she decided.

* * *

Jen drove her pickup into the city. The truck had been a necessity in her early days, when she'd had to transport welding equipment and raw materials. These days she had those things delivered, only running the truck enough to keep the engine from locking up. As she drove away from her property, past the green fields and wire fences, she realized that she hadn't been away from her house in months. Oh, she took walks down to the pond, and to the stand of trees that the butterflies favored, but in all she lived a circumscribed life. She'd chosen that, of course, she savored it, and yet it felt good to be going away.

Without thinking about it very much, she'd tucked the invitation into her purse before leaving the house.

She wore black cotton slacks and a simple white blouse, an easy compromise between the comfortable and the formal. She had no special plans. She'd get a late lunch somewhere, and then go where her feet led her. Maybe breathing in the complex, spiced, and polluted air of the city would revitalize her, and provide some needed perspective for her new sculpture.

She came to a crossroads in the city, a junction of major thoroughfares. She had planned to turn right, and go to a little restaurant she knew... but instead she drove straight, toward the street mentioned on the invitation. She could at least see what kind of place it was—a gallery, a club, a restaurant.

She found the address, reading the hammered-copper numbers over the door. It was a townhouse, with an ornate, asymmetrical iron security gate over the front door. Something about the ironwork seemed familiar, though she wasn't sure why. She parked her truck and walked up the front steps. She looked at the name over the mailbox, not surprised to see it written on a piece of tape in that same sloppy calligraphy. "M. Arrêté."

Her French was practically non-existent. She'd studied Spanish in college. Did "arrêté" mean arrested, or stopped? Or was it a false cognate?

Not that it mattered. Modern family names were often strange corruptions of the originals. Still, she was quite sure she didn't know anyone named Arrêté.

She depressed the doorbell, and heard faint, discordant bells. She waited a while, but when no one came, she went back to her truck.

* * *

The rest of the day passed slowly, and she no longer pretended to herself that she wouldn't be going to the house with the ornamental gate at 9 o'clock. She listened to a mediocre jazz trio in a bar, drinking a single Cape Cod. In college she'd often gotten drunk, and done cocaine, and lived her life as close to the edge as possible. She found it remarkable that she hadn't tumbled into the abyss at some point, and the realization of how many close calls she'd had contributed to the way she chose to live now.

Later she wandered in a bookstore, running her fingertip over books on metaphysics, flipping open a picture-book on religious symbolism. Some of the more obscure images might be very striking in a sculpture or a painting... but some critic would recognize such patterns, even if they were as strange as Maori ritual scars, and proceed to psychoanalyze Jen from a safe distance. People would want to

question her artistic intentions, always an annoyance. Jen didn't care to examine her work closely. The essential structures came to her in her visions. Sometimes she recognized vague associations—death, love, peace—but she rarely had any formal theme in mind. Critics found it hard to comprehend that, sometimes.

Finally 9 o'clock approached, and Jen drove back to the unassuming townhouse. There were no other cars parked out front; indeed, the street was deserted, with only three or four cars in sight. Maybe everyone who lived in the area was out on the town tonight.

Jen went up the steps. A middle-aged, broad-shouldered black man stood by the open security gate, dressed formally (if anachronistically) in a top hat and a coat with tails. He squinted at her, an unlit cigar-stub clenched in his teeth. "Invitation?" he said, in a lilting accent.

"Monsieur Arrêté?" she asked, holding out her invitation.

"Not I, *cherie*," he said, shaking his head. He took the invitation and, to her surprise, ripped it in half, like a ticket-taker at a movie theater. He handed half back to her, which she took without thinking. "You go on inside, now."

Jen hesitated, wanting to ask more questions, but instead she put her hand on the knob and opened the door. With a last look at the merry black man, she stepped inside.

The foyer was small and dim, paneled in wood. The house smelled like her invitation, of coffee and jasmine and copper. She walked into the front room... and stopped, staring.

A huge ice sculpture of a woman, twice life-sized, dominated the large room. The sculpture wasn't skillfully done—like the calligraphy, it seemed to have been created by an amateurish if enthusiastic hand. The sculpted woman sat on an ice pedestal, with fresh-cut yellow and blue flowers heaped around her icy feet. The woman was thin, her features somewhat severe, her face turned half-away from the door, as if averting her gaze.

The sculpture bore more than a passing resemblance to Jen herself. She shivered, imagining that she could feel cold radiating from the thing.

It can't be me, she decided. *It's just coincidence.*

"Hello?" she called. Several doors led away from this room, all of them standing half-open. She heard laughter, and music, and the sharp tones of an argument. She relaxed a bit. Other people had

come to this gathering, at least, whatever it was. Someone would know the host, and then she could get to the bottom of this... or, perhaps, just say thanks for being invited, and then go home.

A long table stretched behind the sculpture, heaped with platters of cheese and bread and hors d'oeuvres. Several filled wineglasses and a few open bottles stood at the far end. Jen considered them, then decided against drinking. One drink a day was enough; she remembered too well the terror following her long-ago blackout, a fear of self-loss that had led her to give up drinking almost entirely.

She listened for a moment to the distant sounds, then moved toward the door the laughter seemed to be coming from. She pushed open the door and stepped inside in time to see a woman in a black skirt hurry out the door at the far end of the room. Something about the woman seemed a little familiar—the way she walked, the set of her shoulders—and Jen wondered if this was some kind of college reunion, or art party, and if so, why it had to be so damned mysterious.

This room had white walls, hung with paintings, the works composed of vibrant slashes and splashes of abstract color. Jen had gone through a brief period in which she created this kind of work, trying to recreate Expressionism in her own image, before moving on to sculpture. A man in a gray suit stood with his back to her, his head cocked as he contemplated a painting. He held a glass of wine in one hand. He hadn't noticed her.

Jen cleared her throat, and he turned.

Jen's smile froze. It was Allen, the violinist she'd dated in college, who'd gone on to perform with orchestras all over the world. He looked ten years older, just as she did, but the sparkling eyes and the kind smile remained unchanged. They'd parted bitterly, each choosing art over love, each claiming they didn't have time for the other. Jen had left for a multitude of other reasons, too, and assumed the same held true for him.

"Back already?" he said, as if it hadn't been a decade since they'd seen each other. He put his arm around her. "Where'd they get these old paintings of yours, I wonder? I thought they were all painted over, or in mothballs in some storage room at the alma mater."

"Allen," Jen said, stepping away from him. These weren't her paintings—not exactly, though some of them seemed close—but

that wasn't why she retreated. He'd touched her far too casually, and she couldn't allow that, nor could she bear how right, how good, that touch felt. Little glass domes in her heart, bell jars containing old feelings, began to crack.

"You okay, dear? You—" he frowned, looking her up and down. "I thought..." he laughed. "Sorry, *jamais vu*, here. I could've sworn you were wearing a skirt." He shook his head. "Look, do you want to leave? I mean, I'm as curious as you are, but our host seems determined to be elusive, so why don't we just go home? We can put on some Ella Fitzgerald and dance on the balcony or something silly and romantic like that."

Jen made a low sound in her throat. This didn't make sense. Wasn't Allen touring Europe with the orchestra this month? She kept track of him, from a distance, and he couldn't be here now. What was going on?

The click-click of heels on hardwood signaled someone approaching from the front room. A sudden, irresistible urge to get away swept through Jen. "I have to go," she said in a strangled voice.

"Again?" Allen said, a long-forgotten tone of annoyance in his voice. "Jen—"

She hurried from the room, through the far door, her panic abating as soon as she crossed the threshold and the door swung half-closed behind her. This room had a curved, domelike ceiling, painted with faded neo-classical frescoes. Mobiles made of bicycle handlebars, spoons, inner tubes, shoes, bits of shattered green glass, fishing lures, and tattered dolls dangled overhead. She'd considered doing a series of mobiles like that once, and decided against it, preferring to do a larger-scale outdoor sculpture instead. That piece, titled "Comets, Eclipses," had earned her the grant she'd been living on for the past three years.

A toilet flushed, and Jen turned her head toward the sound. A little black door, tucked into an alcove. A bathroom. Yes, a place where Jen could compose herself, splash some water on her face, try to figure out what was going on, how Allen could be here, whether or not she should go talk to him again.

She went into the bathroom, surprised that it had several stalls. She'd assumed this was a private residence... It didn't matter. Nothing else made sense, so why should this?

She walked to the marble sink and splashed water on her

face. The fixtures were ornate and brass, the mirror dark with age at the edges. Someone sniffed from one of the stalls, then snorted and made a little sound of pleasure and exhilaration.

Jen turned the water off. She recognized that sound. Someone in that stall was snorting cocaine.

The latch in the stall rattled. Once again strangely compelled to flee, Jen rushed into an empty stall, slamming the door shut just as the other woman emerged.

Jen watched her through the crack in the door. She half-expected the woman in the black skirt, but it was someone different, a woman wearing a too-short white dress and a rainbow scarf. She walked to the mirror, rubbing her nose, and examined her reflection.

Jen could see the woman's face in the glass. A familiar face. A little too gaunt, a little too drawn, but still recognizable.

It was Jen's face. The woman was her—just a little different, a half-twist from rightness. Jen as she might have been if she'd never stopped doing cocaine, if she'd never decided to be a grown-up, to seize control of her life.

When the woman departed, still sniffing, Jen emerged from the stall, trembling. She had to get out of here. This was a madhouse, there was a drug in the air, it was a prank, something. She wanted to believe it was a dream. It had the false-logic of a dream, but she knew she wasn't sleeping.

She hesitated by the door, afraid of running into the woman in white but also afraid of staying here. Maybe the other woman would feel a similar compulsion to avoid Jen's sight, and flee ahead of her.

Jen stepped out of the bathroom, then leaned into the doorframe, disoriented. This wasn't the dome-ceilinged room she'd been in a little while before, but a low room with gaslights flickering on the walls. An elderly, frail black man sat on a wicker chair before her, his stick-thin legs crossed. "*Cherie*," he said. "Don't look so pained. Come in, come in." He took a wooden crutch from where it rested against his chair and stood up, leaning on the crutch.

The smell of jasmine and copper and coffee grew stronger. Jen wanted to run, though there was nothing frightening about the man. The only thing that kept her from rushing back into the bathroom was the irrational conviction that she would emerge into

this room again, face to face with this same man.

“What’s happening?” she asked, hating the breathlessness in her own voice, hating the curiosity that had brought her here, hating herself for coming.

“You came to my house, the house of many rooms.” He came toward her, setting his crutch with exaggerated care. He wore white cotton pants and a loose white shirt, buttoned up. “And I invited you, because you invited *me*.”

“I don’t understand. Who are you?”

“I am the master of the crossroads, the opener of the way,” he said.

“Monsieur Arrêté?”

“As good a name as any, better than most for dealing with you. The frozen girl. The girl who stopped. The girl who stopped making decisions.” His voice was kind but chiding. “You called my name with your sculpture, but you didn’t offer me rum or candy or sugar, and you never said what road you wanted opened, what place you wanted to reach, what spirit you wanted to meet. But still, my name rang out, and I began to look at you, to study you, and your lives...” He shook his head. “Fascinating, *cherie*.”

“What do you mean, I called your name? I never called anyone. I just want to get out of here.”

“You made a sculpture,” he said, leaning on his crutch. “You made it with iron and copper, and part of it was a beautiful rendition of my name. Look.” Fumbling, one-handed, he unbuttoned his shirt. Jen shrank away, but then she saw the blue lines of a tattoo on his dark skin, and leaned closer.

The shape was, at its foundation, a simple cross, like a plus-sign or a crossroads. But the cross was embellished with curves and curlicues and lines. “This is my name, and my fingerprint, and my blueprint,” he said. “You recognize it?”

“I went without sleeping,” she said, “and without water and food, until I saw the shape of my next sculpture... and that figure was part of it, the center, the part I made first. I shaped it from iron.” She’d seen the figure even more recently, too, she remembered—in the strange ornamental ironwork of the gate covering the door to this house of many rooms. “I summoned you by making that shape?”

“The Haitians call me Legba,” he said. “Some have called me the god of forking paths. You made my *vévé*, this pattern, and

I came. I am always the first invoked in any ritual. I open the way to the loas, to the spirits and also to other worlds. I realized you did not mean to call me... but I began to think that, perhaps, you were *meant* to.”

Jen’s fear left her as the smell of jasmine intensified. Legba, Monsieur Arrêté, was soothing her somehow, helping her mind remain clear even as it wanted to crumble. “These other women,” she said, “They are me? As I might have been?”

“As you are, in other... well, say other places,” Arrêté said. “The universe does not make choices, chérie. Everything you could have been, you are. Somewhere.”

“I want to talk to them,” Jen said. She needed to know—did they have better lives, had she chosen the right path when she chose the safe path?

Arrêté shook his head. “No, that can’t be. I’m stretching things by letting you even glimpse each other. That’s all I can do. But you spoke to Allen, and you saw that poor burning-brightly version of yourself in white... you have some idea of how things could have been. How they could, perhaps, still be.” He came closer, his dark eyes considering her. “I have concerns about you, this particular you I’m speaking to now. Because when the universe refuses to make choices, it does everything. But you have decided not to make any more choices, and for you that means doing nothing. Never changing. And everything changes, chérie. Change is the only constant. Yet I see your life stretching out, unbranching, unbroken, comfortable and pale, until your death.”

“I want it that way,” Jen said, trying not to let any of the doubt she felt creep into her voice. “I don’t want to be hurt anymore.”

“Then you may go back out the same door you came in,” Arrêté said. He gestured, and Jen turned. They were back in the foyer, but instead of only one door there were many, more than could possibly fit into this space. The doors all stood open. She saw her familiar pickup through one door. She saw other things through other doors—a black convertible parked half on the curb, a battered-looking hatchback, a motorcycle, a multitude of other vehicles. And the worlds she glimpsed beyond the doors were different in subtle ways, too. In one, a pall of smoke blackened the sky; in another, a colorful mural covered the building across the way; in yet another wild dogs tore at one another in a trash-strewn street.

“I can go anywhere?” Jen asked, stepping a little away from the doors, both daunted and excited by the possibility. She’d forgotten the physical thrill of real excitement, half-fear, half-exhilaration.

“Yes. You’ll be usurping the life of another...” He shrugged. “But only another you, so it’s not precisely a crime. You are the one, in particular, who called me, so I give you the choice. Whichever door you pass through, I will close. The others will return to their old lives, and whichever version of yourself you choose to replace will go to your life. Which is not such a bad one, and can easily be taken in new directions.”

“Can you tell me about them, about the people, the worlds?”

“Surely, *cherie*,” he said, the corners of his mouth turned down. “You do not have to make uninformed decisions.”

She looked at him, then nodded. “But it would be more in keeping with the spirit of things if I chose... not at random... but by instinct.”

“Your instinct gave you the power to call me,” Arrêté said. “Your instinct knew that if you went on this way you would come to nothing but a cold deathbed. Perhaps you should continue to trust yourself.”

“Will I keep my mind, my body?”

“You will not step into a body with cancer, or a rotting body, or an addicted one, I promise. And you will keep your memories of this world, but also the knowledge of the other world. That could be... painful. But it is also a rare opportunity. In all worlds, Jen, you are yourself. You may go mad, but I suspect you will adjust.”

“That door,” Jen said, pointing, and then all the other doors were gone, or collapsed into one, or out of her sight. She’d chosen the door with the mural and the poorly-parked convertible. She wondered if it belonged to the woman in the white dress, the Jen who’d never stopped doing drugs. But she wouldn’t ask. She would wait and see.

“Farewell, *cherie*,” Monsieur Arrêté said. She walked out into the warm and perfumed air, and Arrêté closed the door behind her.

The End