

A photograph of a rough, multi-colored stone wall. The stones are in shades of brown, grey, and red. Several pieces of graffiti are visible, including a large yellow figure in the upper right, a white face with a black smile in the middle, and a white face with a black mouth and eyes in the lower left. The word "Walls" is written in a white, hand-drawn font across the top of the wall.

# Walls

**Malachi Moose-Rat**

# Walls

Malachi Moose-Rat

This book is work of fiction. Any reference to historical events, real people, or real locales is used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover design by Mariana

Copyright © 2018 by Malachi Moose-Rat

Published by Malachi Moose-Rat

at Obooko

ISBN: 9780463002322

## **Obooko Edition, License Notes**

This is an authorised free edition from [www.obooko.com](http://www.obooko.com)

Although you do not have to pay for this book, the author's intellectual property rights remain fully protected by international Copyright laws. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only. This edition must not be hosted or redistributed on other websites without the author's written permission nor offered for sale in any form. If you paid for this book, or to gain access to it, we suggest you demand a refund and report the transaction to the author.

All rights reserved.

## CHAPTER ONE

A dark and misty view. Howls of creatures ancient and horrible tear through the sky. The heavy smell of rot and ammonia invade the nose.

Since the dark days of Yoram—twisted roots of herbaceous creatures, now woody vines—they have lived quite contentedly aloft in the middle-air chambers of this planet, looking down, through the veneer of sky, sometimes descending, dropping wildly from their enchanted paradise to move and mingle among the lower quarters where the groundlings live.

Oscillating at frequencies well beyond the groundlings' sensory perceptive abilities, the goings on in this realm is noticed only through the external vibrations of nature's forces. Resident force, BaØ, has of late been stomping about, moaning and groaning and bellowing loud as thunder as he quests once more to find his lost love, Atrikka, vanished long ago to what foul intent cannot be known. The passing of laws allowing one to rise to the elementals of middle-air allowed beings such as BaØ and his kin, the pleasures inherent in looking down upon the scurrying human specks while stomping about on legs not less than ten feet in height though more often approaching heights of triple digits.

One it seems cannot find contentment with less when more is so grandly attainable.

Universally acclaimed sisters of sky, Manticore and Meretricia, do endow through their implacable hair weaving more damage and horror than that attainable through more provincial means. Yet, coexist they do with the reigning Plorites from on high, silently simmering in treacherous gentleness, and by this means deepen malignity's dark dye.

*When hairs do weave will children grieve; when BaØ does tumble grounds folk crumble.*

Pity the poor little thing that wanted only to be a hot mess of the groundling horde, but was cast against stone and blaze as Meretricia, avenger of the forsaken (Attractive in a superficial vulgar manner but without real value, seemingly significant, but actually insincere or false).

Words against groundlings:

*CARACAS, Venezuela: A city where motorcycle riders roar down sidewalks, buses drop passengers in the middle of busy streets and drivers treat red lights and speed limits as suggestions rather than orders.*

All are in deep dread of Sliggans. BaØ.

Now, this temple frets them, and this impiety does wish to crush the GoDD they have abjured. To ruin them no snare she can devise will be unwrought. Sometimes she pities them, and frequently she even praises, and affects for them a treacherous gentleness; and by this means deepens malignity's dark dye. For two days buried in a dark chagrin she was witnessed, and yesterday watched her eye flash on this holy place a furious glance, as if the depths of this vast edifice concealed GoDD's avenger armed to punish her. There is little doubt it is on them her wrath is to burst; and that the cruel Meretricia will assail their GoDD, even in his sanctuary.

Even GoDD, say they, withholds himself from them: So jealous, formerly, of Hilja's fame, he sees, unmoved, their grandeur crushed to earth, And, in the end, his mercy's wearied out: No more, for them, his terrible arm is seen to awe mankind with marvels numberless: The ark is mute, its oracles unspoken.

## CHAPTER TWO

Tilda and her family had just moved in, but at that first creak in the walls she knew something was up. Mother said it was no

big deal, just the wood and such settling after many years. But Tilda knew there was more to it than that; sure of it once she explored around her room and heard the voices, little whispery things that were oh-so-obviously not doing very well at hiding. But she knew. She always seemed to know.

“Going out—”

“Fine dear, just keep things in order and be home for dinner,” said her mother, floating by the wall.

Didn’t even get to finish her words, she had only wanted to say “outside.” But “out” all by itself was such a big word. Adults would say, going “out.” Tilda says “going outside” meaning she was going out around the house to play. Going out back to look at that very interesting and slightly creepy chimney sounded scary fun.

The grounds were sprinkled with stones, overgrown brush, rusted toy wagon wheels, and pods of cactus. Paths wandered off every which way. This was how it looked on her right. On her left she was shocked to find another house wedged up almost against the very interesting and slightly creepy chimney, the porch on the house hanging out like a dirty lazy cow tongue.

Did her parents know about this? She found it quite odd. Surely not something her everything-just-so mother would want. And was her mother floating by the wall?

She could feel the damp air grab at her. She heard a little voice. Her legs shivered.

The day trickled by as she went about exploring inside and outside to get her bearings on this new place. She walked up the rickety old attic stairs. Dirty spider web covered windows let in only the smallest amount of light. If this were cleaned up it could make a great room to play in; keeping this detail in the backmost part of her mind, the part where things were put to store or disappear altogether. Next stop on her tour was the

cellar. In her experience all cellars looked the same, mostly icky and creepy, so she had little interest in exploring this new one.

For the next several hours she sat outside counting blades of grass. Stopping when the count got to 300, she decided she'd found out all she needed to know about the grass. Then moving along to count stones (57). After that counting trees (4), then bushes (15), then birds (20), then beetles (2), then any old thing that wandered into her sights.

This counting business was tiring.

Darkness arrived ahead of schedule. Sleep claimed her. Troubling images of surreal beings crowded into her dreams like meerkats. Soon, rumbling snores delivered her to the deepest slumber. She sailed on settling waves, cast off and cast away.

“Wake up silly,” mother said with a shake.

Tilda stretched and yawned. “Really?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“So you stomp on a few. They get over it quick enough. Though losing that third dimension does impose hardship.”

“What, Ma? I can’t—”

“Oh get up already.”

She rolled out of bed slowly, not wanting to move too quickly and lose the moment. Yet she knew she heard something and it kind of sounded like those things in her dream. But that couldn’t be right. She...was...too tired to think about this now...later.

*“The Gørr is come!”*

There it was again. She needed a metal helmet to stop the voices. That old beat-up colander mom never used would be perfect. This she had used at their last house, the beat up

yellow house with planters drooping from all the downstairs windows. Her cat Smudge had found great enjoyment attacking the flies and beetles that collected there. Tilda saw them as bridges to other worlds. From this a veritable empire is built. The people who lived next door at her last house were kind and helpful, frail and poor, their house enclosed by crooked, withered trees. A crow cawed through the sky.

Anxious to explore her new surroundings she shuffled out the door set for adventure. A whistling breeze puffed in from the west. The sniggering sun and fractured landscaping lay silent and still. Sporting a crooked smile she strolled with her hands stuffed into her pockets.

Then she met her neighbors, two odd shaped women and a round little man. They lived in a house wedged up almost against the very interesting and slightly creepy chimney, the porch on the house hanging out toward it like a dirty lazy cow tongue.

“Look at that girl with the big black saucer eyes.”

“Yes, I can see her. But she cannot see us uncle.”

“Really? Then why does she smile at you?”

“Little girls smile all the time, uncle.”

“Sure, but this one is different.”

Tilda walked slowly up the porch steps, careful not to fall through the crumbling wood. She saw the women staring at her strangely as if they had something stuck in their eyes, and she saw the old man scratch at his head and stomp his foot. A puffy cloud of dust rose up where he stomped. The strong smell of old rotted wood surrounded her.

“Hi, I’m Tilda and—”

“Where are you off to little girl?”

Her mother had come around the corner and was headed right for her. She thought her mother would like to know about this house business. But when she turned back around the house and people were gone.

“Just exploring.”

In the house by the chimney lived the odd shaped Schtoodle sisters who called each other dear one, and their peculiar uncle Hydezinklos. They were of the legion of beings that oscillate at frequencies well beyond the groundlings’ sensory perceptive abilities, yet it appeared that this little girl with black saucer eyes could see them quite fine. The sisters yammered on and on about the fascinating possibilities, uncle Hydezinklos was frozen in fear. Never had such a thing occurred. Surely there was something odd about this particular little girl but the two sisters were enchanted with her black saucer eyed loveliness.

“We haven’t had a little girl to play with in such a long time, uncle.”

“But it’s just not done, girls. It’s just not done.”

“Well, uncle,” said Orelia Schtoodle, “maybe things are different now.”

“Yes,” added Gelma Schtoodle, with dramatic flair “the dawn of a new age.”

“Or the end of time,” groaned the uncle.

“Remember dear one what happened when cousin Schpitzhaförr caused that massive flood? It was enchanting, wouldn’t you say?” said Orelia Schtoodle.

“It did cause quite a spectacle,” answered her sister Gelma, twirling her fingers through her hair. Her own hair, of course, not her sister’s.

“I tell you true this saucer eyed little girl could cause an even bigger spectacle,” grumped their uncle.

“Oh, wouldn’t that be lovely?”

“It would indeed, dear one.”

### CHAPTER THREE

“It’s virtually impossible to sit down and eat a meal and eat food that hasn’t come from all over the world.”

“My father’s words exactly!”

“He’s gone to a place where eyebrows run free...”

“Forever may they wave.”

Tilda’s parents both worked from home as Technical Writers. Evidently they made a good enough living this way to afford an okay sort of old house and provide their daughter with the things she needed, and some of the things she wanted.

Oftentimes at dinner, they would have wide ranging discussions on a variety of topics of which 10 year old Tilda had no interest at all.

Not even by accident.

At these times she would make quick to finish eating and skip away to play. As she made ready to escape her mother stopped her.

“Where’re you going, muffin? It’s getting dark soon.”

“Oh, but not too dark now, is it honey? C’mon, let the girl play.”

Her father was always helpful to get her things that her mother would not willingly give. This was one of those times.

“Fine. Okay muffin, keep things in order and be back before dark.”

Tilda hopped from the table remembering to keep things in order and made a straight line out to the chimney to find that

curious house peopled with those curious people. But she did not find them. Not one speck that said anything about them ever being there. She sat down and put her head in her hands to think it out. Maybe they'll be back tomorrow, she thought.

This she kept thinking for the next week as she returned to the very spot to look each and every day. But not a sign of the curious ones. She was beginning to believe she had just imagined them.

She returned home too suddenly.

“Not all furniture is just meant to sit there and gather dust. Of the different pieces of furniture we have in our house, perhaps desks are the ones that we really need to keep in order, maintaining them fully functional and organized.”

“Ma?”

“I wonder if shaving would make it coarser and easier to keep in order.”

“You know it’s my motto, darling. Keep things in order. Have a place for everything in your home. Remember to return things you have used back to its location when you’re done using it.”

“Ma?”

“Count to ten, okay? One - three - nine - eight - two - four - six - five - seven - ten! Now that’s confusing isn’t it? Anything not in its proper order causes confusion. Kind of kooky.”

“Yes you are darling, yes you are.”

“Ma?” said this time with a sharper edge.

“I’m sorry. Yes, dear?”

“Do people live behind us?”

“Um, good question. Haven’t noticed any. Maybe a ways back beyond all the shrubberies. Why?”

“Nothing. Just exploring around.”

“Watch out for ugly nasties out there.”

Tilda stuffed her hands in her pockets and walked up to her room. In the far corner of her room, almost out of sight, was a short square door that looked like it was made for children. Not very tall ones even. When she had crawled in there on the first day they were exploring the house and called to her mother, she noticed a kind of echo. Now she wondered if there was something else she could find out in there. It seemed, odd didn't it? Little doors that went nowhere?

At first it held no interest for her that stupid little door. It was just a little cubby hole to store her toys. And what could she find there anyway? Creepy spiders and nasty bugs? She knew very well the ugly nasties that could be waiting in such an old house. So she decided instead to explore outdoors. And when she thought she found another house out there she was extremely excited. Felt like a rocket to the moon! But, that came crashing to the ground when that imaginary house disappeared as sure as it had come. Sometimes she wondered if there was such a thing as dangerously strong imagination

She poked around behind her toys and found the wall very soft. She decided to push some pennies through to see if there was some great big canyon back there. It was so mysterious. Little rooms of no purpose. Could be hiding who knew what. She pushed a penny through and put her ear to the wall and counted. She got to 10 before hearing the penny hit something. Right then she decided she must get behind that wall.

In her mind she saw a deep dark smelly cave with all kinds of creepy things, maybe even snakes. But she had made up her mind to explore and she was not going to let a little imagination stop her.

She had to begin her search by finding the other side of that wall.

It didn't take long at all. On the other side of the wall were the attic stairs. Attics were always mysterious and so were basements. She opened the attic door and found little spaces between some of the stairs. She pushed a penny through. Once again, she counted to ten before she heard it hit something. Now she was off to the cellar.

When she came down the rickety stairs into the dark dusty musty cellar smelling of the mold of a million years, she could feel something very old and creaky pulling at her. She stopped and gathered her breath before continuing.

Light streamed through the small soot covered windows letting in enough light to make her way around. She felt she could taste the dust, could feel the mold hanging onto her. As she got further away from the stairs, the light dropped off. This sudden loss of light made her a bit nervous. She was almost ready to start singing her scared song. Then she bumped into something big. She stood statue still hoping it would not notice her. Then she reached out slowly and touched a very crusty wall that came off in pieces in her hand. This was becoming the grossest adventure she had been on for like ever!

She felt around and found a big heavy latch attached to a big heavy door. When she opened the door a blast of old cold air rushed at her, ripe and wet with the smell of long ago rotted fruit. She stopped. Inside the room was dead silence. She could even hear her heart hammering away as it attempted to stay brave. Right at the point where scared turns to run she heard a faint little voice. Easy to miss except in this incredibly silent room. But the voice sounded far away. Really really far away.

How big was this room?

That was all she needed. She pushed forward slowly, deeper and deeper into this room without end. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness she could see things coming off the walls. Cords and beams and nails and every now and again heard the scurry of little feet. Dusty spider webs were strewn all about and she

tried best as she could to avoid them. Every few steps she would stop to make sure she could still hear the voice. It was so faint and all. But yes, she heard it still, except now it sounded like it was singing a sad song.

She kept pushing forward finally losing track of how long she had been searching.

After what seemed like forever Tilda came around a jagged corner and heard the shuffling sounds of something or someone moving about. She started and stood still, not wanting to give herself away. Again she heard the voice, closer still, a little girl's voice, but up close it seemed a bit heavy and tired sounding, softly singing a sad child song.

*I used to chase the dying sun*

*From field to field till day was done*

*Now all alone in my dark place*

*I see no sun or its bright face*

She recognized the melody but the words were different. The voice was coming from someone dressed in a short skirt, sneakers, and hair ribbons, like a little girl. But Tilda could see she was no little girl at all. Maybe a big sister. Or a mother. And very pale indeed.

“Hi, my name is Tilda.”

The girl looked at her as if she did not understand her words then said, “Oh. A new little one. I have heard there were others. Sometimes even heard their voices. But I have never seen them.”

“Others?”

“That is what I have been told by Night Mother. She gives me all the treats I want. Very tasty snacks. But I...have you seen my mother?”

Tilda wanted to tell the girl that she had not seen anyone's mother and also that she did not seem to be a little girl in need of a mother. But she thought better of it and said nothing of the sort.

"No, I have not."

"Night Mother says little girls must be tended. Must always keep things in order. It is the Night Mother's duty to ensure all is accounted for."

This sounded strangely familiar when the girl spoke of "keeping things in order." Just like her very own "regular" mother.

"How long have you been here?"

The girl's eyes went all spacey and crossed like the question had clobbered her over the head. Then she spoke in a very whispery voice, like coming from a dream, "A few days. Maybe a week. I really do not know."

Tilda thought of something that just popped into her head like a runaway freight train.

"Do you have a day mother?"

Maybe the wrong time. Maybe the wrong question. But the little girl's face suddenly went all dark and cloudy. When her voice came it was all sharp and jagged. Certainly a peculiar shape.

"Night mother says that day mothers do not pay enough attention to their little girls. Do not keep things in order. But Night Mother pays close attention to her little girls and always keeps things in order. She gives them yummy treats!"

"She sounds very nice."

"Oh yes! Nice indeed. She says day mother's don't deserve their precious little girls. Says it is the Night Mother's job to put things in their proper order."

Now the girl went on like a windup toy. “She has green marble eyes that glow. She is, tall, wiry, very long fingers and a voice so sweet it makes you warm and happy, like a big teddy bear.”

Tilda suddenly found herself with nothing to say. What could she say? How often do you come across a girl/woman living in your basement?

“Um, Tilden?”

“Tilda.”

“Sorry, Tilda. Maybe you should go now? Night mother will be back soon and she does not like surprise guests. She must keep things in order and surprises put things out of order.”

“Oh. But you were singing that song about being alone and I thought—”

“It is the only song I know.”

“But...”

“She will be back for me soon enough.”

Not feeling entirely right about leaving, Tilda moved a bit quicker in order to be home for dinner before dark. When she shut the big heavy door she had the strangest sensation of the room shrinking in size with a strong whoosh. She looked around quickly to make sure the ceiling and walls weren't collapsing. Then she saw a long shadow slither up the wall and creep out the window. A chill ran through her. Adventures could be scary, yet in one day of exploring her small little world had become extremely interesting.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

Relax, Tilda told herself Relax and think of normal things. Of normal houses and normal mothers and normal fathers and normal creepy-crawly things scampering around your feet and sometimes jumping out to scare you. That's it. Relax and drift

away into your normal world, not the world of little girls who are not quite “little girls” living in cellars and singing songs waiting for the Night Mother.

She tried. She really did. But between houses that sprung out and disappeared like ghosts and little girls who are not quite “little girls” living in the cellar her mind was just a jumble of mish mashed goo that didn’t make any sense.

But this stuff didn’t matter...really. Still, her curious mind and wild imagination could not let these thoughts go.

That night Tilda had the strangest sort of dreams. A short, freckle-faced girl of about six or seven years old was running in circles flapping her hands and screaming, “Your mother doesn’t love you. Doesn’t care if you get killed or end up being a raving lunatic,” on and on and on without end until a great thick cloud of dirty gray smoke rose from below her and wiped her away, like an irritating drawing wiped clean from a huge chalkboard. Tilda was happy about this as she had found the girl disturbing indeed. And happy she might have remained, until in the next instant a house came flying out of the sky with a little girl looking surprisingly like the one she had seen in the cellar, hanging dangerously from a post on the front porch, swinging and singing and spinning so fast as though she were trying to become a tornado. And just when Tilda thought things could not get any stranger in this dreamland, she came face to face with a tall, green eyed woman with large sharp teeth, twiddling her long dangerous looking fingers, making them click click click like a typewriter.

When Tilda woke with a shudder she was not sure of anything.

Downstairs in the kitchen, Tilda’s parents were entertaining a friend. Tilda’s mother had been going on about her daughter’s recent behavior and how she was concerned about her after moving into this new house.

“You know, Roxy my dear, children are of the impulsive wildly imaginative sort. Best to just take it easy and not get too worked up. She’ll come out of it soon enough.”

This was Clare, a friend of Tilda’s mother.

“I know, I know. It’s just that sometimes it feels like—”

“How ‘bout some coffee?” said Roxy’s husband and Tilda’s father Don as he bounced into the room.

“Mmm...sounds good to me,” cooed Clare, blinking flirtatiously. “You sure you wanna keep this guy Roxy? I could sure use a man to make me coffee and stuff”

“Oh right, girl. With the wolf pack of guys you have chasing you around I’m sure you do just fine.”

“So right, so true”

Don looked at Clare as if he were seriously considering her offer. Even got a sort of dreamy look in his eyes. Roxy caught his little dreamy eyed act and stared lightning bolts at him. He smiled sheepishly and looked away.

With her long blonde hair, incredibly shapely figure, and face of an angel, it was true that Clare was the picture of perfection to most guys who saw her. Unfortunately, Tilda was not too fond of her. It’s just that she always acted like Miss know-it-all and she didn’t even *have* any children. Like, what was she talking about? That and her father Don couldn’t keep his eyes off her. Something her mother did not like at all.

Yawning and rubbing her eyes, Tilda floated into the room like a feather. She was making a beeline for the cabinet to grab hold of her favorite cereal, Crunchy Crinklies, pour herself a big bowl for breakfast and skitter away from this roomful of adults.

“Speak of the devil,” said Clare.

Tilda ignored her and kept shuffling along.

“Good morning sleepy head,” said Tilda’s mother.

Tilda looked at her mother, grunted something, and kept after fixing her bowl of cereal. Her father rushed over to her and squeezed her in a big bear hug.

“Oh, there’s my little girl,” he said, kissing her like crazy. “You know I miss you so much when you’re asleep. You’re just so adorable!”

Tilda just smiled sleepily and hugged him back. At least there was *somebody* in this house who she was sure loved her. Her father had never been shy about showing his affections and it was sometimes the only way Tilda knew she was wanted. About her mother she wasn’t so sure.

As Tilda settled into the business of eating her cereal, her mother and Clare stood off to the side speaking in whispered tones. What they were talking about was unclear, but Tilda was sure she heard her name go by at least once

But it was too early to concern herself with such silliness. She was only interested in finishing up and getting out and about as soon as possible.

Tossing her bowl into the kitchen sink, she quickly made her escape up the stairs and into her room. With everything that had happened yesterday, she was as excited as could be to continue her explorations.

She popped into her room like a toaster strudel, plopped onto her bed and began jamming on and lacing up her shoes. The smelly ones. Mother was annoyed by this “stench” yet being so busy, busy, busy had let them slip by. Oh well.

They were just stupid shoes.

A growl of thunder burst overhead and heavy drops of rain began to fall. Those who have not witnessed gales and storms in tropical regions can form but a faint conception of the fearful storm that burst upon the city. Before she jumped off the bed the storm burst upon her with a deafening roar, and the animals, who knew too well the devastation that was to follow,

fled right and left through the woods leaving all behind in the midst of the howling storm. The trees bent before the blast like willows. A thrill of horror ran through her heart as she recalled to mind the awful scenes that she had before witnessed. But deliverance came suddenly from a quarter whence she little expected it. During the whole of that day there had been an unusual degree of heat in the atmosphere, and the sky assumed that lurid aspect which portends a thunderstorm.

The thunder growled and roared to life. From her window she could see a fleet of oil tanker size dark clouds massing. Whipping winds rattled the walls. The narrow window panes shivered and cowered. A squadron of buzz bombers posing as rain splattered steady till windows looked like bug loaded windshields. The sun was struggling through the misty atmosphere of the horizon before swiftly melting away.

“Raining out there,” mother yelled up the stairs.

She was just tying her shoelaces when she heard it. Very faint whispery voices, drifting out from the little cubby hole in her room. A chill ran from her toes to the top of her curly head. Adventures she didn’t mind. But creepy spooky sounds coming through her bedroom walls? Well, this was something new. Still, she couldn’t resist.

Down to her knees she went and crawled into this odd little cubby hole in her room.

“Listen,” she scolded, “I can totally hear you, okay? Busted!”

She couldn’t be sure but she thought she saw the wall at the far end pulsing. Like someone was pushing on it from the other side. She rubbed her eyes and looked again.

Maybe it was breathing?

She moved closer to it. Yikes! Breathing walls now? Her last house had all kinds of odd creatures living in the walls but this was something else entirely. As if the house itself was alive.

Okay. Okay Tilda. Take it easy. Slow down. Don't rush off and do anything foolish. Maybe she was imagining things. Maybe, if she closed her eyes it would go away.

Snapping her eyes shut like electric shutters she squeezed them tight and wished, wished, wished the breathing wall would go away. She opened her eyes slowly and again looked at the wall. There! It had stopped. So she was definitely imagining it. Probably just—

Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale. The wall started doing the breathing thing again.

“Stop it. Stop it. Stop it,” she yelled, slapping her hand against the breathing wall. Her hand went right through it to her shocked amazement. But the wall did not split or crumble apart like it usually would when you pushed something through it. Like the time she kicked at a wall in the old house and got her foot stuck in it. NO. This wall did not break like that. Instead, it just kind of gave way like she was pushing her hand into a ball of cookie dough. But this cookie dough would not be made into cookies.

She kept on pushing to see how far she could go and before she knew it she was stepping through the wall into another world. Now she had already found that a penny pushed through a crack in the wall would fall down to the basement. She also knew that behind these walls in the cubby hole were only the attic steps. But now she had entered a world within the walls and this was definitely something magical and new.

“Wow,” she gushed. “This is really something!”

Being inside the wall she was surprised to find she was not all squished like she expected. And looking around her she could see nothing but lots and lots of space. Amazing, she thought. Who would have thought something like this would be inside their walls? Curious to find out how big this space was she made a hooting sound.

“Hoot...hoot...”

Sure enough, a strong echo came bouncing back.

“Okay then...pretty big.”

She also found it was pretty easy to see in there. Thin streams of light were coming through from somewhere, crisscrossing and reflecting off surfaces she couldn't see, making it look like one of those high tech alarm systems she'd seen on TV. For an instant she thought that maybe she *was* on TV.

Something buzzed by almost hitting her in the head.

“Hey,” she shouted.

The thing that had almost hit her was a hummingbird. At the sound of her voice the bird stopped and hovered in front of her. Looking straight at Tilda as if it were trying to tell her something.

Hmm, that's weird, thought Tilda. I wasn't expecting to see a bird in here. And I've never had a hummingbird stop in front of me and just float there. Oh, but if it could talk what stories it could tell!

Deciding this was just another odd occurrence in a house that seemed full of odd occurrences she sighed and started moving forward. But the bird stopped right in front of her. It held its place and would not let her pass.

“What are you, like a guard bird or something?”

At this the bird chirped and turned away from her. Tilda took a step forward and stopped. The bird moved forward and stopped too. Thinking the bird wanted to play, Tilda stepped forward and stopped again. The bird copied her moves. Then Tilda took two steps before stopping. The bird copied her and moved forward a bit as well.

This bird is kinda silly, thought Tilda. “Okay. Maybe you're a guide bird or something. So...show me where to go then.”

As if understanding her words the bird started moving slowly forward. Tilda followed close behind. With each step she took a cloud of dust floated up. She tried stepping softer to see if this would help. No. Despite walking softly dust clouds floated up with each step. In the crisscrossing light around her, Tilda could see a swirling storm of dust mites.

“If this keeps up I won’t be able to see anything,” she grumbled.

She sneezed and thought that whoever lived here was not a very good housekeeper. In her head she heard her mother’s voice, “Keep things in order, dear. Keep things in order.” One thing was for sure. This messiness that surrounded her was an example of things *not* being kept in order.

Some time passed and the next thing she knew they were traveling down an incredibly long, very clean, green hallway, shiny and new as if it had just been built. This was certainly unexpected. First she steps through her bedroom wall into an entirely different world. Meets a hummingbird who becomes a tour guide. Follows him along in this dark, laser light crisscrossed extremely dusty universe. Loses all track of time. And next thing you know she comes out into this incredibly clean and long green hallway. Do her parents know of this part of the house?

Then she heard it. Somebody singing in a high voice. And, wait a minute now. The song sounded really familiar, like...yes, yes, that’s it! Farmer in the Dell. Except this version had some strange out of tune notes in there every so often. Dissonant notes she thinks they’re called. Making the overall effect sound kinda sad. Like a song at a funeral or something.

Weird or what. Who would want to sing a song like that?

The singing voice was getting louder and louder as they moved closer and closer to it. The bird stopped short and Tilda stopped with a gasp as she had almost run into it. So abruptly did the

bird stop. Now the bird turned right and pointed her to a door that was slightly cracked open. She supposed it wanted her to go in.

All right then, birdy. In I go.

She opened the door and found herself looking into a smoky, moist room with a round table at its center.

A long spindly woman surrounded by child-size manikins was serving tea and cakes and carrying on conversation with them as if they could hear.

She paused and looked intently at this woman. Aha! This was the woman from her dreams. Tall, scarecrow skinny, wearing a long, black, funeral ready dress, but this was only the beginning of what was strange about this woman. She had extremely long fingers with pointed fingernails and her face...her face...was of a greenish tint that in this light made her look like *she* was dead. Tilda also noticed the woman's darkly stained teeth were long and deadly sharp. Like a shark.

What happened next made no sense at all. As if someone or something were controlling her like a marionette. Tilda casually sauntered up to one of the manikins and pushed the wig off its head.

"You rude, rude, child. Have you no manners."

"Sorry, I just—"

"No excuse. No excuse. Now you've upset Martha. Look at how she's crying now."

Tilda stared at the woman like she was speaking a foreign language. The manikin is crying? Oh right. This shark woman was loony.

Spinning her head around to look at the manikin called Martha, Tilda gulped in shock. Sure enough, there were tear tracks on the manikin's face. Was this some kind of trick?

She turned to the woman who kept up the tea service, promising the crying manikin, “Yes, dearie. Children these days are so uncouth. She will put you back in order immediately.”

Now the woman trained her hard green eyes on Tilda.

“Put things in order, little ruffian. You must give her a kiss and a polite apology.”

“Seriously?” asked Tilda, shocked beyond belief.

“I have not humor nor do I joke. Get to it!”

The look of absolute animal hunger on the woman’s face told Tilda she’d better get moving to put things in order.

Quickly she raced over to Martha, picked up her wig, and put it back in place. Thinking she was finished she began to turn away.

“Tsk tsk. You are *not* finished,” the woman admonished.

“Apologize sincerely as sugar and give Martha a kiss on the cheek.”

Feeling the fool, Tilda turned to Martha, looked into her blank eyes and said, “I’m really really sorry,” and started to turn away once again.

“Tsk tsk, little scruff. My orders were specific orders. Give my dear friend a kiss.”

Oh, how she wanted to shout at this odd woman and run away but she felt that doing so would not be a good idea. She leaned over once more giving Martha a kiss on the cheek.

Now when she turned around the woman was all smiles.

“Now, now. That was not so dreadfully difficult, was it?”

Tilda shook her head from side to side to gesture no.

“I cannot hear you!”

Was this woman really going to insist on her saying the word “no?”

The woman stared missiles at her, drumming her fingers on the table in an irritating click, click, click. Like a typewriter. Just like the dream last night. The woman’s cold reptilian stare was starting to creep her out.

“No,” said Tilda.

“A marked improvement. Perhaps you will yet be useful.”

Tilda balled her hands into fists as she restrained herself from saying the things that were boiling inside her.

“Good news,” said the woman, cheery as a mortician. “Martha forgives you your bad manners and says you may join us for tea and cakes.”

“But I don’t—”

“Now, now. Always politesse, young thing. Always politesse,” instructed the woman, pushing back a chair for Tilda to sit.

Looks like it’s tea and cakes for me, thought Tilda. Not my favorite...tea. But I guess refusing it would be “bad manners?”

So down she sat, first sipping the tea, yuck, then nibbling the cake. Which would have been the most enjoyable part of this snack if it didn’t happen to be a hunk of clay. She took just the one teeny tiny nibble and started gulping her tea to wash the disgusting clay flavor away.

“My my. I see we have a tea aficionado among us. No matter. Plenty there is,” said the woman reaching for the teapot “More cakes?”

Tilda’s eyes went wide in horror. What could she say? She had already grown afraid of this seemingly peaceful woman.

“Um, no thank you, I just...”

The woman stared intently into her eyes, waiting for her to finish. Tilda had the feeling that the woman was reaching inside of her trying to hear her thoughts. She couldn't actually say she didn't like the cake, right?

Tick tock, tick tock, the seconds squeaked painfully along.

The woman continued staring at poor terrified Tilda, eyes blank like a manikin, not blinking even once. Suddenly, as if flipping a switch, the woman's eyes flared red and quick as a snake she reached across the table and snatched the cake from Tilda's plate. She placed the cake on the table, slammed her fist against it, and flattened it completely.

“Apparently the rude behavior has no end. You have slapped Martha's hair off her head and humiliated her, insulted your host, and further insulted my dear friend Martha by refusing this Wednesday cake she made especially for today. Now you've made her cry all over again.”

Tilda was stunned to silence as she turned her head to look at “poor dear Martha.” Sure enough, her eyes were squinched closed as tears ran down her cheeks.

“It is good fortune that I can bear the strain of your abuses. Martha, however, is not so configured. I believe you *know* what you must do to put things in order.”

Tilda's mind went blank for an instant as she attempted to pluck from her brain what exactly it is she was supposed to know, as the woman said. In a flash it came back to her. She wants me to apologize to Martha manikin and kiss her again? Is this for real?

Her tongue started to come out of her mouth, prepared to start wagging wildly as she told this woman what she could do with her stupid manikin and stupid clay cakes. Miraculously, she stopped herself just in time.

Relax, relax, she reminded herself. Then up she stood to once again stroll over to the manikin to make her apologies.

It suddenly dawned on Tilda that she needed to ask this odd scary woman how to find her way back to her house. Not this house inside the walls but her “real” house.

“Well done, uncouth one. Now, to reward your act of humility, Martha has asked me to reward you with this most scrumptious piece of cherry candy,” the woman said, holding out her hand with a rather large jawbreaker size red candy.

Tilda slumped over to her, thanked her and Martha for the candy, then swiftly snagged it from the long fingered hand and popped it into her mouth. She guessed refusing it would be wrong and if she ate this probably nasty candy quickly she could be on her way. Her eyes went wide in shock. Wow! This candy was really really good. How could...why did...when did... No matter. The bitter pill was not so bitter after all and she was only too happy to eat it.

On and on she chewed, smiling more and more and feeling happier than she could remember ever feeling before.

“Now see what you’ve done. You’ve forced your bad manners onto me. Excuse me, please. My name is Villarda, the Night Mother. Your name for the moment is of no consequence...”

That’s the last thing Tilda remembered before waking up curled into a tight ball next to the girl she had met in the cellar. Tilda was moaning and rolling around rubbing her eyes. Her throat was so dry it hurt.

“Mmm... who are you? I mean, have we met before?” the girl whispered.

Tilda was so groggy she was finding it hard to focus her thoughts. The girl speaking to her was busily knotting and unknotting a wild tangle of rope.

“My name is Quill. Have you seen my mother?”

“Umm...I...umm... Yeah, I think so.”

A dark cloud passed over the girl’s face.

“Oh, if you have seen her you would remember. She is the wisest, kindest, prettiest, softest, most generous mother of all. So much better than any day mother. And she is just...”

On and on and on she went like the words were programmed into her and set on repeat. Tilda was unsure whom this girl Quill might be speaking of until she uttered the phrase “day mother.” This spotlighted in Tilda’s memory—like a vile infection—everything that had happened not too long ago. All the details came flooding in like a ravaging tsunami. Yes, yes, she *had* seen her mother. This is assuming Quill was speaking of the Night Mother.

Moreover, Tilda was sure without a doubt that she disagreed with Quill’s description of this...shark woman. As far as Tilda was concerned, this Night Mother creature was not one you wanted anywhere near you.

Finally Tilda’s muddled mind began to clear up.

“We met before. I came in here ‘cause I was wandering through the cellar and saw the light from your door. Remember?”

A dense fog drifted into the girls eyes. She turned her head slowly from side to side her eyes sticking to the ceiling as if it held something for her. Snapping to, she landed.

“Uh huh...yeah...right. You were the one that got away.”

“What?”

“Yeah. Got away from putting things in order so she had to rescue you. Mother says a life without order is no life at all. And certainly not one for mannered children. Day mother’s should be...” A dark storm passed over her face.

Tilda was thinking this girl was nothing but a puppet for Night Mother. Something about the way Quill’s eyes got all misty when she spoke of her screamed puppet so loud Tilda’s ears hurt. Pretty sure it was dinner time she knew had to get home.

“Okay so she *rescued* me. Whoopy do. Um, I gotta go home now. Parents, dinner, you know.”

If she didn't get out of there right now her fear of sharks would shred her to pieces. Tilda backed up to the door slowly while keeping an eye on the girl. She reached the door not a manikin's hair too soon and pulled the handle. The door wouldn't budge. She pulled stronger this time. Not even a squeak.

“Hey um...”

“Quill.”

“Right...Quill. What's wrong with this door?”

“Door? There's a door?”

Was Tilda hearing correctly? Did this girl not know she had a door in this room? How did she think...Tilda was gobsmacked.

“Right. The one I came in the first time I came here?”

The girl's face lit up as she started giggling.

“Uh uh. You're trying to fool me. You just blipped through the wall. Like Night Mother.”

“Blipped through the—”

“Uh huh. I can't do that.”

“Well I need to go Quill so—”

“Mmm...maybe you can blip back out?”

“I didn't blip anyw—”

Like an exploding comet the lights went painfully bright before going to black. Tilda couldn't see her hands in front of her face. Her knees began to shake a little. Whatever was happening she was sure she didn't like it.

Slowly the light returned, coming up to a dusky view. Tilda squinted at the light, eyes burning a bit. The hair on her arms

stood on end. A buzzing sound shook the room like the air was alive. Then like a living nightmare Tilda could see the Night Mother gradually materializing at the back of the room behind Quill, as if she was a cloud of dust.

Tilda's lips were locked closed.

"Hello my sweet," the Night Mother said to Quill, her voice soft as molasses. "Is this filthy thing bothering you?" She speared her eyes at Tilda.

Quill's eyes fluttered as her hands flew up. "Oh no, mother. Just visiting."

The Night Mother continued staring holes in Tilda as a crooked smile crossed her face.

The eyes were hypnotic, binding Tilda in a web where she could not move. A fly waiting for the killing spider fangs. Until being caught in the hypnotic stare of this sinister creature, Tilda did not know the sensation of being trapped in an excoriating stare of pure primeval hatred. The animal hunger in this woman's eyes was a force old and slow. Tilda thought this woman would start chomping on her right there. A warm trickle ran down her legs.

"To the bath, tidbit!"

Tilda must have blacked out. Afterward all she could recall was being washed by something like a Claymation creature, and popping back into the room with the Night Mother and Quill who was happily busying herself with a tangle of rope.

The room was different from when she last saw it as all the walls were now mirrors. And as she looked into them she almost didn't recognize herself. This little girl with neatly styled hair, shiny new clothes, and un-smelly shoes was her? No way!

"Home?"

Tilda trembled and tried to nod her head yes hoping this woman did not demand she say the word.

“Very well. There,” the woman said, pointing a long snaky finger toward a massive hole in the wall. A hole had appeared where before there was none. Tilda wanted out of this place in the worst way.

The woman snapped her fingers and Tilda came unstuck.

“Run along, run along,” said the woman, moving her fingers in a brushing away motion, speeding Tilda toward the wall.

Now what was she doing?

Tilda’s eyes flew open wide as whales. She was so close to the wall she could see the pockmarks and irregularities of its structure. Could smell the imbedded dirt. This is it for me, she thought. This is it. Tilda was certain she would be smashed into the wall when she smoothly popped through the large hole and landed on the other side.

This looked like her basement but not quite. The same but different. Like there was something not right about it. Her breathing was coming real fast, like she couldn’t get enough air. She tried to calm herself and slow her breathing down, and was succeeding until she saw a huge black shadow move across the wall. Her breathing started speeding all over again and her heart began thumping hard.

Now she *knew* this wasn’t her basement.

“Meow, meow.”

The cat sound was small and weak and sounded far away.

“Smudge? Is that you my little—”

Flash bang the cat came into the light. It devoured Tilda with wild hungry eyes. This was entirely unexpected. She had had Smudge for so long she could no longer remember when their friendship began. Maybe a present for her fifth birthday? But

the feline face now staring her down did not look at all like the Smudge she remembered.

Moving slowly, with a soft voice she tried coaxing it, “Good boy, Smudge. Good boy.”

The cat gave no response just intensified its glare in her direction and hissed.

“Okay, okay. I’m going.”

Backwards she walked. Carefully. Softly. Not expecting anything but knowing she would figure it out when something happened along. Careful to not look directly at the cat—eye contact is often taken as aggression—she kept her eyes on the floor in front of her feet. Desperate for anything to deliver her from this showdown, she was hoping she had walked far enough when she swung her arm behind her and hit something solid. Running her hand along the surface behind her she encountered a handle. A door! A door at the right time for a scared and cornered little girl. With the skill of a tightrope walker she grasped the handle, keeping the cat clearly in her sights.

Okay. It’s all or nothing.

With one swift pull she opened the door and slipped through it. The cat kicked up quite a ruckus of unhappy sounds. It slammed itself against the door and scratched at it wildly. Tilda breathed a cleansing breath of relief at having been spared the jaws and claws of the strange and feral cat she dubbed Un-Smudge.

“If we ever meet again, cat...I hope we don’t.”

She sat herself down feeling like she needed a good long think. A disorienting constellation of things had happened seemingly all at once. Too many to make sense. Once again, she had stepped into treacherous universe where all things and people—if she could call them people—appeared intent on harming her in various ways too gruesome to imagine.

Also once more, she had narrowly avoided certain annihilation. Though aside from being spared, she couldn't see that her situation had improved much. In the dim light she could see only an arm's length ahead while at the same time sensing herself surrounded by numberless huge entities. Thoughts like this would do nothing to help her.

Meanwhile, there was still the matter of getting home for dinner that needed tending.

Good luck finding your way out of this muck, she thought. That'll teach you to not walk through walls.

With dark thoughts weighing on her, she stood up firmly resolved to get home as quickly as possible.

“Now, I got here by going through a wall, maybe I can get back home by doing the same.”

She put her hand against the wall and plopped back into her bedroom.

Relieved the bad dream was over, she scurried out of the cubby hole and high tailed it downstairs where she was sure dinner was waiting.

Her mother was standing by the stove. Father was at his computer. Something was odd though. They were both so still.

Tilda went up to talk to her mother and pulled on her mother's arm. Maybe a little too strongly. Her mother's arm fell off in Tilda's hand.

Falling down, stunned to silence, Tilda began sobbing. “I'm sorry ma, I'm really sorry, I didn't mean to...”

But when she looked at the arm in her hands she saw it was plastic. Like a fake arm. Like a...manikin's arm!

She jumped to her feet spun her mother around and looked into cold empty eyes. Her father had now slumped over and was laying across his computer.

One small step at a time she moved forward, holding her hands in front of her. She figured this was as good a way as any to move around an unfamiliar place.

She froze in her tracks when something tapped her on the shoulder. Dropping her hands to her sides she remained steady and unmoving. This is no time to be scared frozen, she thought. Turn around...turn around.

With every ounce of courage she had, about face went, turning to find...nothing.

Her mouth dropped open in shock. "Ghosts now? Really?"

If there were ghosts about there was one thing they were not: silent.

A faint and steadily increasing sound of whispering hissed out of the gloom and swirled around her. The sound seemed to be coming from everywhere. Voices...whispering voices. Like the ones she had heard in her room. Except this time, she was close enough to make out what they were saying:

*Yes. Yes. The melting. The melting...*

Of course these voices would make no sense. Why would they? If they intended to scare her, they had already done that. No point in hiding behind words and...

*She escaped the melting. She can escape the melting. She can...*

Melting? Escaping? And who was "she?"

Looking down at her feet as if they were the most interesting things in the world, she saw smoke trails, saw rather than smelled them. She jolted to attention and that's when she detected it. Long tendrils of smoke growing out around her and reaching further and further, like a massive sea snake, creeping slowly then faster in her general direction. The floor beneath her feet was rumbling. Panic set in. A fear for her life. Trying to move her legs and get as far away as possible was the

brilliant idea of the moment. But her legs would not move. Stuck like glue. Her mind sizzled: the melting?

No, no, no!

Immediately coming to mind was the Night Mother who evidently was not content to leave Tilda alone. Down Tilda went. Feet stuck to the floor. Backside hitting ground. She felt herself being whisked away and shivered in terror. Opening her mouth to scream for help produced no sound at all. The air around her absorbed her voice like a sound sponge.

This not-so-magic carpet ride was speeding her along, peeling around turns, bumping over—Ouch!—stones, shuttling her along as though she were a watermelon being pushed along in a grocery cart. So this is the life of a watermelon.

Bump, bump, bump.

The last bump laid her flat on her back, looking straight up at an enormously tall peaked ceiling. The air around her felt suddenly warm and a bit moist. Brightly colored paintings, a grand piano to her left, twisting white sculptures everywhere. Maybe she had landed in a museum?

A pleasant cinnamon scent wafted through, rubbing against her nose, and sneaking in, giving her a much needed sense of calm. Well a very tasty smelling museum anyway. Not the dead, moldy, dusty smell they usually had. Like dead things.

Click, click, click.

Closer and closer the clicking came. Rippling with squeaky young voices.

“We could keep her for a while.”

“Oh, wouldn’t that be darling?”

“It would indeed, dear one.”

“But uncle has made his feelings clear.”

“So right, so true. But we, dear sister, are legion.”

Girlish giggling and more giggling, just two little girls being naughty. These had to be the two laughingest people ever.

Click, click, click.

They were upon her. Looking down at her with hands folded in front of them. They had the most fat rosy cheeks.

Tilda found she could now move her feet so she rolled onto her stomach and stood up.

“Oh...hi again,” she said, shaking her head and running her hands through her hair. “I’ve had a really weird day.”

“Oooh. Don’t you want to pinch those eyes?”

“One does not go about pinching eyes, dear.”

“Of course, of course. Excited too much”

Tilda stood by, her mouth a straight line, her eyes drinking them in.

“Please forgive, my darling. Gelma Schtoodle,” sweeping her arm theatrically to her right, “my sister Orelia.”

“The shackle glide was absolutely imperative, I’m afraid.”

“Yes,” added Orelia, “*Most* imperative.”

Tilda’s eyes spoke in loud whispers.

“Huh?”

“The mode of travel employed to express you to this domain. To glide on a current of air one must be shackled to it.”

“A safety issue.”

“If one fails to shackle to the glide current a...tear apart...or, or worse...can occur.”

“Poor cousin Schpitzhaförr.”

“Poor, *poor* cousin Schpitzhaförr.”

“Uncle grumpy calls him cousin Splateat.”

Orelia screwed up her eyes and drooped her lower lip.

“Dear sister, I believe we’ve overloaded the poor little girl.”

“Correct I believe you are.”

Gelma walked up to Tilda, put an arm around her shoulders, and started leading her away. Tilda’s first impulse was not too pull away. She decided she liked these two sisters.

“Let us sit down to afternoon tea, dear.”

Orelia’s eyes went three shades of wide.

“Yes. Let us.”

Soon enough they were entabled, comfy in their chairs, sipping and giggling enough to cause a shortage. Though they were not *all* sipping tea. Tilda had apologetically declined the tea claiming stomach issues, and the sisters accepted this with polite tolerance, providing her instead with a wonderful fizzy beverage a lot like lemonade. And Tilda was known to go for the lemonade.

“Pico, pico, pico, pepper.”

“The lemon twizzle I too enjoy,” enthused Orelia. “For this a taste has not my sister.”

A strange disarray of images flashed through Tilda’s mind. In scary movies why do those teenagers keep going into that dark room to be scared senseless? Horror movies have scared the pants off generation after generation but they were not for Tilda. Therefore it came without surprise that recent events in her life had scared her witless.

For some reason, as scared as she had been before, having her life threatened by the cold animal stare of the Night Mother had caused her to wet herself. Good thing she was whisked right away to bathe.

For in the presence of the Night Mother she had become a timid, subservient child who was terrified of making a mistake. And this was not the Tilda of old. A bold adventurous girl for whom the world was nothing more than a massive and magical play land.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Odd as a square circle, the next morning Tilda could not eat her breakfast fast enough as she raced through to get back to the new mystery world she had discovered.

“What’s the rush, muffin? Do we smell bad or something?”

Tilda screwed up her eyes and gave her father a funny look. Were these her “real parents” now? Well, they didn’t look plastic.

“Uhm, or something I guess.”

“Something you guess? My my. Our little angel is very mysterious, wouldn’t you say my love?”

“Oh honey,” said mother, “Little girls have their own little play worlds. I think I would know. I WAS as a little girl once.”

Tilda stared at her mother trying to see her as a little girl and decided her mother was never a little girl, just her mother. Still it was kind of weird that this time it was her mother making excuses for her behavior. And it also looked like her mother’s arm was just fine. Last time Tilda saw it the arm had fallen off in her hands.

“I suppose your mother’s the one to know, muffin. Go ahead and race away off to your little play world then.”

Weird suddenly became weirder and Tilda just had to get away to the new world she had discovered. Oh, it was weird in its own way, scary too. But she expected that because it was brand

new to her. Yet her parents were anything but brand new to her so their sudden weird behavior stuck out like a big red nose.

The city has its cunning wiles, no less than the infinitely smaller and more human tempter. There are large forces which allure with all the soulfulness of expression possible in the most cultured human. The gleam of a thousand lights is often as effective as the persuasive light in a wooing and fascinating eye. Half the undoing of the unsophisticated and natural mind is accomplished by forces wholly superhuman. A blare of sound, a roar of life, a vast array of human hives, appeal to the astonished senses in equivocal terms. Without a counselor at hand to whisper cautious interpretations, what falsehoods may not these things breathe into the unguarded ear! Unrecognized for what they are, their beauty, like music, too often relaxes, then weakens, then perverts the simpler human perceptions.

Tilda pushed through into a large dimly lit room. She looked around for the Night Mother and saw several tables, each with one or two kid sized dolls sitting at them. The bowls in front of them made it look like they were sitting down to breakfast. Were there other children at play here?

A long shadow grew suddenly from out of the corner. When the tall wiry shadow turned into the tall Night Mother with green marble eyes and extremely long spidery arms, Tilda started to run. But the Night Mother spoke in such a sweet honeyed voice Tilda was immediately calmed.

“Dearie, if you just sit down here and play a bit you will feel much better. I promise it will put things in order.”

“But...but—”

“Now, do not be difficult, dearie. Eat this wonderful piece of fluffy candy and your playtime will be magical. I promise—”

Tilda was waiting to hear her finish "I promise" with "it will put things in order" but she never heard these words. Suddenly the candy was in her hand then in her mouth, and as the candy

went down her throat she was cast adrift into a playtime with wonderful carnival sounds, flashing colors, sweet smells of spring, happy laughter, no thoughts of anything troubling like Day Mothers or...

*There is no pain she is drifting. A distant ship, smoke on the horizon. She only comes through in waves. Her lips move but no one hears what she is saying. Her hands feel like lead balloons. Her eyes go blank, her brain goes fuzzy, a misty morning in the rain, a violet pumpkin at her feet. Mothers of all shapes and colors floating by, their feet unhitched from dock or anchor. Only clouds obscure the way. She has a name but cannot say it. Not sure of anything anymore, her eyes drop like the sun brings on the moon. She fades in; she fades out, a circular dance, a rhythm undefined.*

“...you see, dearie? No dogs, cats, etcetera. Simply vile beasts left to their own obnoxious beastly ways. But here, for soft comfort, we have the stick creatures, eminently shapeable, pliable, and appealing for their eagerness to please. You will find these far superior to the lowly beasties.”

Tilda looked at her intricately crafted ploopy and was happy with what she saw. Memory of living pets had faded from her grasp. Now, this Popsicle stick figure, this "ploopy," was as good a pet as any and easy to train.

She watched to see words jig and shimmy and take form, conversing in shouts and whispers, shaped to their kind, wily words filling the earspace, the mind dancing resplendent. Watching words dance in front of her tearless eyes happened as if it was the most normal thing in the world. Whereas before she had only heard or ignored words, now she could not evade them.

“Bring her!”

Immediately, two large multi-lettered words seized her like a sack of potatoes, a faint cracking sound when they squeezed

her arms, and slammed her down in a chair at the kid sized dolls breakfast table.

“You’re late, you tardy child. Yet the others have already begun. And you’ve made dear little Martha cry.”

The Night Mother pulled off one of Tilda’s arms and thumped it on the poor girl’s head.

It was then Tilda went unconscious and slumped across the table.

## **About the Author**

Malachi Moose-Rat toils in half light and solitary silence in his cellar work space. As he has difficulty intermingling with the groundlings, this arrangement is to society's benefit. He disdains karaoke. He does not chase the moon. But he does tell stories. Thereby his redemption is ensured.





This edition was downloaded free of charge from  
[www.obooko.com](http://www.obooko.com)

Although you do not have to pay for this e-book, the author's intellectual property rights remain fully protected by international Copyright law. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only: it must not be redistributed commercially or offered for sale in any form. If you paid for this free edition, or to gain access to it, we suggest you demand an immediate refund and report the transaction to the author.