

Ian MacLeod is the author of The Light Ages, The Summer Isles, and several other novels and collections. His most recent collection, Journeys, is due out this summer and a new novel, Wake Up and Dream, is slated for publication in the fall. (There's an extract from the novel online at www.ianrmacleod.com. Make sure to put the "r" in that URL unless you're looking for a whisky distiller.)

Regarding this new story, Mr. MacLeod says only that he has yet to take a cruise holiday.

Recrossing the Styx

By Ian R. MacLeod

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ELCOME ABOARD THE *Glorious Nomad*, all 450,000 nuclear-powered tons of her. She is literally a small country in her own

right, with her own armed services, laws, and currency. But for all her modernity, life afloat remains old-fashioned. There are the traditional fast-food outlets, themed restaurants, colored fountains, street entertainers, and even a barber's shop staffed by a charmingly impromptu quartet. There are trained armies of chefs, litter collectors, pooper-scoopers, and maintenance engineers. Firework displays are held each evening on the main central deck above the Happy Trillionaire Casino, weather permitting. It's easy to understand why those who can afford her tariffs carry on cruising until — and then long after — death.

Wandering the decks in his lilac-stripe crew blazer, resident tour host Frank Onions never paid much attention to the news reports he saw in magazines left glowing over the arms of sun loungers. Still, he knew that dying was no longer the big deal it had once been. Death, it had turned out, was the answer to many of the problems of old age. With your weakening

heart stopped, with your failing body eviscerated and your memory uploaded and your organs renewed, you were free to shuffle around on your titanium hips for another few decades. And, after that, you could book in for the same procedure again. And again. There were, admittedly, some quibbles about whether the post-living were still technically the same people they had once been. But, working as Frank did in an industry that relied heavily on the post-centenarian trade, it would have been churlish to complain.

It seemed like there were more corpses than ever as he led the morning excursion to the ruins of Knossos in Crete, with the *Glorious Nomad* anchored off what remained of the city of Heraklion. At least fourteen out of the forty-two heads he counted on the tour bus looked to be dead. Make that double, if you included their minders. The easiest way to tell the dead apart from the living was by a quick glance at their wigs and toupees. Not that the living oldies didn't favor such things as well, but the dead were uniformly bald — hair, like skin, seemed to be something the scientists hadn't fully got the knack of replacing — and had a particularly bilious taste in rugware. The lines of bus seats Frank faced sprouted Elvis coxcombs, dyed punky tufts, and Motown beehives. The dead loved to wear big sunglasses as well. They shunned the light, like the vampires they somewhat resembled, and favored loose-fitting clothes in unlikely combinations of manmade fabrics. Even the men put on too much makeup to disguise their pasty skins. As the tour bus climbed toward the day's cultural destination and Frank took the mike and kicked into his spiel about Theseus and the Minotaur, a mixed smell of corrupted flesh, facecream, and something like formaldehyde wafted over him.

The September sun wasn't particularly harsh as Frank, *Glorious Nomad* lollipop in raised right hand, guided his shuffling bunch from site to stairlift to moving walkway. Here is the priest-king fresco and here is the throne room and here is the world's first flush toilet. The only other tour group was from the *Happy Minstrel*, another big cruise vessel berthed at the old American naval base at Souda Bay. As the two slow streams shuffled and mingled in their frail efforts to be first to the souvenir shop, Frank couldn't help but worry that he was going to end up with some of the wrong guests. Then, as he watched them some more — so frail, so goddamn *pointless* in their eagerness to spend the money they'd earned

back in their discarded lives as accountants from Idaho or lawyers from Stockholm or plant-hire salesmen from Wolverhampton — he wondered if it would matter.

He corralled what looked like the right specimens back on the bus without further incident, and they headed on toward what today's itinerary described as *A Typical Cretan Fishing Village*. The whole place looked convincing enough if you ignored the concrete berms erected as protection against the rising seas, and the local villagers did local villager as well as anyone who had to put on the same act day after day reasonably could.

Afterward, Frank sat under an olive tree in what passed for the harborfront taverna, took a screen out from his back pocket, and pretended to read. The waiter brought him stuffed olives, decent black decaf, and a plate of warm pita bread. It was hard, sometimes, to complain.

"Mind if we join you?"

Frank suppressed a scowl and put away his screen. Then, as he looked up, his contractual smile became genuine.

"Sure, sure. It would be a pleasure."

She was wearing a strappy sundress made of some kind of fabric that twinkled and changed with the dappling light. So did her bare golden shoulders. So did her golden hair.

"I'm Frank Onions."

"Yes..." There was a curious intensity to her gaze, which was also golden. "...We know." She raked back a chair. Then another. And beckoned.

Damn. Not just her. Although Frank supposed that was to be expected, apart from crew, the only young people you found on board ships like the *Glorious Nomad* were minders. The dead man who shuffled up was a sorry case indeed. His toupee was a kind of silver James Dean duck's arse, but it was wildly askew. So were the sunglasses, and the tongue that emerged from between ridiculously rouged lips in concentration at the act of sitting looked like a hunk of spoiled liver.

"Oh, I'm Dottie Hastings, by the way. This is Warren."

As this Dottie-vision leaned to restraighten the rug and sunglasses, the dead man slurred something that Frank took to be hello.

"Well..." She returned her gaze to Frank. "We really enjoyed your tour and talk this morning. What can we get you? A carafe of retsina? Some ouzo?"

Much though he'd have loved to agree with anything Dottie suggested, Frank shook his head. "I really don't drink that kind of stuff.... Not that I have a problem with it..." he felt compelled to add. "I just like to take care of myself."

"Oh yes." Frank could feel — literally *feel* — Dottie's gaze as it traveled over him. "I can see. You work out?"

"Well. A bit. There's not much else to do in time off when you're crew."

She made a wry smile. "So. About that drink. Maybe some more coffee? I'm guessing decaf, right?"

Dottie, he noticed, settled for a small ouzo, although the Warren thing restricted himself to orange juice, a considerable amount of which she then had to mop up from around his wizened neck. There was a strange and unminderly tenderness about her gestures that he found almost touching. Lovely though she was, Frank found it hard to watch.

"You do realize," she said, balling up paper napkins, "that most of the stories you told us about Knossos are pure myth?"

Frank spluttered into his coffee. But Dottie was smiling at him in a mischievous way, and her mouth had gone slightly crooked. Then the knowing smile became a chuckle, and he had to join in. After all, so much of what they'd just been religiously inspecting — the pillars, the frescos, the bull's horns — had been erected by Arthur Evans a couple of hundred years before in a misguided attempt to recreate how he thought Knossos should have been. But Evans got most of it wrong. He was even wrong about the actual name. Frank never normally bothered to spoil his tales of myths and Minotaurs with anything resembling the truth, but, as Warren drooled and he and Dottie chatted, vague memories of the enthusiasm that had once driven him to study ancient history returned.

Dottie wasn't just impossibly beautiful. She was impossibly smart. She even knew about Wunderlich, whose theory that the whole of Knossos was in fact a vast mausoleum was a particular favorite of his. By the time they needed to return to the tour bus to view the famous statue of the bare-breasted woman holding those snakes — now also known to be a modern fake — Frank was already close to something resembling love. Or, at least, serious attachment. There was something about her. Something, especially, about that golden gaze. There was both a playful

darkness and a serene innocence somewhere in there that he just couldn't fathom. It was like looking down at two coins flashing up at you from some cool, deep river. Dottie wasn't just clever and beautiful. She was unique.

"Well...." He stood up, as dizzy as if he'd been the one knocking back the ouzo. "Those treasures won't get looked at on their own."

"No. Of course." A poem of golden flesh and shifting sundress, she, too, arose. Then she leaned to help the Warren-thing, and for all his disgust at what she was doing, Frank couldn't help but admire the way the tips of her breasts shifted against her dress. "I'm really looking forward to this afternoon. I mean...." After a little effort, Warren was also standing, or at least leaning against her. His mouth lolled. His toupee had gone topsy-turvy again, and the skin revealed beneath looked like a gray, half-deflated balloon. "We both are." Dottie smiled that lovely lopsided grin again. "Me and my husband, Warren."

MINDERS WERE ALWAYS an odd sort, even if they did make up the majority of Frank's shipboard conquests. But Dottie was different. Dottie was something else. Dottie was alive in ways that those poor sods who simply got paid for doing what they did never were. But *married*? You sometimes encountered couples, it was true, who'd crossed the so-called bereavement barrier together. Then there were the gold-diggers: pneumatic blondes (why were they always blonde?) bearing not particularly enigmatic smiles as they pushed around some relic in a gold-plated wheelchair. But nowadays your typical oil billionaire simply accepted the inevitable, died, and got himself resurrected. Then he just carried on pretty much as before. That was the whole point.

Frank Onions lay down in his accommodation tube that night with a prickly sense of dislocation. Just exactly where was he going with his life — living down in these crew decks, deep, deep below the *Glorious Nomad's* waterline where the only space you could call your own was so small you could barely move? It might not seem so up among the parks and shopping malls, but down here there was never any doubt that you were at sea. Heavy smells of oil and bilge competed with the pervasive human auras of spoiled food, old socks, and vomit. It was funny, really, although

not in any particularly ha-ha way, how all the progress of modern technology should have come to this: a hive-like construct in which you shut yourself like a pupa preparing to hatch. No wonder he wasted his time in the crew gym working his body into some approximation of tiredness, or occupied what little was left after that hunting the next easy lay. No wonder none of the ship's many attractions held the slightest interest for him. No wonder he couldn't sleep.

All he could think of was Dottie. Dottie standing. Dottie seated. Dottie smiling her lopsided smile. The sway of her breasts against that prismatic fabric. Then Frank thought, even though he desperately didn't want to, of what Dottie might be doing right now with that zombie husband of hers. Mere sex between them didn't seem very likely, but mopping up food and levering withered limbs in and out of stairlifts was merely the tip of the iceberg of the tasks minders were required to perform. The thing about being dead was that blood, nerve cells, and tissue, even when newly cloned, were susceptible to fresh corruption, and thus needed constant renewal and replacement. To earn their salaries, minders didn't just give up a few years of their lives. After being pumped full of immunosuppressants, they were expected to donate their body fluids and tissue to their hosts on a regular basis. Many even sprouted the goiter-like growths of new replacement organs.

Frank tossed. Frank turned. Frank saw throbbing tubes, half flesh, half rubber, emerging from unimaginable orifices. Then he felt the rush of the sea beneath the *Glorious Nomad's* great hull as she plowed on across the Mediterranean. And he saw Dottie rising shining and complete from its waters like some new maritime goddess.

As the *Glorious Nomad* zigzagged across the Aegean from the medieval citadel of Rhodes to the holy island of Patmos, Frank Onions kept seeing Dottie Hastings even when she wasn't there. A glint of her hair amid the trinkets in the backstreets of Skyros. A flash of her shadowed thighs across the golden dunes of Evvoia. He felt like a cat in heat, like an angel on drugs. He felt like he was back in the old times that had never existed.

Warren Hastings wasn't hard to find out about when Frank ransacked the *Glorious Nomad's* records. He'd made his first fortune out of those

little hoops that used to hang at the top of shower curtains. His second came from owning the copyright on part of the DNA chain of some industrial biochemical. Warren Hastings was seriously, seriously rich. The sort of rich you got to be not by managing some virtual pop band or inventing a cure for melancholy, but by doing stuff so ordinary no one really knew or cared what it was. For all the money a top-of-the-range Ultra-Deluxe Red Emperor Suite must be costing him, he and Dottie should by rights have been plying the oceans aboard their own cruiser, living on a private island, or floating in a spacepod. Perhaps they enjoyed the company of lesser immortals. Or perhaps they simply liked slumming.

The more Frank thought about it, the more the questions kept piling up in his head. And the biggest question of all remained Dottie herself. It was an odd shock, despite all the times he'd now seen her and Warren exhibiting every sign of tenderness, to discover that she'd married him ten years earlier — before he'd even died — in a small, private ceremony in New Bali. There she was, dressed in virginal white beneath a floral arch, with Warren standing beside her and looking a whole lot better than he did now. The records were confused and contradictory about exactly when he'd chosen to die, but he must have started seriously decaying before he finally made the leap, whilst Dottie herself seemed to have just emerged, beautiful and smiling and entirely unchanged, into the more discreet and upmarket corners of the society pages, and into what you could no longer describe as Warren's life.

It all still felt like a mystery, but for once Frank was grateful for the contract clause that insisted he spend a designated number of hours in the company of paying passengers. He mingled at the cocktail hour of the Waikiki Bar, and feigned an interest in a whole variety of passenger activities about which he couldn't have given the minutest fuck until he worked out what kind of social routine the Hastings were following, and then began to follow something similar himself.

Onward to the island of Chios with its Byzantine monastery and fine mosaics, and the autumn waves were growing choppy as Frank Onions ingratiated himself with what he supposed you might call the Hastings crowd. Sitting amid the spittle rain of their conversations as Warren gazed devotedly in Dottie's direction with his insect sunglasses perched on his

ruined Michael Jackson nose, Frank could only wonder again at the continuing surprise of her beauty, and then about why on earth she'd consented to become what she was now. Most minders, in Frank's experience, were almost as dead as the zombies they were paid to look after. They'd put their lives on hold for the duration. Apart from the money, they hated everything they were required to do. Even in the heights of passion, he always felt as if their bodies belonged to someone else.

But Dottie didn't seem to hate her life, Frank decided once again as he watched her wipe the drool from her husband's chin with all her usual tenderness and Warren moped back equally tenderly. The thought that they made the perfect couple even trickled across his mind. But he still didn't buy it. There was something *else* about Dottie as she turned to gaze through the panoramic glass at the wide blue Mediterranean in proud and lovely profile. It was like some kind of despair. If her golden eyes hadn't been fixed so steadily on the horizon, he might almost have thought she was crying.

He finally got his chance with her after a day excursion on the tiny island of Delos. The Hastings had opted to join this particular tour party, although they hung back as Frank delivered his usual spiel about the Ionians and their phallic monuments as if Dottie was trying to avoid him. Then a kerfuffle involving her and Warren broke out just as the launch arrived for the return to the *Glorious Nomad*. A lovers' tiff, Frank hoped, but it turned out there had been some kind of malfunction that required immediate action as soon as they got back on board ship.

Dottie still had on the same white top she'd worn all day when she finally emerged on her own at the Waikiki Bar later that evening, but it now bore what looked to be — but probably wasn't — a small food stain on the left breast. Her hair was no longer its usual marvel in spun gold, either, and the left corner of her mouth bore a small downward crease. She looked tired and worried. Everyone else, though — all these dead real estate agents and software consultants — barely noticed as she sat down. They didn't even bother to ask if Warren was okay. The dead regarded organ failure in much the same way that flat tires were thought of by the petrol motorists of old: a bit of a nuisance, but nothing to get too excited

about just as long as you'd packed a spare. The spluttering talk about annuity rates continued uninterrupted, and the tension lines deepened around Dottie's eyes as her fingers wove and unwove in her lap. Even when she stood up and pushed her way out through the corral of matchstick limbs toward the deck, Frank was the only person to notice.

He followed her out. It was a dark, fine night and the stars seemed to float around her like fireflies. A flick of hair brushed Frank's face as he leaned close by her on the ship's rail.

"Is Warren all right?"

"I'm looking after him. Of course he's all right."

"What about you?"

"Me? I'm fine. It wasn't me who — "

"I didn't mean that, Dottie. I meant — "

"I know what you meant." She shrugged and sighed. "People, when they see us both, they can see Warren's devoted to me...."

"But they wonder about you?"

"I suppose so." She shrugged again. "I was just this girl who wanted a better life. I was good at sports — a good swimmer — and I had these dreams that I'd go to the Olympics and win a medal. But by the time I'd grown up, Olympic competitors no longer used their own limbs or had anything resembling normal human blood flowing in their veins. So I eventually found out that the best way to get steady work was on ships like this. I did high dives. I watched pools in a lifevest. I taught the dead and the living how to swim — how to paddle about without drowning, anyway. You know what it's like, Frank. It's not such a terrible life just as long as you can put up with the tiny sleeping tubes, and all those drinks served with paper umbrellas."

"What ships were you on?"

"Oh...." She gazed down into the racing water. "I was working on the *Able May* for most of this time."

"Wasn't that the one where half the crew got killed in the reactor fire?"

"That was her sister ship. And then one day, Warren comes along. He looked much better then. They always say the technologies are going to improve, but death hasn't been particularly kind to him."

"You mean, you really did find him attractive?"

"Not exactly, no. I was more — " She stopped. A small device on her wrist had started beeping. "I have to go to him. Have you been to a suite like ours, Frank? Do you want to come down with me?"

"Wow! This is nice...."

Gold. Glass. Velvet. Everything either glittery hard or falling-through soft. Frank had seen it all before, but this wasn't the time to say. The only jarring note was a large white structure squatting and humming beside the cushion-festooned bed.

"...I just need to check...."

It looked as if Dottie were inspecting the contents of some giant walk-in fridge as she opened one of its chrome and enamel doors and leaned inside. The waft of air had that same tang — a chill sense of spoiling meat. There was even that same bland aquarium light, along with glimpses of what might have been trays of beef and cartons of colored juice, although by far the biggest item on the racks was Warren himself. He lay prone and naked in such a way that Frank had a fine view of his scrawny gray feet, his hairless blue-mottled legs, his scarred and pitted belly, the winter-withered fruit of his balls and prick. He looked not so much dead as sucked dry. Far more alarming, though, was the empty space on the rack beside him, which was plainly designed to accommodate another body.

"He's fine," Dottie murmured with that weird tenderness in her voice again. She touched one or two things, drips and feeds by the look of them. There were flashes and bleeps. Then came a sort of glooping sound which, even though he couldn't see exactly what was causing it, forced Frank to look away. He heard the door smack shut.

"He'll be right as rain by morning."

"You don't get in there *with* him, do you?"

"I'm his wife."

"But...Jesus, Dottie. You're *lovely*." Now or never time; he moved toward her. "You can't waste your life like this.... Not when you can...." It seemed for a moment that this oh-so-direct ploy was actually working. She didn't step back from him, and the look in her golden eyes was far from unwelcoming. Then, as he reached out to her cheek, she gave a small shriek and cowered across the deep-pile carpet, rubbing at where his fingers hadn't even touched. It was if she'd been stung by a bee.

"I'm sorry, Dottie. I didn't mean — "

"No, no. It isn't you, Frank. It's me. I like you. I want you. I *more* than like you. But.... Have you heard of imprinting?"

"We're all — "

"I mean the word literally. Imprinting is what happens to the brain of a chick when it first sees its mother after it hatches. It's an instinct — it's built in — and it's been known about for centuries. It's the same to some or other degree even with the more advanced species. That's how you can get a duckling to follow around the first thing it sees, even if it happens to be a pair of galoshes."

Frank nodded. He thought he understood what she meant, although he hadn't the faintest idea where this was leading.

"We humans have the same instinct, although it's not quite as strong or simple. At least, not unless something's done to enhance it."

"What are you saying? Humans can be imprinted and attached to other humans? That can't be legal."

"When does whether something's legal matter these days? There's always somewhere in or off this world where you can do whatever you want, and Warren already knew he was dying when I met him. And he was charming. And he was impossibly rich. He said he could offer me the kind of life I'd never achieve otherwise no matter how long I lived or how hard I worked. And he was right. All of this — " She gestured at the suite " — is nothing, Frank. It's *ordinary*. This ship's a prison with themed restaurants and a virtual golf range. With Warren, I realized I had my chance to escape places like this. It didn't seem so difficult back then, the deal I made...."

"You mean, you agreed to be imprinted by him?"

She nodded. There really did look to be tears in her eyes. "It was a small device he had made. You could say it was a kind of wedding gift. It looked like a silver insect. It was actually rather beautiful. He laid it here on my neck, and it crawled — " she touched her ear " — in here. It hurt a little, but not so very much. And he made me stare at him as it bored in to find the right sector of my brain." She shrugged. "It was that simple."

"My God! Dottie...." Again, but this time more impulsively, he moved toward her. Once more, she stumbled back.

"No. I can't!" she wailed. "Don't you see? *This* is what imprinting means." The stain on her left breast was rising and falling. "I'd love to

escape this thing and be with you, Frank. But I'm trapped. At the time, it seemed like a small enough price to pay. And it's true that I've been to incredible places, experienced the most amazing things. Living on a cruise ship like this, looking at the ruins of the ancient world because we can't bear to look at the mess we've made of this one.... It's meaningless. There's a different kind of life out there, Frank, in the high mountains, or up in the skies, or deep beneath the oceans. For those few who can afford it, anyway. And Warren could. *We* could. It's like some curse in a fairy tale. I'm like that king, the one who wanted a world made of gold, and then found out that he was killing everything that was important to him in the process. I wish I could be with you, Frank, but Warren will carry on and on as he is and I can't give myself to anyone else, or even bear to have them touch me. I just wish there was some escape. I wish I could unwrite what happened, but I'm forever tied." Her hand reached toward him. Even in tears, she looked impossibly lovely. Then her whole body seemed to freeze. It was as if a glass wall lay between them. "I sometimes wish we were dead."

"You can't say that, Dottie. What you and I have — what we *might* have. We've only just —"

"No. I don't mean I wish *you* were dead, Frank. Or even myself. I mean things as they are..." She raised her golden eyes and blinked more slowly. "...and Warren."

THE TIDES WERE TURNING as the *Glorious Nomad* beat against the deepening autumnal waves. Frank found himself giving talks about the Grecian concept of the transmigration of souls, and how the dead were assigned to one of three realms: Elysium, for the blessed; Tartarus for the damned; Asphodel — a land of boredom and neutrality — for the rest. To reach these realms you first had to cross the River Styx and pay Charon the ferryman a small golden coin or *obolus*, which grieving relatives placed on the tongues of the dead. To attain your desires, he concluded, gazing at the papier-mâché masks of ruined, once-human faces arrayed before him in the Starbucks Lecture Suite, you must be prepared to pay.

Poison? The idea had its appeal, and there were plenty of noxious substances on board that Frank might be able to wrangle access to, but

neither he nor Dottie were experts in biochemistry, and there was no guarantee that Warren couldn't still be re-resurrected. Some kind of catastrophic accident, then — especially in these storms? Something as simple as disabling the magneto on one of those big bulkhead doors as he went tottering through...? But getting the timing exactly right would be difficult, and there was still a faint but frustrating chance Warren would make some kind of recovery, and then where would they be?

The options that Frank and Dottie explored as they met on the spray-wet deck over the next few days seemed endless, and confusing. Even if one of them worked flawlessly, other problems remained. There was an opportunity coming for them to leave ship together when the *Glorious Nomad* dropped anchor by the shores of old Holy Land for an optional tour in radiation suits, but Dottie would be expected to act the role of the grieving widow, and suspicions would be aroused if Frank were to resign his post and then be spotted with her. No matter how many jurisdictions they skipped though, they'd still be vulnerable to prosecution, and also blackmail. But one of the things Frank was coming to admire as well as love about Dottie was her quickness of mind.

"What if *you* were to appear to die, Frank?" she shout-whispered to him as they clung to the ship's rail. "You could...I don't know...you could pretend to kill yourself — stage your suicide. Then — " she gazed off into the tumbling light with those wise, golden eyes " — we could get rid of Warren instead."

It was as perfect and beautiful as she was, and Frank longed to kiss and hold her and do all the other things they'd been promising each other right here and now on this slippery deck. Disguising himself as Warren for a few months, hiding under that toupee and behind those sunglasses and all that makeup, wouldn't be so difficult. Give it a little time and he could start to look better of his own accord. After all, the technology was continually improving. They could simply say that he'd died again, and been even more comprehensively re-resurrected. All it would take was a little patience — which was surely a small enough price to pay when you considered the rewards that awaited them: Dottie freed of her curse, and she and Frank rich forever.

Drowning had always been the most obvious option. They'd toyed with it several times already, but now it made absolute sense. Toss Warren

overboard, he'd sink like a stone with all the prosthetic metal he had in him. And if they did it close to the stern — threw him down into the wildly boiling phosphorescent wake of the *Glorious Nomad's* eighteen azimuth propellers — he'd be torn into sharkmeat; there'd be no body left worth finding. Sure, alarms would go off and one of the hull's cameras might catch him falling, but even the most sophisticated technology would struggle to make sense of whatever was going on through the force-eight gale. Especially if they waited until dark, and Warren's body had on one of the transmitting dogtags all crew were required carry, and was wearing a lilac-striped blazer.

By the next day, the kind of storm that had shipwrecked Odysseus was brewing, and the *Glorious Nomad's* public places soon fell empty as her passengers retreated to their suites. The barber's shop closed early. The several swimming pools were covered over. The ornamental lake in the Pleasure Park franchise was drained. The air filled with the sounds of heaving and creaking, curious distant booms and bangings, and a pervasive aroma of vomit.

Heading along the swaying passageways to their pre-arranged meeting point, Frank already felt curiously convinced by the details of his own suicide. His last talk on board the *Glorious Nomad* was about how Orpheus tried to rescue his dead wife Euridice from the Underworld, and it had taken no effort at all, staring at those white-faced zombies, to put aside his usual catch-all smile and appear surly and depressed. Ditto his few last exchanges with colleagues. Fact is, he realized, he'd been this way with them for years. Everything, even the ferocity of this storm, had that same sense of inevitability. Back down in his sleeping tube, he even found that it was far easier than he'd expected to compose a final message. He'd been able to speak with surprising passion about the emptiness of his life: the sheer monotony of the talks and the tours and the berthings and the embarkations — the long sessions in the gym, too, and the ritual seductions with their overcoming of fake resistance, and the inevitable couplings and even more inevitable break-ups that followed, with their equally fake expressions of regret. Just what the hell, he'd found himself wondering, *had* he been living for before he met Dottie? Looked at dispassionately, the prospect of his own imminent death made every kind of sense.

He arrived at the junction of corridors between Challengers Bowling Arcade and the smallest of the five burger franchises just two minutes early, and was relieved to find the whole area empty and unobserved. Dottie was as punctual as he'd have expected, and somehow still looked beautiful even dressed in a gray sou'wester and half-hauling her dead husband up the sideways-tilting floor. Warren was in his usual brushed velour top, crumpled nylon slacks, and velcro sneakers, although his sunglasses and toupee were all over the place.

"Hi there, Frank," Dottie said, grabbing a handhold and supporting Warren by a bunched ruff behind his neck. "I know it's a terrible night, but I persuaded Warren that we might feel fresher if we took a walk." Frank nodded. His mouth was dry. "Maybe you could help me with him?" she added, shoving Warren into Frank's half-surprised embrace.

"There you go, fella," Frank heard himself mutter as he propped the withered creature against the bulkhead. "Why don't we take this off...?" Quickly, he removed Warren's black top, which slipped worn and warm and slightly greasy between his fingers, although it was the feel and sight of Warren beneath that really set his teeth on edge. The dead man muttered something and looked back toward Dottie with his usual puppy-dog longing, but made no discernable attempt to resist.

"Maybe this as well..."

The toupee felt even warmer and greasier.

"And this..."

Here came the sunglasses, hooked off what passed for ears and a nose. Frank had to judge every movement against the rising, falling waves. But, Jesus, the man was a mess.

"Looking a bit cold now, Mister Hastings...."

Frank shucked off his own blazer.

"So why don't we put on this?"

A few more maneuvers and Warren was wearing Frank's crew blazer. Frank almost forgot the crew dogtag until Dottie reminded him in a quick whisper. Even then, Warren in this new attire looked like nothing more than a particularly bald and anemic scarecrow, and Frank was wondering how this switch would ever convince anyone until he swung the weighed hatch open and was confronted by the sheer size and scale of the storm.

The deck was awash. Dottie hung back. Salt spray ignited the air. It

was a miracle, really, that she'd been able to do as much as she had to help when you considered the deal this dead husk had forced on her. Now all she had to do was keep hold of his nylon top, toupee, and sunglasses. The sky shattered in grays and purples. For all his slips and struggles as he maneuvered Warren Hastings toward the *Glorious Nomad's* stern, Frank Onions felt like he was Odysseus sailing from Circe's island, or Jason with his Argonauts in search of the Golden Fleece. Soon, he would reach those warmly welcoming shores that Dottie had been promising him.

A few last staggers and he was clinging to the final rail, and still just about keeping hold of Warren, although they were both equally drenched and it was hard to distinguish between sea and sky out here. Then he felt the steel cliff-face of the *Glorious Nomad's* stern rising and straining until her screws were swirling above the waves, and it seemed for a long moment that the whole ship would simply carry on climbing until the ocean dragged her down. Frank skidded and nearly fell as he grabbed Warren's arms and tried to haul him over the rail.

"Stop squirming, you bastard!" Frank screamed into the wind even though Warren wasn't squirming at all. As the ship teetered and began to fall back, he tried to lift him again, and this time got some better kind of purchase. This, Frank thought, as he and Warren swayed like dancers over the stern's drop, was far closer to a dead man than he'd ever wanted to get, but for all the wet, gray skin, cavernous cheeks and birdcage chest, there was something about Warren Hastings in this stuttering light that didn't seem entirely dead. Something in the eyes, perhaps, now that they were stripped of their goggle sunglasses, or in the set of that mouth now that the powder and rouge had run. The guy had to have worked out what was happening, but there was still no sign of any resistance, nor any sense of fear. If anything, Frank thought as he finally managed to hook one hand under Warren's wet and empty armpit and the other under his even emptier crotch and gave the final quick heave that tipped him over the rail, that last look conveyed something like relief — perhaps even a sense of pity....

"Did it work? Are you okay?"

Already, Dottie had managed to clamber up the deck. Already, the curse of her imprinting was broken, and her arms were quickly around him. Roughly and wetly, they kissed.

"I love you, Frank," she said, and her arms were strong and the ship's searchlights and alarms were blazing as she drew him behind a lifeboat into the lee of the storm and took out something silver from her sou'wester pocket that squirmed and uncurled like a living jewel.

"I love you."

She said it again, and kissed him harder as he felt a sharpness crawl across his neck.

"I love you."

She held him tighter than ever as pain flared inside his ear.

"I love you."

She said it again and again and again and again.



HERE HAS he not been? What has he not seen? He's looked down on an Earth so small that he could blot it out with his thumb, he's skysailed to the peak of Mount Everest. If there was a price to pay for all this glory, Frank Onions would willingly have paid it. Most glorious of all to him, though, eclipsing every moonrise and sunset, is his continuing joy at sharing Dottie's company. The money — even the incredible things that it can buy; the glass terraces, the submarine gardens, the refurbished Burmese palaces — is just the river, the coin, the *obolus*. To be with her, and to share his flesh and blood with her, is an experience that pales even the furthest heights of sexual ecstasy.

Days change. The living die and the dead live, but Frank's love for Dottie is unchanging. He has, once or twice, much as one might gaze in awe at bare footprints left across an ancient floor, looked back along the path that brought them together. He knows now that the real Warren Hastings married his beautiful sixth wife just a few months before he died, or perhaps simply disappeared, in circumstances that other times and cultures might have regarded as mysterious. Since then, and as before, Dottie has remained just as stunningly, agelessly beautiful. And she always has a companion whom she likes to term her husband. Sometimes, when the circumstances suit, she even calls him Warren. Frank has no need to ask Dottie why she chose death above life. He already understands perfectly. After all, why would anyone who had the money and the choice wait for old age and decrepitude before being resurrected? And what

sacrifices and demands wouldn't they then make, to ensure that they remained eternally beautiful?

Dottie is Frank's world, his lodestone. He lives with and within her, and would sacrifice any organ or appendage or bodily fluid joyously. As for himself, he knows that he's no longer the well-kept specimen of a man who was first enraptured by her. Only last week on the glassy plains outside Paris, he gave up a good portion of his bone marrow to her, and a third regrown kidney. The effects of these and other donations, along with all the immunosuppressants he must continually take, leave him thin and weak and dizzy. His hair has long gone, he must wear sunglasses to protect his bleary eyes, and he shuffles hunched and crabways. He realizes that he's already starting to look like the creature he tossed over the stern of the *Glorious Nomad*, and that the wonders of the life he's now living cannot last forever.

In the circles in which they move, far removed from the *Glorious Nomad*'s ruin-inspecting tribes of meekly departed middle executives, Frank and Dottie's relationship is seen as nothing unusual. As she once said to him in what now seems like a different existence, who knows or cares about what is legal nowadays? Sometimes, when the weakened husks like himself who accompany Dottie and her companions grow close to failing, they head off to live some lesser life for a few weeks, and enjoy the thrill of finding a fresh and willing replacement. They call it *recrossing the Styx*. It's a new kind of symbiosis, this imprinting, and it strikes Frank as a near-perfect relationship. It's only when the pain and weakness in his thinning bones sometimes get the worst of him, and he gazes around at the golden creatures who surround him, that he wonders who is really dead now, and who is living. †

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