

COMING AND GOING

By Antonin Dvorak

He hadn't expected this. Would you have? Probably not. No one short of God could realize His family was about to be abducted. But there he stood, nonetheless, a half-eaten Twix in one hand, a Sunoco receipt in the other. The spot where his Chrysler had stood—at pump number 5—now stood ajar, open, utterly empty. No, worse than all that. That gas-stained station was a cavity in the world, a cavity that quickly swallowed *everything*.

Dr. Mark Atlas—yes, pronounced Atlas—closed his fist over his candy bar and felt it rupture under the pressure, spilling crumbs to the concrete and melting chocolate through his fingers.

“Tess?” he said.

She was just teasing him. Sure she was. His wife had swung the car around to an adjacent parking lot. There, Tess and his daughter, Mary, were laughing cutely. Five-year-old Mary would be sitting in Mommy's lap, looking at Daddy, who now dropped his Twix into a small puddle of gasoline.

Tess hadn't moved the car, though, because Tess didn't do things like that. And her having done that wouldn't leave a cavity in the world and in his heart.

Only half-an-hour ago they had been at Aunt Maybell's place, a rickety old house on the outskirts of Detroit, in Romulus. It had been another stellar visit. Aunt Maybell had only thrown a fit once that evening, and that was good. Normally the woman's moods were as rickety as her house, with the Atlas family forever walking on eggshells.

Today's tantrum had something to do with the way her television's speakers didn't project sound well. After dinner they had all gone into her living room to catch up on the evening news. The volume, as always, could have been compared to that of a space shuttle launch. But Aunt Maybell couldn't hear the TV, and became convinced that the sound wouldn't reach her ears because the speakers had become prejudiced against her.

“Why can't I hear?” she had caterwauled in her shifty, gobbling voice. “Why do you hear, and I can't? Doesn't make any sense, Marky. Not to me. No sense at all!”

“Oh, now, May,” Mark had replied. “That's a Sony television with Sony speakers. And I read an article last week—just last week, wasn't it, Tess?—on how Sony makes the least discriminating sound systems in the world.” Tess nodded emphatically, blond hair bobbing, as if she remembered exactly the article in question. Mark could have kissed her right then and there. In fact, he had.

Aunt Maybell had peered cleverly up at him with squinted eyes. “Please, Marky. Don't pester your old aunt.”

He had comforted Maybell as best he could, moved her chair closer to the television, to a point where he was sure that her ears must burst with sound. Then they all sat on the couch, about fifteen feet behind her at the very back of the room.

Aunt Maybell pumped her fist in the air in a cheery sign of victory. They had foiled the evil conspiring of the speakers yet again. Ears ringing with the reporters' voices, the Atluses laughed to themselves.

They loved her. Aunt Maybell's tantrums and sometimes dispiriting bouts of paranoia were little penance for the joy she brought them. Mark most of all, made it a goal to visit her at least once a week. He had asked for her to move in with them a few times. *It would be easier for us to spend time together*, he had explained.

Her reply had been camouflaged simplicity: *Elephants are great animals, but I'd never take one home with me.*

Mark had trouble imagining Maybell as an elephant—the woman stood five-feet-four-inches tall and tipped the scale at 108 pounds soaking wet—but had no doubt she could do her fair share of trampling.

So the visits were what came and went. The visits just about every weekend, because they loved her. And that was that.

Hell, Aunt Maybell was the whole reason Mark had become a doctor, wasn't she? Her gibbering goosewash and meandering walks couldn't erase the good she had done for him in a time when the good had needed doing.

Mark Atlas had been fifteen years old then. Aunt Maybell, thirty-six. He had gone over to her house to return the colander his mother had borrowed. He had walked into a house that smelled strongly of air fresheners. It smelled sterile and soapy. But beyond the smell, it was the silence that had struck little Marky. A lambent silence that seemed to hover over everything like a thunderhead, sharpening its toothy lightning. The only sound came from an old grandfather clock in the vestibule. Its copper pendulum swung back and forth in lazy strokes, and gears clicked with each successive movement.

When he found her, he clapped eyes on a different Aunt Maybell than he cared to know. This Aunt Maybell was sprawled out on the floor. This Maybell's lips were the color of purple lilacs, her cheeks as white as moonlight on bone. Her hands lay at her sides, palms up. Her eyes stared up into some unknown place well beyond the ceiling. And Bernie Goodshoes stood at her side, licking her hand and whimpering. A black lab, Bernie Goodshoes had white patches of fur on each foot but for his right forepaw. Sometimes, as younger kids, he and his sister had called the dog *Uncle Bernie Goodshoes*, and Maybell hadn't minded that one bit.

That had been almost thirty-three years ago. Thirty-three cavity-filling years, and he still remembered perfectly Bernie leaping up at the sight of him. The dog had bound toward him, then returned eagerly to Aunt Maybell and resumed his licking of her mostly-soaked hand. It was eerie the way he had done that, little Marky had thought. His tongue lapping because it was all he knew to

do, while his eyes stared up at him. That sidelong stare begged for him to do something, too, even if all he could offer was the licking of Maybell's other hand. At least that way they could get both of her hands. At least that way they could do something!

And then, for the first time, he felt panic. Real panic. It had taken a moment to come, but, oh *God*, here it was. Panic like a downpour of fire-hot, steamy rain. Panic like teeth. He had run to her, had fallen to his knees next to her.

"Auntie?" he had said, knowing there would be no reply. "Say something, please."

Next to Marky, Bernie stopped his licking and looked up as if to say, '*Well start licking, boy! You're doing no good just kneeling there!*' And then Bernie redoubled his efforts.

Marky poked his hand out over Aunt Maybell's mouth and tried to feel for breath. He felt none. In the insanity of it all, panic tightening around him in pythonic coils, he had licked his finger and stuck it back over her mouth. That's what you did to feel wind, right? Made sense that you'd do it to feel human wind. But still, he felt nothing.

He could've jumped up to call an ambulance. It would have been screeching up the street only minutes later. But minutes later would have been too late. Minutes later and Aunt Maybell would already be gone.

Reeling through a fit of nausea, Marky felt for her pulse, pressing his fingers against her neck, stumbling across her carotid artery. There was a pulse. No question. It wasn't a strong one, but it was definite—a slight rhythm almost like something squirming in her neck.

The panic python grew in strength, squeezing him almost to busting. If she were still alive, it meant she could be saved. If she could be saved, *he* would have to save her! He would have to save—

His breath snared in his airway. He reached up and gasped once, twice, and then no more. It was as if the very air had formed a stodgy wedge in his throat. Marky fell from his knees and found himself sitting Indian-style. Flashes began flickering in his eyes. Flashes not of light, but of dark, of black flashbulbs. The cameras taking these pictures weren't memorializing life, but venerating death.

And then it had happened. The panic fell away, as if Marky had only to cast it off. The swollen air in his throat thinned, and wheezed out. He coughed.

He saw the Details. For the first time in his life, he saw the *Details*.

He felt them, too. His eyes did more than just see, they understood. His eyes ran the show, and he let them.

Just there, a bit to the left of where he had felt for Aunt Maybell's pulse. Her throat looked a bit off-kilter. Barely, if at all. But this was Marky's gift. These were the Details.

He jumped up and straddled her, knowing what to do the way birds know how to fly. He put his hands on her stomach, and pressed up and in with quick,

powerful jolts. Sweat trickled down his forehead and cheeks, and Bernie stopped his licking so that he could watch.

It was sickening, the way her body rocked beneath his press. Her insides pushed up and away, rolled inside her, and Marky did his best to ignore the nastiness of it. But ignoring wasn't his strong suit now. No, Details were his strong suit and the Details pestered him.

The lump in her throat moved a bit with one of his upthrusts. Moved up, and then dislodged entirely.

Suddenly very awake, Aunt Maybell bounced up, knocking Marky clear away, sending him skittering across the floor on the seat of his pants. Uncle Bernie Goodshoes barked, almost apologetically, as if he were to blame for this mishap. Good ol' Bernie, loyal to his last strands of fur. Aunt Maybell barked in reply.

Barked in reply? Why on earth would she—

And then Marky realized that his aunt wasn't barking after all. She was coughing, coughing to save her life, pulling large bunches of air into her lungs whenever she could. A few more hacks and the bit of candy she had caught on came popping out of her mouth. It clinked against the linoleum floor and rattled its way over to where Marky sat.

A gumdrop.

A goddamned gumdrop.

Maybell blinked tears from her eyes and stared at Marky. She understood already. She didn't see the Details the way he had, but she understood well enough anyway. Color rushed into her cheeks; her lips got carried away and went from that sickly lilac purple to practically the color of roses. If one thing could be said for members of the Atlus family, they were quick on the mend. You had to give them that. Very quick on the mend.

With his Aunt's life saved and the crisis averted, the Details began to wash away into the everyday soup of perception. Marky was glad for that. He didn't think he could live with those Details day-in and day-out. He would have been driven mad.

"We're all just coming and going," Aunt Maybell said later that day. "Don't be scared. You saved me and that's all you could do." Only Maybell hadn't understood. How could she? Marky wasn't scared for her life, but for the unknown dimension that had been unlocked in his own. "If I had passed on, I would have gone to heaven. It wouldn't have been over for me. I would have gone to be with God." She had blotted away his tears with her thumbs, and Marky thought of how one of those thumbs had been slathered in dog drool only hours ago.

Dr. Mark Atlus had come to rely on his gift in the end. That gift had turned him into one hell of an ER physician. Sometimes he wondered if other doctors saw what he saw. Was it what drove them to be doctors?—being able to see everything so clearly during times of stress and panic? He thought that maybe

others did have the same gift. Sure, such a gift wouldn't have been rationed only to him. Why would it? But he did doubt that very many saw the Details as acutely as he.

Mark had saved countless lives already—put off their going for at least a little while—and he would probably save countless more. But just now, he was interested in staving off death for only two lives. If he could save just those two, he would happily hang up his duties to this world. He would wash his hands of them. But these two lives, he could not let go.

A strange tangle of smells filtered through his nose. Of Twix and gasoline, of humid, cold air and tires. Mark was also very aware of the vapor puffing out through his nose with each breath, big, puffy plumes of it, like smoke from a dragon's nostrils.

A woman busily pumped her gasoline-pig (a Ford Explorer) full of 89 octane. This woman also kept looking over at Mark with wide eyes, because she had seen something, though she *just couldn't be sure what*.

Across the street from the Sunoco, November's evening air ruffled the blades of grass, which scissored back and forth almost like upside-down pendulums. Cars whizzed back and forth over the road between him and the grass, their tires whirring over the pavement and making sounds like applause as they happened along a mashed Pepsi Twist soda can.

Immediately, Mark knew which way they had gone. He wasn't sure why they had gone, or who had taken them, but he knew that they were headed south. He knew, because he saw the Details.

The woman, in her mid-forties, was just now beginning to comprehend what she had seen. Even without looking directly at her—there were, of course, more noteworthy items available for his consideration—Mark could see the pieces of the puzzle coming together in her eyes. Yes, things were coming together for that lady, incredibly, too. She had never expected to see something like this, but...here it was. Like all the leaves falling from a tree in tandem, and landing in a perfectly constructed pattern of meshed serration and concavity. But he would deal with her in a second.

Two other things. One, the skid marks. Sure, there were a lot of them on that patch of pavement under the loud Sunoco sign, but only one set had splashed a puddle of gasoline-laced water.

Two, across the street, there stood a signpost. And on that signpost—this was the first Detail he had noticed—the offender had left a streak of the Chrysler Concorde's beige paintjob.

Stepping forward just as the lady took her first step, he effortfully came down on the Twix just to feel it squelch underfoot.

"Oh, my God," the lady started. The words were fuddled and stammered, as if they hadn't taken into account the presence of her lower lip and had come out tripping over it. "They were kid, weren't they?" She reflected on her statement for only a moment, and still Mark didn't look at her. "*Kidnapped*. That man, he

took them. I thought that maybe they were just horsing around like people sometimes do and that—”

Now he did look to her, already reaching into his pocket. “A man? What did he look like? Would you recognize him?”

“Of course,” she said, in a tone half-angry and half-hurt. ‘I may not have stopped him, but I’m no fool,’ that tone said.

“Good, go inside and call the police. Explain what you saw.”

She was confused again; he could see that. She didn’t need a gumdrop in her throat to choke her thoughts. “What are you going to do?”

Mark unlimbered his wallet and offered it to her. “This is my identification, a hundred and forty-six dollars, and every credit card I own. If you’ll let me, I’d like to borrow your car to go get back my wife and daughter.” Perfectly calm, his voice. Grace under fire, and quick on the mend.

The woman stared at the wallet as if he had just pulled a dead mouse from his pants.

“I can call the police from my cell,” she said. “You can borrow my car, but not without me in it. For all I know, those folks *were* just horsing around. Maybe you’re just trying to steal my car.”

Now it was Mark’s turn to be confused. Him trying to steal her car? Unlikely. It was her excuse to come with him, to be a part of something bigger than the evening she had planned for herself.

She ignored his wallet and held out her keys. Mark noticed the slip of receipt poke tongue-like out of the automated gas pump.

“All right.” And his eyes once again left her. His sight streaked to the Explorer. Already he knew that in moments he would be rolling the driver’s seat back by roughly nine inches. He knew that he would adjust the steering wheel down two notches.

He skirted her and went right for the driver’s side door. It popped open and he heard the slight rasp of an under-lubricated hinge. He paid it no mind, but he heard it just the same. Mark heard it as he heard the humming fluorescent bars above them.

The woman climbed into the passenger seat and snicked her seatbelt in place. “They went that way,” she said, pointing southbound down Mound Road, pointing in the direction Mark already knew they had gone.

“Call the police,” Mark said.

The engine roared and suddenly the Explorer bolted out of the gas station. It reared like a rudely awakened beast, bucketing onto Mound Road over potholes and lumpy pavement.

Knowing which direction they had gone was the easy part. Knowing what came after, that would be the trick. As if from inside his own head, he heard the brief tonal beeps of 9-1-1 being dialed. The sound of those three numbers being dialed in that particular order were what drove the reality home to him. And he

had to admit to feeling some stress. His wife and daughter had been stolen from him. Their absence was a cavity, a gaping, yawning, inexplicably large cavity.

Mark Atlas welcomed the stress. It sharpened the Details. His perception sharpened to the point it could cut a diamond.

“There’s been a kidnapping. I need to report a kidnapping of a wife and daughter.”

Without any thought, “Theresa and Mary Atlas.”

“Theresa and Mary Atlas,” the woman parroted.

This was some stress. It welled up in him with great force. He hadn’t felt this kind of pressure since...since he first saw Bernie Goodshoes licking Aunt Maybell’s hand. As crazy as it sounded, he thought he might be sick. Mark’s mind swam with the Details he saw, smelled, heard, felt. His muscles vibrated as adrenaline sparked wildfires in his body. He became convinced that his muscles had gone ape-shit and would completely pull his body apart—that the muscles would tear and splinter his bones, turning him into a fleshy pincushion.

“No, no,” the lady said. “I saw them get nabbed.”

Nabbed? Mark thought, as if his family were no more than a deck of baseball cards or pack of gum.

“In the Sunoco gas station on Mound Road. The man just climbed into this guy’s car and took off with his family while he was inside paying for his gas.” There was a tone in her voice he recognized—disbelieving belief. He knew it well. He thought of it as the *how-in-God’s-name-could-this-be-happening?* tone. The very same tone many of his patient’s family members took on when they found out that little Jeffrey had cut his hand playing with a machete, or that 350-pound, five-foot-seven-inch tall Dad had suffered a heart attack. “Right. Well, he’s here with me now. The license plate number is...”

“S49-0L2,” Mark said. “A beige Chrysler Concorde.”

She repeated the information. Then silence for a few seconds. “She’s putting out a call on your vehicle.”

Mark pumped the brakes and took a left on Timling Street.

“Where are you going?”

But he didn’t answer. He was too busy watching for signs.

“Why’d you turn down here? They probably went—”

“Down this street,” Mark finished. He pointed to the group of kids standing on the sidewalk. They were flustered and ranting, one of them waving her hands in the air.

The Explorer pulled up alongside them.

“Excuse me,” Mark said, rolling down his window. Now he could almost hear the hum of his muscles jiving and buzzing under his skin. “You saw them, didn’t you?”

“Yeah!” a boy cried out. “They was screaming. This little girl was screaming like crazy and some guy was screaming back.”

“Yes, I’m here,” the lady, whose name he still hadn’t learned as Judy Averitt, said into the cell.

“The guy was trying to get her to close her window,” the girl who had been throwing her arms around added. “Yelling at her. He was swatting her. And then when—”

But Mark didn’t care to hear whatever came next. He threw his foot down on the gas and shot forward again.

“Sure,” Judy said, “Absolutely.” Another pause. Mark registered the smell of bananas, apples and potatoes; Judy had just gone grocery shopping. “He was probably in his 30s, wearing black sweatpants, and a white T-shirt. No, not that I can remember, no logo or anything on the T-shirt. Just white...He had on sunglasses, which I thought was weird in the middle of the night...About five and a half feet tall, average weight. Maybe a hundred and seventy pounds, I don’t know.”

He listened to this with great interest. Details, Details. It was always about Details.

“No beard or facial hair, no. Dark brown hair, cut pretty short and parted...No tattoos that I saw. He limped though. Yes, he did limp, and he had a scar that cut across his ear.”

A scar that cut across his ear? Mark tried desperately to remember anyone he had known with a scarred ear, but he was shooting blanks. No one in his personal life. But patients...sure, there were plenty of those with blemished ears and limps to boot.

And now Timling Street came to...*a dead end*, he thought, and he didn’t like the flavor of that phrase in his head. A dead end simply wouldn’t do.

Tasting bitterness in his mouth, he threw the car in reverse and backed it up to the last intersection. Timling and Worcester. Had the maniac taken them north or south, gone right or left, to heaven or hell?

He frenetically searched for Details.

“I will stay on the line, of course. We are just going after—” Mark reached over and snapped her clamshell cell shut. His senses the way they were, the sound of it closing was like a grenade detonating. “Why’d you do that? We need their help.”

But when Judy looked up at him again, the expression on his face stopped her talking. And that was good. Less clutter.

Mark studied the road, searching for any telltale traces. Skid marks, or more beige paint, or more concerned patrons of the city. Nothing.

A horn blared at him from behind, sounding for all the world like a shrill scream. Flipping on his hazards, Mark flagged the driver forward. The Cherokee hung a Louie at the intersection.

We’re all just coming and going, Aunt Maybell’s voice churned in his head. He tried to shake it out, to tell her that this wasn’t the time. But memories can’t be

reasoned with. They are persistent jackasses. *Don't be scared. You saved me and that's all you could do...*

All you could do...

All you could...Don't be scared...

Coming and going, we're all just—

No! His family wasn't going. Not yet!

Mark closed his eyes and concentrated, first opening the windows. Nothing visual. Maybe something more.

He felt the breeze, a westward-travelling fellow. He heard cars a few streets away. He heard a Dodge Neon come up behind them. The driver headed the hazard lights and passed, also to take a left on Worcester. A line of sweat tickled his back as it slid down his spine and brought goosebumps up over his arms.

Poor Judy Averitt must have been frightened just about out of her mind. She had never borne witness to such a thing, and found herself a bit out of her element. A fish not only out of water, but also on the moon.

And suddenly Mark's gift grew in breadth. He stopped breathing as it did. He stopped breathing because he could never have expected it. But there it was, his gift opening layers upon layers, as if he had never fully unwrapped it, as if he had only been peeking under the wrapping all these years.

Whoever had kidnapped his family had taken a right on Worcester. He knew this better than he knew the number of digits he had grown on each hand. He spun the steering wheel and blasted down the street. He left the hazard lights on, because this was a hazardous situation if he'd ever seen one.

"Where are you going? How do you know that they went this way?" Judy asked. Apparently even his look of extreme contemplation couldn't hold off her curiosity. How did that saying go? Curiosity kills cats? Mark decided that Judy was very lucky to have not been born of the feline persuasion, and he didn't answer her.

She wouldn't have believed him anyway.

He hit the brakes and swerved left onto Rowley Avenue, a strip more of potholes than pavement. The Explorer bucketed and jounced wildly. Mark thumped his head on the ceiling twice, but did not slow down. Seconds were almost as important as Details.

He knew they had come down Rowley Avenue—and then taken another left onto Kipling—because he felt his wife. He felt her presence. It was like standing in the wind. Turn against the wind, and you feel it smacking you in the face, rippling through your hair, chasing the small hairs in your nose. Turn away from it, and it presses you forward, urges you on. That was the best Mark would ever be able to explain it to Maybell. It was like he had gotten all caught up in the wind of Tess' Details.

He could feel Mary, too. But her presence here was weaker. He wasn't sure why, and he didn't want to know. Not just yet. Let the punches fall when they need to, but not just yet.

Mark experienced the Details as Tess had experienced them. They traveled the wire that all married couples run between themselves, but never quite learn how to decode. He felt her pain, not physical, but mental. He felt her anguish and fear, and the emotions almost tore him apart, almost *did* make his muscles splinter and thrash his bones.

Turning a corner and goosing the engine before throwing on the brakes, Mark finally spotted his Chrysler Concorde. It stood ahead on the curb rakishly, the left, front tire up in the lawn. Mary was inside the car. He knew that much right when he saw it.

Swerving to avoid hitting the Concorde, Mark came to a screeching halt next to it. Judy rocked forward in her seat and threw her hands against the dashboard, but she didn't say anything. She simply stared, and Mark felt the confusion baking off of her.

"Wait here. Call the police and tell them where we are, that we found them." The next part was harder to get out, but just as necessary. "Tell them to send an ambulance."

He leapt from the confines of the Explorer and ran to the Concorde. What he saw inside he would never erase from his memory. What he saw would forever haunt him, bringing him restless nights and fretful days.

...Every...last...detail...

Mary lay across the back seat. Her small hands seemed to reach out towards him. Her legs pressed awkwardly against the back of the front passenger seat. Her head tilted to one side, eyes closed, a bruise blooming in her temple like a thunderhead, sharpening its toothy lightning.

Oh Jesus, no.

He threw the door open and climbed in next to her. His gift had never failed him, and it didn't fail him now. He looked her over, examined ever possibility, and assured himself that she would be all right. The pulse was strong. No bones were broken. Her breathing came in regular intervals, intervals one could set his watch to if he chose.

But the bastard had knocked her out. He had clocked her a good blow to the head, and Mark would return the favor.

And for the first time—feeling a little woozy, a little drunk on the Details of Mary's turmoil—he looked away from his daughter and to the house. Inside that house, his gift was still needed. He could hear his wife screaming.

He jumped out of the Chrysler and looked over to the Explorer. Judy sat with her eyes bolted to him, her lips spitting out words and phrases the way some cobras spit venom, and her words burned in his ears.

"Yes," she was saying. "Yes, I don't know how bad it is. *We* don't know."

Only that wasn't entirely true. He knew how bad it was. It was well beyond bad. This situation was mounting horrible, horrific, and horrendous.

He turned back to the house. The house with its pleasant white siding and eyelid-like shutters. The damned house where his wife was just now staring down Death and doing her best to keep a grip on Life. Life is funny like that, you know? Mark sure knew. He knew that Life was a lot like a balloon. Untether that balloon and it'll just float away, not a care in the world. Down below, the world's children will cry for that balloon, will bellow and wail and lament. But the balloon will just—

The Detail wind came in a powerful current now, not pressing, but *forcing* him forward. He could almost taste blood. A crack pointed jaggedly out of the driveway and Tess had tripped over it, had scrapped her knee in doing so. She had kept looking back towards the Concorde, towards Mary.

The rush of Details buffeted Mark and he almost lost consciousness. But that didn't matter. Nothing mattered anymore. Even if he had lost consciousness, he was pretty sure the wind of Tess' Details would have carried his body forward anyway.

Mark mounted the steps to the porch, felt the tiny shifting of the boards, and tried the doorknob. It was unlocked. Sure. Of course it was. No one could have followed them in, right? Who would ever know what was happening until the happening was over?

And then a Detail he hadn't been expecting. As if in response, the doorknob jangled under his hand. Mark looked down, confused, just as the door swung inward.

Distracted muttering, "Two. I owe two now." Then, "Mark! Fuck me, Friday, how'd you find us?"

Mark recognized this man instantly. The sunglasses Judy Averitt had described were now perched on his head. The scarred ear that would forever impede his Hollywood aspirations rang in Mark's eyes like a visual bell. How could it not? Mark was, after all, the doctor who had stitched the ear back together.

"It's gone too far," Jeffrey Dunmore said. Sweat dripped from him in torrents and he smelled like roadkill. After those few seconds of standing in the doorway, drops of sweat beaded the floor beneath him as if a rainstorm had blown by. But the sweat wasn't the liquid that bothered Mark. "But maybe you can save her! Maybe you can! Sure you can!"

Blood had been spilt on Jeffrey's shirt. It gleamed in the moonlight and sent vapor into the air. And Mark could smell Tess' perfume on this man.

He threw up his hands and before he knew what he was doing, Mark had sent the man reeling backwards into the house. Jeffrey tried to put his weight down on that gimp leg and the leg folded beneath him. The bookshelves in the family room rattled as the man hit the floor.

“No, wait!” Jeffrey shrieked in a voice like Mary’s. And suddenly Mark thought that he understood. Jeffrey had killed his wife. Tess had been dispatched, and Jeffrey had been going out to the car to get his daughter.

“You fucking bastard,” Mark roared, and the Details tore into his head like punching fists. He knelt over Jeffrey as he had knelt over Maybell. Jeffrey, who had come into the St. John Macomb Hospital one year ago with multiple contusions and bone fractures. Jeffrey who had sustained serious injuries in a car crash he had caused. Jeffrey who had served as the angel of Death for the family who’s car he had smashed his station wagon into. Apparently he liked serving in that role, because he seemed eager to take up the responsibility again.

“I need to repay you,” Jeffrey screamed, still sounding like a little girl, a voice so high it could have clabbered milk. And those eyes! Staring into those eyes was like staring into the sun, so much white hot, crazy, raw energy. “*Please!* I went too far, but it’s not too late.” The Detail of Jeffrey’s last sentence almost escaped Mark, because Mark was preparing himself to kill. But Jeffrey screamed it again, “It’s not too late!”

“Where is she?”

“Like I told her, I owed you a life. I owed you a favor!”

“*What?*”

“You saved my life. So I had to save a life for you. That’s how it works, right? Otherwise I’m indebted to you forever.” Jeffrey stared up at him with wide, lunatic eyes. A drop of sweat fell from the tip of Mark’s nose and he watched peripherally as it dropped into the intransigent splotch of blood on Jeffrey’s white T-shirt. “So I tried to save her for you. Just to almost kill her, and then bring her back. We’d have been even then! We’d have been even, Mark!”

This man had been following him. Had gone crazy and been charting out his life. For the last twelve months at least, Jeffrey had been planning to get even. To set things to rights.

Mark shivered, jumped up, and ran deeper into the house.

We’re all coming and going, echoed Aunt Maybell’s words again. *You saved me and that’s all you could do.*

“She’s in the kitchen,” Jeffrey called after him, but Mark had already known.

Tess lay on the cream linoleum with her face against the floor. One arm ran the length of her body. The other was curled up around her head. A circular puddle of blood crept out across the floor, bright as a red balloon, but much heavier and definitely earthbound. Her hair looked like seaweed in that blood, clumpy and tangled.

A butcher knife rested next to her, light winking off it in fluorescent clumsiness.

For a few moments, tears blurred the Details, and Mark stood back from the horror. But the smell returned him to it. The smell of blood in the air, of a life to be saved. Have you ever smelled that crisp perfume? It could almost be pleasant,

sweet. But it's thick, too, and it leaves a residue deep inside your throat that never quite goes away.

It was a smell with which he was well acquainted.

He fell next to her and gently rolled her onto her back. Even through the blood, he saw the bruise that had bloomed on her temple. It would have been a deep purple if there had been enough blood left in her system to color it. But things being the way they were, the bruise was a shadowy yellow.

As he turned her, the arm coiled around her head flapped limply to the side. And Mark saw for the first time the wound. He saw it as a cut through her yellow blouse, but that cut ran deeper.

Mark tore off that blouse, revealing a white bra that was now pink-going-on-red. The cut was deep. If it weren't for the blood spilling out, it looked almost like a smiling mouth.

"I should've stuck to my plan," came Jeffrey's voice from behind him. And suddenly Mark could feel the heat of Jeffrey's sweat and madness. "This wouldn't have happened. I shouldn't have cut there. It's not too late, is it?"

Mark didn't answer, only applied pressure to the wound with the torn blouse. He pressed hard, and bit back the urge to cry again.

"It is, isn't it? It is too late? I fucked up."

Mark shook his head, *no*. Tears began to tumble down his cheeks, gleaming, liquid crystals in the light of the kitchen. In light of the Details. It wasn't too late. Couldn't be. But Tess needed blood. She needed more blood!

"Don't worry, Mark," Jeffrey said from behind him. "I won't do it wrong this time."

That phrase took far too long to click inside him. By the time it did, it was too late. It snicked into place like a cuff. And just before Jeffrey clouted him, one last phrase went through his mind. It held there for a second, and then all the world went black, and the Details ebbed away.

You've saved her, Marky, Aunt Maybell's gobbling yet gracious voice assured him, *and that's all you could do*.



If whatever cornball god Jeffrey Dunmore worshiped actually exists, then maybe he really did set himself to rights. But Mark doesn't subscribe to a Lunacy God.

Still, Jeffrey had been true to his word. He hadn't done it wrong when he cut Mark. The butcher knife had slit Mark's wrist, spilt just enough blood to satisfy the madman, and then the madman had tied off the arm with a thick strand of rope. When the medical technicians came barreling into the kitchen some three minutes later on a call from a Ms. Judy Averitt, they found Mark's body lying over Tess'. His weight over her laceration had saved her life.

Of course, it had taken them a few minutes to get to the inside of the house, because the scene outside was a bit more grisly. Believing that he had killed Tess by accident—*I owe two now*—Jeffrey had carved Judy Averitt's arm as well. She survived, too, barely. After a week of recovery, she went home to her husband and three children. Mark and Judy talk a lot these days, and their families have become close as some families do under such circumstances. And after everything, she's glad the cards fell the way they did, and that she was there to help when the help was needed.

Jeffrey Dunmore didn't survive. Finished getting even, he had taken that knife and thrust it through his temple. Mark suspects that the balloon of his life didn't leave any lamenting children on this world, and that his balloon wasn't filled with helium, but lead, destined to go nowhere but down.

Dr. Mark Atlas has since hung up his stethoscope. SAVIOR DOCTOR CALLS IT QUILTS, some headlines had read. AFTER BATTLE FOR HIS OWN LIFE, DOCTOR QUILTS ON OTHERS, read others. But that wasn't true. Mark hadn't saved his wife and daughter with anything but being there for them. His skills as a doctor had been a moot point. It was his finding them that had done the trick. He intends to do a lot more of being there for them in the years to come.

They still visit Aunt Maybell, and he still thanks her—consciously or not—for showing him his gift. As they sit with her in her living room watching the evening news, only one of the Details really lingers. It's the one Detail he can't ignore even over the loud clammer of the Sony's discriminating speakers. The others, they sometimes haunt him, sometimes rear up like monstrous thunderheads with the past for lightening bolts. But it's that one Detail that will haunt him forever. It's taken up residence in the back of his throat.

The smell of Tess' blood in the air.

Almost pleasant.

Almost sweet.

Thick and unyielding.

As for the gift of Details, it's a gift he uses less often now. And he's thankful that he doesn't need it so much. It's a tiring thing. Sometimes, when panic rises, he sees things more vividly than other people would. The colors jump out at him. The sounds tinkle a bit more clearly. And he finds the answers that he needs.

Mark knows it's a gift he can never escape. Like life, the Details will forever be...coming and going.

– July 2, 2002