

# The Tithonian Factor

by Richard Cowper

*Humanity has dreamed of achieving immortality since the earliest written records of our species, but dreams have a way of changing when we achieve them. The reality of immortality depicted in this story makes the immortals into ghost-like beings, and immortality itself only a short-lived fad.*

*British author Richard Cowper's novels include Pro-fundis and A Dream of Kinship; his first short-story collection was Out There Where the Big Ships Go.*

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An A|NN/A Preservation Edition.

[Notes](#)

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In all my National Service the time I spent working with the ghosts was far and away the spookiest—if you'll excuse the pun, or whatever it is.

What happened?

Nothing *happened*. Well, not in the way you mean it. It was just—well, *spooky*. I still get dreams from it sometimes.

What sort of dreams, Sarah?

Dreams of the old days. Strange dreams. Sad ones.

Tell me.

That's just it. I can't. I can never remember them properly.

Then how do you know they're sad?

Because I wake up crying, stupid.

Really?

And then I find myself remembering—not the dream, but *them*—the ghosts, the Sempiterns. And I recognize the feeling I used to have when I'd been with them—a sort of awful *helplessness* like—like watching someone drowning when you can't swim.

Didn't you talk to Control?

What about?

Well, ask for a transfer or something?

I didn't *want* a transfer, Jo. I just wanted to help them some way—and I couldn't. I couldn't *reach* them.

How do you mean?

It's hard to explain unless you've met them, and how many of us do that? Even if you *did* meet one you wouldn't know *what* they were unless you'd been told. It's only after you've been with them for a while that it begins to get to you.

What does?

The spookiness of it—of your situation—of *their* situation.

Their *age*, you mean?

Well, obviously that's part of it, of course, but it's not that exactly. After all, that's something we all *know* about, something we've been told. What I'm talking about now is something different, something that's *in* them, a sort of frozen sadness which lies deep, deep down in the backs of their eyes where no one can ever reach it.

They talked about it?

One of them did. Once.

What did he say?

It wasn't a he.

Well, *she* then. Go on. Tell me about it, Sarah.

It happened on my birthday—my sixteenth—when I was stationed down at Marlow. There were six of us assigned to Waterside—that's the Grace and Favour hospice—a huge old house beside the river. We were on attachment to the regular staff which meant that we didn't have any special duties in the running of the place but were just there on hand to help out wherever we were needed.

Sounds like a real old skive to me.

Well, yes and no. The director of the place, Father Petrie, was a real sweetie, but we Nats were under Sister Philippa and she kept a pretty beady eye on us. Except for Andrew who was a Fourth, we were all Third Graders, which meant Technique Exercises from eight to ten each morning and a full Response Cycle every third day. But for the rest of the time we just loafed around and chatted up the ghosts or helped out in the kitchens or the gardens. I went for the gardens mostly because, after a bit, being with the Sempiterns made me feel uncomfortable. I don't know why—I *didn't* know why *then*, I mean. Besides, the weather was glorious that May. I spent most of my time purring around the place on a mower—they had about a million acres of lawn—and after a week or two I was as brown as a biscuit.

Most of the time I was as near naked as makes no difference—shorts, sandals, and a floppy yellow sunhat. Some of the Sempiterns used to peek at me through binoculars from the upstairs windows. I knew because I'd sometimes see the sun winking from the lenses. It was a bit of an eerie feeling—like being brushed with invisible cobwebs—but most of the time I don't suppose I even noticed it.

On the afternoon of my birthday I was mowing a part of the grounds which was out of sight of the house. There was a backwater—a sort of artificial creek drawn off the main river—which led up to a boathouse. It was tucked away behind a lot of trees and shrubs—rhododendrons and suchlike—and nobody seemed to go there except the gardeners who had the job of keeping the place tidy. There wasn't really much grass to mow—just a long, narrow strip winding along beside the water, and when I'd done that I switched off the machine and went to take a poke around. Just pure, idle curiosity.

It was that sort of hour in the early afternoon when the sun seems to need winding up again and the loudest sound is the buzzing of the bees. Even the birds had nodded off and the smell of the grass I'd cut hung over everything like a sort of warm sleepy oil. I wandered up to the boathouse and had my hand on the door latch when I heard a noise from inside...

Well? Go on. What sort of a noise?

Eh? Oh, someone talking.

So?

I know I shouldn't have listened but I couldn't help myself. I'm not just saying that, Jo, I really *mean* it. It was as though I'd become part of a happening which *needed* me to be there in order for it to work—but a happening which I didn't know anything about, so I couldn't *shape* it.

You mean you think you were being *chosen*?

You tell me! Perhaps I just happened to be lying around handy and got drawn into it somehow. Anyway, that's what Father Petrie thought.

Father Petrie! You talked to *him* about it?

That was later.

Well, what happened?

To start with I thought it was two people talking—two women—one answering the other. But then I wasn't so sure—the voices sounded too much alike for one thing. They were very quiet—I couldn't really make out anything they were saying—and I'd just about decided to sneak away when I heard one of them call out: "Who's that? Who's there?"

"It's me," I said. "Sarah Jackson. I'm sorry. I didn't know there was anyone in there."

There was a scuffling noise and then a sound of footsteps on duckboards and a moment later the door was pushed open from inside and there we were staring at each other. I recognized her as one of the ghosts—a Mrs. Cassel—and I guess she recognized me, too, because I saw her glance down at my bare tits and give a funny twitchy sort of a smile. "Do you want a boat?" she asked me.

I shook my head. "I was just curious about the place," I said. "I didn't think there'd be anyone here. I'm really sorry if I've disturbed you."

She gave me a long thoughtful look and then shook her head and smiled again. "It doesn't matter," she said. "After all, it's not my private property. Come along in."

She stepped back inside and I ducked my head and followed her. For a second or two I was bat-blind after the bright sunshine but there was quite a lot of light coming in through the half-open water-doors and I could soon see well enough. I glanced round for the other person and of course there was no one else. I wasn't really surprised at all.

There were a couple of row-boats tied up and a punt.

Lying in the bottom of the punt were some faded cushions and an open book. Somehow I guessed that Mrs. Cassel was the only person who ever came near the place—it had that sort of feel about it.

What was she like?

To look at you, mean? About my height, with wide, dark blue eyes and fine, silky blond hair which she wore down to her shoulders. If I hadn't known she was a Sempitern I'd have said she was in her early thirties. But she was really lovely, Jo, *beautiful* in that timeless, eternal sort of way—I mean she'd have been beautiful anywhere, any time. Everything about her was right, balanced, all of a piece—her hands, her mouth, her nose, her neck, the shape of her face, her figure. It made you feel clumsy and lumpish just to look at her. All the Sempiterns tend to be pale—it's something to do with their metabolism, I think—and with some of them it really is pretty ghastly. But not with her. Mrs. Cassel's

skin was *right* that way—sort of translucent—with faint, dusky blue shadows under her eyes.

But spooky with it?

Not then. Not that afternoon. I think there must have been a sort of link between us that we both sensed. Perhaps it was because we'd both opted out a bit, gone our own private ways, and then we'd met up by chance on common ground in that dead hour of the day. Or maybe it was something else. But after that first moment when she'd opened the door I didn't feel the least bit awkward with her. I just sort of looked around and said, "Yes, it really is nice in here. Really peaceful."

"I know," she said. "That's why I come here."

I could see it was time for me to get back to my mowing and leave her to enjoy it and I said as much.

She stretched out her arm and touched my shoulder with her fingertips. "Don't go yet," she said. "Stay a while and talk to me."

I dithered a bit but I couldn't think of any convincing reason for backing out so in the end I said, "O.K. Why not?" and I stepped down into the punt and plonked myself on one of the cushions.

She climbed in after me and there we were sitting and smiling at one another in a shy sort of way while the punt rocked up and down and the ripples went *tock-tock-tock* against the row-boats. Her book was lying open between us and I glanced down at it. The page was upside down but from the way it was printed I could see it was poetry. "Do you like poems?" I asked her.

"Some," she said. "Poems of the old days. Do you?"

I told her I used to like them a lot when I was young.

"And how old are you, Sarah?"

"Sixteen," I said. "Today's my birthday as a matter of fact."

"Really?" she said. "Congratulations on scaling the dizzy peak of sixteen!"

"And how old are you, Mrs. Cassel?" Honestly, Jo, it was out before I could stop myself. I could've *died*, I swear I could!

"Well, older than that, certainly," she said and gave a kind of little snort of a laugh.

"I'm so sorry," I said—my face must've been a real sight—"I really am, Mrs. Cassel. Please forget I ever said it."

"But why should I? And why should you apologise? Is that what you've been taught?"

I nodded and felt as if my ears were steaming.

"They told you it would distress us?"

I mumbled some sort of apology. *Oi*, was I *embarrassed*!

"And what else did they tell you?"

I just shrugged. I really didn't want to discuss all that, and certainly not then and with her.

"Take great care not to disturb the even tenor of their days and ways?" She was imitating the way Sister Philippa used to talk and I couldn't help grinning.

“So tell me how old *you* think I am, Sarah. I promise I won’t be distressed.”

I raised my head and looked at her and I knew that she really did want to hear my answer. “A hundred and forty?” I guessed.

She gave a sort of lop-sided smile and shook her head. “I was born in two thousand and five,” she said, “and I took the plunge when I was twenty-six. I shall be exactly a hundred and twenty-seven years old on the eighteenth of July.”

“You became a Sempitern in thirty-one?”

She nodded.

“But I thought it was all made illegal long before that.”

“Officially, yes. But in those days there were still ways if you had the means. The last one I know took it in two thousand and forty.”

“Really.”

“Yes,” she said. “March, two thousand and forty. After that there wouldn’t have been any point, would there?”

I shook my head. “Do you mind if I ask you something, Mrs. Cassel?”

“Go ahead. Only I do wish you’d stop calling me Mrs. Cassel. I never think of myself that way. To me I’m Margaret.”

“Why did you *do* it, Margaret? What made you decide to become a Sempitern?”

She didn’t answer straight away and then she said, “Well, I can *tell* you, but I’m sure you won’t understand. You *can’t* understand. You and I don’t just belong to different generations, Sarah, we belong to different *species*. When I was your age, life, this life we’re living here and now—that’s all there was. Anything else was dreams, fairy tales, delusions. You were begotten by your parents, you were born, you lived, and then you ceased to live—you died. That was what we *knew*. For us death was the end of everything. So when *Sempiterna* was discovered we saw it as offering us the ancient Gift of the Gods—immortality. And, even better, the promise of eternal youth. In the hundred years since I became a Sempitern this body of mine has aged physically no more than ten.”

As she said that she lifted up her bare left arm and touched it lightly with her fingertips and there was an expression on her face as though she was looking at something which only she could see—the ghost of her *real* arm maybe.

“And that was all it was?” I said. “Just wanting to stay *young* forever?”

She smiled at that. “There you are,” she said. “I knew you wouldn’t understand. None of you do. You’re a true Gaian, Sarah. But in those days, when I was a child, it was different. It really was. Let me try to explain. When I was ten years old my grandmother—my *mother’s* mother—came to live with us. She was very ancient, well into her seventies. We had a little house in Golders Green—that was a part of London—and I had to give up my own room to Gran and move in with my sister. My mother and father were very apologetic about it but they explained that it probably wouldn’t be for very long because Gran was pretty feeble and dodderly and wouldn’t be with us for much longer—a few months at the most. Well, she stayed with us for *nine years*, and for most of them I prayed every night that she wouldn’t wake up next morning. But she just went on and on and on getting more and more senile and in the end my mother had a nervous collapse. It was as if I was watching my family falling apart in front of my eyes and the cause of it was a person who wasn’t even a *person* any longer, just a *thing*. She didn’t even

*know* what she was doing to us. Gran's world had shrunk to her mouth and her fingerends but she still wouldn't let go. When Mother had her breakdown we thought we'd be able to get Gran into a geriatric ward or something but they wouldn't hear of it. So long as we had the space and there were people around to spoon food into her and wipe her bottom they simply didn't want to know. Anyway, the whole Health System was in chaos by then so even if we had managed to get the Authority's permission the chances are she'd never have got in."

"So what happened?" I whispered. "What did you do?"

She raised her head—she'd been looking down at the book while she'd been saying this—and stared at me. "I ran away," she said. "Opted out. I just couldn't cope any more. I went to Paris and got myself a job. I was eighteen then. That Christmas, six months after I'd quit, my sister phoned me and told me that Gran had passed away and that Mother was ill again. The way she said it made me wonder what had *really* happened. Well, I found out eventually. One night Mother had reached the point of no-return. She gave Gran a massive overdose of barbiturates and then did the same to herself. Mother survived—just. I didn't go to Gran's funeral. I couldn't face it. Anyway the whole thing was quietly hushed up. It was such a common sort of tragedy in those days that no one wanted to know about it. Two months later they passed the Euthanasia Bill and within a year anyone over sixty could get a *Quietus* capsule on a doctor's prescription. In fact *Quietus* and *Sempiterna* both arrived in the same year. Strange, isn't it?"

I looked at her and I just didn't know what to say. I tried to tell myself that this had all happened more than a hundred years ago, but I knew that wasn't the point. By the way she'd told it I knew that for her it could all have happened yesterday—probably it was *still* happening somewhere inside her at that very second. And I remember thinking: Who'd ever have become a Sempitern if they'd known they'd have to go on living with *that* sort of memory forever and ever? And suddenly it struck me that that's what sets them apart from us, those great invisible loads of sadness they're humping around with them—things you and I could hardly even *begin* to imagine, like watching your kids grow old and fly free before your eyes while you were stuck fast there forever like a wasp in treacle, only in this case the treacle you were stuck fast in was your own miserable self. Just *thinking* about it was so awful that I began to cry—I simply couldn't help myself.

Mrs. Cassel knelt up in the bottom of the boat and put her arms around me and I heard her whispering: "Don't cry, child. There's no call for your tears. Those days are all over and done with long ago. We both know that." I felt her cheek soft against my cheek and the scent of her was as sad and as sweet as last year's rose petals.

I stopped snivelling after a bit but the pain which had caused it was still there inside me, only now it was dull and muffled, a sort of heaviness around my heart. I wondered if she felt better for having told me or worse because now she'd have me on her conscience too, but I reasoned that I wouldn't have been there at all if I hadn't been *needed* to be and that cheered me up a bit.

She began to kiss me, first on my face and neck and then on my breasts, while I stroked her hair and forgot for a while how far apart we were from each other. A swallow flickered in through the water-door, flew round us and darted back into the sunshine again, and I heard a clock chiming somewhere in the village. I counted three strokes and at the third I let my trueself slip free and then tried to reach down to hers. I could see it there inside her but it was screwed up all tight on itself like a clenched fist, and the more I tried to coax it loose the smaller and tighter it became till it was like a little, hard, dim knot cowering deep down in the dark sad shadow of her. The tiny silvery trueself of the swallow came darting back and wove a pattern web around mine so I gave up trying and slipped back into my formself wondering if that swallow wasn't perhaps her own trueself's guardian though I'd never heard of any Sempitern having one before.

She must have guessed that something had happened even though, by her sort of reckoning, I couldn't have been out for more than a few seconds. She pushed herself away from me and I could see her fear like a darkness at the back of her eyes. "What did you do?" she whispered. "Where did you go?"

"I wanted to try and help," I said, "to try and reach your trueself. I'm sorry, Margaret. I didn't mean to frighten you."

For a long moment she didn't say anything—just stared at me. Then she said: "What you did is forbidden. You must know that."

I nodded but I didn't feel particularly worried—I suppose I must've known she'd never tell anyone else about it.

"But what did you...? What *happened*?"

"I uncaged myself," I said. "I flew free."

"You mean you *died*?"

It sounded so old fashioned and funny that I couldn't help smiling at her. "We don't use that word much," I said.

"But that's what *happened*," she said. "It is, isn't it?"

"I don't know," I said. "Perhaps they'd have called it that in the old days. Here. Give me your hand." I took up her hand in mine and laid it over my heart and held it there pressed against me. "You see," I said, "the bird still sings in the cage," and then I leant forward and kissed her on the cheek. "I must go now," I said, "or someone's bound to be wondering where I've got to."

She caught hold of my wrist and turned those huge dark eyes of hers full on mine. "You'll come and see me again, won't you, Sarah?"

"Yes, sure I will, if you'd like me to," I said and I loosed my arm gently and stepped out of the boat onto the wooden track. As I reached the door I looked back and saw the swallow skimming in low over the water and this time a second one was following it.

I didn't go back to the boathouse next day because we had Responses. The day after that I found a note waiting by my plate at breakfast. All it said was, "Please come this afternoon, M."

Mrs. Cassel was sitting in the boat when I got there. I was a bit later this time because I'd got through all my work first and put the machine to bed before I went to see her. I'd thought maybe she'd like it if we took one of the boats out on the river or something but as soon as I saw her I realized she'd got other ideas. For one thing she'd rearranged the cushions so that instead of our being at opposite ends we'd be slotted in side by side. And she wasn't exactly dressed for going anywhere either, though what she had on really suited her even if there wasn't much of it. When I told her so she laughed and said she had chosen it specially for me.

The thought of pairing off for a session of formplay with a Sempitern—even one as lovely as Mrs. Cassel—gave me a pretty strange feeling in the pit of my stomach.

To be honest I didn't think they were even *interested* in that side of things—certainly Sister Philippa had never suggested they might be when she was briefing us about our duties at Waterside—but it seemed to me that working an orgone nexus with Margaret Cassel was hardly in line with our aim of "preserving the even tenor of their days and ways." So I squatted down on the duckboards beside her and asked her if she was quite sure she knew what she'd be letting herself in for.

She gazed up at me so that I could see two tiny Sarahs reflected in those fantastic eyes of hers and then she smiled a sort of slow, soft smile that made me go all watery inside. “Do *you*, my dear?” she said.

“But have you ever shared a nex with one of us before, Margaret?”

“Is that so important?”

“I don’t really know,” I said. “But I think maybe your trueself...”

“Go on.”

But I couldn’t. I felt as if my skin was all charged up and a stream of invisible sparks was leaping across from me to her. I was shaking like a leaf on a tree. If there’d ever been a moment when I was in control I knew I’d lost it by then. There was a flicker while her formself seemed to go all faint and glimmery and I glimpsed the silvery flame of her trueself deep inside her and I remember hearing a voice whispering the odylic mantra and I suppose that must’ve been me. That’s when Gaia shook the branch I was clinging to and I was swirled away. After that nothing mattered any more.

I don’t know how long it lasted and I still don’t know what *really* happened. So many people have asked me questions about it and asked them in a way which has made me start thinking along the lines *they* were thinking along already, that I can’t ever seem to get back to how it *really* was to *me*, then. Take the *feng-shui* business for instance. I didn’t even *know* the boathouse was a *feng-shui* focus point till they showed it to me on the chart—didn’t know in my *mind*, I mean—but when Father Petrie led me back to that first afternoon and took me all through it again under total recall, there I was standing with my hand on the latch and hearing the voices coming from inside and I *knew* I was part of it.

And it was Father Petrie who spotted that book Margaret had been reading. I couldn’t have done it on my own. He led me up to it and held me there till I’d spelled it out to him—reading it upside down and all!—though he only needed a line or two before he knew what it was and let me go on. I took him right through the whole of our first meeting up to when I’d left her there and gone back to my mowing, and then he released me. I thought he was going to make all sorts of trouble about my flying free with her, but he didn’t—he just gave the others a sort of sideways look and a half-shake of his head so I guessed I’d been forgiven for breaking the rules—for the time being at any rate.

He asked me if I’d mind going under again and taking them through the second visit and I said I’d do it if they thought it would help. He talked me down and I led them back to the boathouse and there was Margaret waiting for me. I got through just as far as to where I’ve told you already and then I stopped. I could hear him coaxing me forward but there was something far stronger than Father Petrie saying, “No,” and it was saying it not to *me* but to my trueself. “I can’t!” I cried. “I can’t! I can’t! It won’t let me!”

“What won’t? What’s stopping you, child?”

“The brightness.”

“Fly free, Sarah.”

“I can’t. I mustn’t.”

“Is that all you can tell us?”

There was a long, long silence, and then I heard myself saying: “Margaret’s free.”

“Go on, child.”

“She’s trusted me. She’s flown free.”

“Where are you, Sarah?”

“In my formself. In the boat. I’m cold.”

“And Margaret?”

And Margaret? This chill in my arms, in my naked breast and stomach, is that Margaret? Evening shadows are stealing across the water. The swallows have gone. Have I done right or wrong? Tell me, Gaia.

I still shiver when I think about it (just feel how my arm’s shaking now!) but I wasn’t frightened then even though I was lying across her naked formself and no bird was singing in her cage. I lifted my head from between her breasts and looked down into the gone-out lights of those dark eyes that had seen so many years go by which I knew nothing about and my own formself wept for her the tears hers couldn’t. Then I kissed her one last time on her mouth and got up and put my clothes on and left her lying there.

They asked me afterwards why I hadn’t gone straight back to Waterside to tell someone what had happened and I told them it was because I didn’t *know* what had happened. Besides, what harm could have come to Margaret’s formself lying there so quiet and still in the dark boathouse? I just needed to be on my own for a while.

I wandered along the riverbank till my formself found a healing place beside some lilac bushes and laid down along the flow line. As the first stars came out I let my trueself slip free, little by little, until I felt Gaia moving under me, rocking me in her arms. That’s when I knew for sure that what I’d done *was* right and was what I’d *had* to do.

I heard the clock strike nine and I got up and made my way back across the dewy lawns to the hospice. I went straight to Sister Philippa’s room and knocked on the door. She called me in and I saw that Father Petrie and Doctor Maddern were with her. They were all drinking tea out of pink china cups and they looked pretty surprised to see me. Sister Philippa asked me if anything was the matter.

“It’s Mrs. Cassel, Sister,” I said. “She’s flown free. She’s in the boathouse.” And then I sort of let go. I just sat down on the floor and shut my eyes and went to sleep.

I didn’t wake up till mid-day the next day but I think that Doctor Maddern may have had a hand in that.

When I opened my eyes I found I was in the sick wing and one of the staff nurses was sitting beside the bed. “Hello,” I said. “What am I doing here?”

“They brought you in last night,” she said. “I wasn’t on duty then. I’m to let Sister know as soon as you wake up.”

She went out and I heard her talking on the phone. I got out of bed, found the bathroom and took a shower. I was drying myself when I heard voices outside and recognized one of them as Father Petrie’s. There was a knock on the door and the nurse handed in my clothes and told me to get a move on.

Besides Father Petrie and Sister Philippa there was the Doctor and a man whose name I didn’t know though I’d seen him around before. Father Petrie asked me how I was feeling and I said that I was feeling fine thank you but a bit hungry. He smiled at that.

They sat me down in a chair and arranged themselves in a sort of half-circle in front of me and then Father Petrie asked me if I’d mind telling them how I’d come to find Mrs. Cassel in the boathouse. “I didn’t *find* her there,” I said, “I *left her* there,” and they all looked at each other—all except Father Petrie that is. He just sort of nodded his head and said: “We want you to tell us everything that happened,

Sarah. Right from the beginning.”

So I told them more or less what I’ve told you and when I’d finished Father Petrie asked me if I’d mind going through it all over again under hypnosis just so he could get things absolutely straight. That’s how I came to learn about the brightness and Margaret’s trusting me and how I’d cried the tears for her into her own eyes. He could have told me to forget all that but I suppose he had his own reasons for not wanting me to and when he finally let me go I saw that the four of them looked almost as shaken as I was.

I dried my eyes on the towel which I was still holding and the man whose name I didn’t know reached across and patted my arm. “Thank you, my dear,” he said. “Believe me, you have nothing to reproach yourself for. Nothing at all.” Then he turned to Father Petrie and said, “So far as I am concerned the matter should be allowed to rest here, Father.”

“Yes, I think we are all agreed on that, Mr. Cassel. There will, of course, be certain formalities to be gone through, but nothing we can’t handle on our own.”

Doctor Maddern and Sister Philippa both nodded and then they all got up from their chairs, smiled at me in their different ways, and trooped out. I heard them talking among themselves in the next room, then Father Petrie poked his head back round the door and whispered: “I’ll be having lunch in my study, Sarah. Would you care to join me?”

He wasn’t the kind of man you felt shy with—more like a sort of tall, friendly tree—so I nodded my thanks and he said: “Good. I’ll see you down there in ten minutes,” and then he disappeared again.

It wasn’t a very exciting lunch actually—egg salad and bread and cheese—but he insisted on my having some of his, too, and what with that and a glass of wine I didn’t do so badly. He told me about the boathouse being a *feng-shui* focus and showed me the chart with all the lines flowing in along the creek and curling round those bushes where I’d gone on my mower that first afternoon, but he didn’t actually *say* it had anything to do with what had happened.

It was then that I found myself saying: “You think she knew what was going to happen, don’t you, Father?”

“No,” he said, “I don’t think she *knew*. I think she just hoped it might. And it did.”

That really knocked me sideways. “You mean Margaret wanted to *stay* free?”

“I think she wanted to believe it *might* happen to her. Most of the Sempiterns do. But their instinct for physical survival is so terribly strong that when they come to the moment of trust they find it impossible to let go.”

“But that’s what *she* said!” I cried. “She said that about her own grandmother!”

“Unfortunately Mrs. Cassel’s grandmother didn’t have you for a formplay partner.”

“She was so beautiful, Father,” I said. “Beautiful and gentle and sad. I couldn’t *not* try to help her.”

He gave me a long, thoughtful look. “Do you know *why* what you did is forbidden, Sarah?”

I shook my head.

“Because for them, for the Sempiterns, there *is* no way back. In them trueself and formself are one and indivisible. That was the single, awful, side-effect of *Sempiterna* that no one suspected until it was too late. We called it the Tithonian Factor. In the old days when we attempted to do what you did with Mrs. Cassel the Sempiterns’ trueselves clung to ours like drowning swimmers and would not let go.”

I stared at him. “So what happened, Father?”

“Usually both formselves perished. Once or twice our own managed to survive only to find that they were playing host to the Sempitern’s trueself as well as their own.”

“But how did they...?”

“They went insane.”

I felt my skin gather itself up into a cold shiver of fright. “Then why didn’t it...? Why didn’t *we* ...?”

“Gaia alone knows, child. Unless perhaps you can explain more precisely what you meant when you said, ‘She’s trusted me.’”

“She flew free,” I said.

“But how could you possibly *know* that?”

“Because I was *her*,” I said. “I lent my own trueself to her. What else could I have done?”

“*You lent her your trueself?*” he repeated in a frozen sort of voice.

“Gaia borrowed it from me. Gaia lent it to her.”

“Why didn’t you say this before?”

“You didn’t ask me.”

He looked at me for a long time without saying anything, and then he shook his head slowly, slowly, and murmured: “Out of the mouths of very babes.”

He got up from where he was sitting and went across the room to a bookshelf and took out a book. He turned over some pages and then read out that same poem which Mrs. Cassel had been reading in the boat. I only remember the first part because I’ve never been able to understand the rest of it—

*Margaret, are you grieving  
Over Goldengrove unleaving?  
Leaves, like the things of man, you  
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?*

He read the poem all through and when he’d finished he closed up the book and looked at me.

“Was that written about *her*?” I asked him.

“No, no,” he said. “It was written long before Margaret Cassel was born. I feel it might have been written about someone like you though.”

“But my name’s not Margaret,” I pointed out. “So it wouldn’t have worked.”

He just laughed and put the book back on the shelf. Then he turned to me again and said, “Will you come to the boathouse with me, Sarah?”

That shook me a bit I can tell you! “Is *she* still there?” I asked.

“Her formself has been moved to the chapel.”

“You know that’s not what I mean.”

“We think not,” he said, “but only you can tell us that for sure. That’s why I’m asking you. But you don’t have to do it if you don’t wish to.”

“All right,” I said at last. “So long as you stay with me.”

So off we went to the boathouse and when we were about halfway there I said, “I think we ought to come to it along the creek—from the river.”

“Very well,” he said. “Whatever you feel is right.”

The moment we’d got beyond the trees I felt the flow of the *feng-shui* like a sort of slow, in-drawn breath drifting me along and I remember wondering vaguely why I hadn’t noticed it when I’d come there the first time. I asked Father Petrie if he could feel it too, but he just smiled and sort of shrugged so I guessed he couldn’t.

We came up to the boathouse and I put my hand on the latch and felt it all warm from the sun. I sensed that particular stillness which lies at the heart of every *feng-shui* focus like the calm eye of a tropical storm and I thought: What if he’s wrong? What if she *is* still here? What shall I do then? The little ripples of my fear went circling out from me into the empty quietness on the other side of the door and I felt the bird flapping its wings against my ribs. On the wall beside me I saw Father Petrie’s shadow, long and dark and kind of reassuring and I bit my lip hard and thumbed the latch down.

It was all exactly as it had been before except that now there was no Margaret. I let go of the latch, drew in my breath and walked slowly along the duckboards. As I gazed down at the faded cushions where I had last seen her lying I knew I need have no fear of her at all. I stepped into the boat, lay back and looked up into Father Petrie’s worried face. “It’s all right,” I said. “She doesn’t need me now.”

He nodded to me and I closed my eyes and flew free as quiet and easy as tipping water out of a cup. I looked down on Father Petrie kneeling beside the boat and then upon my own familiar formself and—*it wasn’t familiar at all!* Well, it was and it wasn’t. It was *me*, was *mine* all right, and yet I was *seeing it* differently, seeing it as if it was my chosen partner for a really terrific formplay session. It was just about the *weirdest* experience of my whole life, but I wasn’t *scared* at all, just sort of shaken up, set trembling inside and, let’s face it, *excited*.

I linked in again almost at once, opened my eyes and looked up at Father Petrie.

“Sarah?” he said, and the *way* he said it made me pretty certain that he wasn’t a hundred percent certain that it really *was* me!

I drew in a deep breath and shook my head. “There’s nothing there,” I told him. “It’s like I said. She’s flown free.”

He gave me a curious sort of questioning look, then he smiled at me and reached down and helped me to my feet. “That is a great relief to me,” he said. “But now I must ask you to promise me in Gaia’s name that you won’t try helping any of our other guests in the way you helped Mrs. Cassel. The risk is altogether too great.”

I remembered what he’d told me about how they’d tried it in the old days and what had happened to them and I shivered. “I promise you, Father,” I said. “In Gaia’s name.”

And that’s really all there is to tell you. At the end of July I got my Fourth Grade and went down with Andrew to Sussex for my six months’ Healers’ Vocational. The day I left Waterside Father Petrie called me into his study and handed me a packet which he said Mr. Cassel had asked him to give to me. In it was that book of poems which Mrs. Cassel had been reading the first time we met. I tried reading one or two but I couldn’t make head or tail of them and then Andrew borrowed the book from me and I

haven't seen it since.

But I quite often find myself remembering Mrs. Cassel, and, once or twice, it's occurred to me that maybe she *was* there when I went back to the boathouse with Father Petrie. It's the only way I can explain what happened when I flew free. I mean, couldn't I have been seeing my own formself as *she* must have seen it? Or was it just that my trueself was still carrying the shadow of hers—like a sort of scent left on it after she'd used it and then given it back to me? And why do I still have those strange, sad dreams of the old days?

## **The End.**

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### **Notes and proofing history**

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