

Ur-Nocence: A Chapbook

3 Short Stories of Fantasy and Reality
by
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*Literary Fiction * Science Fiction * Fantasy*

prefix: **ur-**

1. primitive, original, or earliest.
"urtext"

nocent [noh-suhnt]

Adjective. Rare.

1. harmful; injurious: nocent chemical waste and other toxins.
2. guilty; not innocent.

UR-NOCENCE: A Chapbook contains works of fiction. Any similarity between the names, places, persons, or incidents therein are entirely coincidental.

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Nothing you do for children is ever wasted.
-Garrison Keillor

Belay

"*This is where I always fail,*" she thought, briefly pausing because it was true.

But this time was different. She had to make it.

Panic was setting in. She didn't bother to glance down; she already knew that the Man below was gaining on her.

This wall wasn't meant to be climbed. It was too sheer for amateurs and too short for experts. Up above, the rock wall ended at Branson's Lookout. She was only thirteen, so her experience with the Lookout was limited to what she'd heard about from others: The Make-Out Sessions. The True Love.

What hounded her from below was the opposite of that. The Man wasn't interested in her finding love. He didn't care about her. He just wanted what he wanted...

Sweat dripped from her face as she deliberately, directly, snatched the next crevice. There were no rock climbing shoes. No ropes or carabiner, like for practice. The Man didn't give her time for any of that.

She had tried to scale this many times before. But it had always been alone, for fun. To prove she didn't always fail, even when she fell.

She never feared that climb.

But this time she was afraid. The Man had her in his sights.

"C'mere, You!" he growled, as he easily chased her upwards. He was toying with her, of course. She couldn't escape him.

The realization fueled her. She moved quicker and quicker, pulling herself up with each step. And then she *slipped*...

#

Later, at the dinner table, he recounted her mistakes, each one of them, for Mom.

"She just needs to concentrate." he adjudged, as Mom nodded her assurances.

It had been another visit to the E.R. The doctors there knew the story. The rock climbing champion Dad pushing his young daughter. It seemed like every week there was another bruise, or scrape, or broken arm. *You're lucky we know you, Jim, or else we'd report this as abuse.*

And they laughed, their voices tumbling down on her like an avalanche of despair.

FRIEDERIKE

*"We are unfashioned creatures, but half made up,
if one wiser, better, dearer than ourselves—
such a friend ought to be—do not lend his aid to
perfectionate our weak and faulty natures."*

-Frankenstein's Creation

#

The candlelight shadows shivered at the sudden opening of the door behind her.

She caught her breath and readjusted herself—but didn't get up from the chair. Two heartbeats later, she recognized who it was by the faint smell of rotting flesh beneath the perfume and alcohol and decided to stay still. If he was going to kill her there would be no stopping him, anyway.

Without preamble: "Who is Fritz?" the monstrous visitor demanded.

She had to sigh at that: "Who, indeed?"

The daemon circled into view, towering over her with the grave air of a parent about to tuck their child in for bed. Beneath his overcoat and breaches, he was wrapped from head to toe in soaked bandages of methanol and gin. And where bandages failed, so, too, had his yellow flesh—rather the sinews and blood-soaked innards underneath were quite visible.

But she did not avert her eyes. She did not scream.

"You do well to hide your horror, Madam. But perhaps you and I have met before?" Its voice was surprisingly soft.

"Yes. I was there at the beginning. Your beginning. When you were just plans and drawings and equations. Such wishful fancies the genius of youth can produce."

Then the daemon did a strange thing, he removed his cap and bowed before her and apologized, "M'lady. You have my sincerest apologies for this intrusion. Indeed, since my...creator's death I have had every intention of dying, myself. It is, after all, what he wanted. But, somehow...I do not. And, so,

as life continues, I have grown with the need to investigate and attempt to understand the mind of he who was my creator. And, so I further ask forgiveness that I broke into the laboratories in the far wing and read his journals...

“...Truthfully, they revealed nothing...

“...But, in another hand, written in the margins, from time to time are additional notes. And those are signed, each time: 'Fritz'. No mention of a 'Fritz' was ever made by the Doctor. And, yet, the sum total of his notes lack the raw emotion of those few simple annotations from this mysterious choir. I feel that, only upon meeting this 'Fritz' will I truly know Frankenstein.”

She said nothing.

He rose to his full height and nearly brushed the ceiling. "Madam, I have observed this estate, the late Doctor's estate, from afar, for some time. And from my observations, I have gathered that you have inherited it. Further, you have become its curator. And, so this is what brings me here. And why I must again ask you: M'lady, please, who is this 'Fritz'?"

His sincerity nearly compelled an answer. Instead she rose and directed him to sit in her chair. It creaked under his weight, but it held.

"May I pour you a cup of tea?" She walked to the bureau, "I am Lady Friederike De'rogi. As you have surmised, I am both curator and caretaker of this place. Castle Frankenstein is now my home."

As she handed him his cup, she answered, "And 'Fritz' was my brother. It is a painful thing to recall! For, even as Fritz was my brother, he was best friends with Viktor and we, the three of us, would enjoy many a...holiday during our youth at University. Fritz was also a 'man of science' and, indeed, his key insights led to such formulae that Viktor was able to perform his...reanimations."

"You are saying your brother helped him make me?"

"No. Not directly. He was only there at the beginning when Viktor first discovered how to do it!

But, to be clear: by my reckoning, the discovery would not have happened without Fritz. Yet soon after that, they had a falling out. Partly it was...my fault. My failing relationship with Viktor ended up confusing the issue. But mostly it was about pride. Viktor did not want to share any of the recognition with my brother. He sent me—sent us, away! And for a long while after that we didn't speak."

"M'lady, when you saw me you recognized me. Yet I have no memory of you."

Lady De'Rogi nodded, "Yes, he invited...Fritz back to be there at your creation. But, the evening before, instead of their reunion being a joyous occasion, Fritz demanded that Viktor abandon the project. Abandon this creation: you. Fritz believed that these processes could be used to...help the living. And that that would be nobler. Fritz just wanted to renew their relationship in a purer endeavor. But only if Viktor would stop this design, as it was an abomination against nature!"

If the daemon was offended, he didn't show it: "Were you there as well, M'lady?"

She brushed the hair from her eyes as she sipped her own cup, "No. Viktor and...my brother fought. And he struck Fritz with a...fatal blow. But not before Fritz could return home to me and describe all that transpired. He died in my arms. When I saw you, I deduced what had happened. Though you have less about you then what..."

"Aye, yes. Again, my apologies, Lady De'Rogi. It is merely that, while my spirit stays strong, as the good book says, the flesh is weak." She had to smile at his little joke, but said nothing.

At length, her visitor rose to leave: "And, so my quest comes to an end. For even as I hear you recount the flaws of the Doctor, I have come to realize that we all must make choices. And the time has long since past when Viktor Frankenstein's choices direct our fates."

He started to leave, but turned to finish. "The warp and woof of my life has been the doctor's madness. In the end, I must make my own choices in much the way one assembles a wooden pillar. Whereas once I only desired a pyre, now I see that such a pillar can also be a style upon which a great, lonely Saint can stand. The choice is mine. If...Fritz were here, I would tell him that."

At this, tears clouded Friederike's eyes.

She only said, "Fritz would be proud of whatever choice you made."

The daemon doffed his cap and left, never to be seen again.

#

It was a long time before Friederike, or "Fritz" as Viktor always called her, left the study for the lavatory.

She slowly preceded down the hallway, mirrors on either side of her reflecting her reflection backwards into an infinite continuity of her female form. Slowly, front to back, those reflections shifted from one side to the other within the frames, until they disappeared, only to reappear in the next set of mirrors.

Were any of those images less real than the one she presented?

Finally she arrived in the lavatory and looked at herself in this final looking glass.

She removed her dress and turned her attention to the corset. It's metal frame was no longer a permanent part of her identity. These days, she only wore it when she moved about her house, just in case company came calling.

As she unravalled the knots and strap-work, she thought to herself about Viktor's creation. *No less a success than me*, she reckoned.

Removing the corset, her breasts dropped to their normal state, making it all the easier to apply the second set of straps. The ones to hold them *down*.

Then, as she stood over the wash basin staring into the looking glass, she could not help but reach down, slowly, purposefully, and touch the large member that Viktor had imbued her with in his very first experiment. Friederike had always felt more like a man than a woman. And she had always wanted to make love to Viktor as a man would. And such was Viktor's love for her, for *him*, rather, during that time, that he granted her wish.

Or perhaps the good doctor just needed a test subject.

Their experiment was a success, of course! But Friederike, Fritz, remembered the agitation. The arguments. His living subject became the object of Viktor's jealousy. For every love-filled day of beauty and lovemaking, there followed a day of scornful arguments and vitriol.

She left. But when she returned, it was no different. The warm feeling reading his letter inviting her back to witness the 'birth' of their creation (their 'son', Viktor called it) was repelled by the horror of it all. Indeed, Viktor had shrunk into a hollow husk of a man and much of his soul seemed now to reside inside the creature itself. This was no science—it was alchemy! How could her sweet, sweet Viktor have become such a monster?

Later, by a quirk of fate, a long forgotten will drafted by a young Viktor permitted her to inherit his estate. And now she had to live the life left to her, wandering about in the shadows at night...

She removed her make-up and replaced the dress with breaches and a topcoat. She combed back her hair and put on the spectacles. In the pubs she frequented, Fritz was expected.

She was, after all, a man about town.

Retired

Sometimes, I cry when I meditate.

That's okay, you know.

Most people think meditation means clearing your mind. *Tabula rasa*. No thinking or feeling allowed.

But, that's not so.

Yes, while you notice your breath and your mind relaxes, sometimes your monkey mind runs wild.

But, mindfulness is about accepting those thoughts, fully, and without judgment—and then letting them go. Emotions will come. They arrive, suddenly filling your consciousness, like a small child's cry in the early morning.

You notice the emotion. You examine it. You allow yourself to feel it. And then you let it pass through you. Not forgotten, but no longer carrying you away from yourself.

You come back to the breath.

Always, you come back to the breath.

Part of my mindfulness routine is to picture a loved one, like one of my sons, sitting across from me in a chair. I hold their head in my hands, close enough to smell their happy breath, their smiling, cherubic faces joyfully squinting back at me.

Then their face changes. It hardens. No longer a child's face, they look as they do now. Men, with purposeful eyes, sharpened by time.

I thrice repeat this affirmation, for each of them:

"May You Be Healthy,

May You Feel Happiness and Find Joy.

And May You Live With Grace."

My sons are grown. But, the world can still hurt them.

I can see it happen, unfolding in another wave of images. Heartache that never heals. Hateful fits and starts from a society that seems to care less and less...even damage to their own children. So inevitable. I can't stop it from happening.

And so, sometimes, I cry.

They can't hear me sob, or feel my hands, or smell my breath.

Nor can they see me, of course. Not since I died.

Still, I'd like to think they know I'm there. That my attempt to hold them someday, while they despair, will register as a faint brush upon their shoulders. That my comforting voice will be noticed as curtains fluttering in a warm, summer breeze.

But no, they are distracted. They have their lives to live.

Still, meditation helps.