

THE CRAWLSPACE OF THE WORLD

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Three days into our hike, Morgan ditched me. I woke in the nest I'd made of socks and children's winter coats and sat up in the gray non-morning, groping for my water bottle, calling her name. I climbed onto a three-legged rolltop desk to get some perspective, and I could see her path clearly, where she'd kicked her way through alarm clocks, lamps, and coffee mugs toward the towering, distant, swaying mountains. I couldn't see Morgan herself, though—her path disappeared around a ten-foot-high hill of tangled wire coathangers.

"Morgan!" I shouted, but only once, because she'd told me it was best to be quiet here, in the crawlspace of the world. She knew at least *one* monster lived here, after all, and she thought there might be others. I picked up my pack—distressingly light, now, since the water was running out, but there was plenty of jerky and dehydrated fruit, at least—and set off along the pathway she'd kicked and stomped clear. Trekking across broken picture frames, antique cameras, splintered snowshoes, and drifts of paper, I followed Morgan. No surprise that she was gone, really. I was forever losing her. Story of my life.

It took all day, moving under that neutral gray sky, climbing over occasional outcroppings of armoires and armchairs, working my way through great snarls of swingsets and backyard jungle-gyms, with always some sign of breakage or snag or passage to point me on her path. The objects that made up the landscape were larger now, in the foothills of this place, closer to the mountains.

I found Morgan near the base of a hill made of battered cars, many with seaweed and barnacles and undersea fungus clinging to their fenders and

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windshields. She stood with her hands on her hips, blonde hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, staring up at the mountains.

“Morgan—”

“You weren’t moving fast enough,” she said. “I knew you’d move faster if you had to chase me, if you thought I’d left you behind.” She turned to look at me, daring me to argue, and for the millionth time in the past few days I marveled at how much she’d changed in the past five years. The girl I’d gone to college with had been tough and forthright, but this Morgan had real steel in her, and her features were sharper and even more beautiful than they’d been when she was twenty. “I couldn’t keep plodding along while you stopped to look through every pile of old records and comic books. I came to this place for a *reason*.”

I didn’t know what to say. I put down my pack and sat on a ripped vinyl bench seat torn from some old Detroit behemoth of a car. I hated disappointing her, and I resented her for frightening me, and of course, I loved her. Why else was I here?

Once I’d calmed down enough to resist shouting at her—monsters aside, I feared triggering an avalanche—I said “Well. We made good time today. What now?”

“Through the mountain pass,” she said. “Down to the valley.”

“And then?”

She shrugged. “And then we kill the dragon.”

That last night in college five years before, in my bedroom with the thumbtacked blacklight posters and the stereo system almost as big as a chest of drawers, I lay in bed beside Morgan, resting my hand on her belly, while she stared up at the glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling. “Don’t forget me while you’re in Europe,” I said, tentative. We hadn’t talked about what would become of us when she left, and we were running out of time to do so.

“I’ll never *forget* you, Rob.” She didn’t look at me. “But I think we both know our lives are changing. At least, mine is. Sometimes I wonder if your life will ever change.”

It was an old discussion, an argument made almost comfortable by familiarity. She was going to spend the summer as an intern at a museum in Italy, and from there, she would move on into the rest of her life. I had no

plans beyond the next party and dealing enough weed and acid to pay another month's rent. We shared a love of old movies, antiques, and kinky sex, and were comfortable with one another to the point of nearly total unselfconsciousness, but otherwise our trajectories diverged.

"So are you saying I'll never see you again?" I tried for a joking tone, as if the idea were absurd.

She shrugged against me. "I don't know. You'll see me tomorrow morning. You'll see me off at the airport. After that, I can't say."

"I don't want to lose you."

"Oh, Rob," she said, jaded and world-weary in the way only a 21-year-old newly-minted college graduate can be, "everybody always loses everything eventually. Just enjoy the time we have."

After we made love for the last time, I whispered in her ear, fierce and a little possessive: "If you ever need me, any time, even years from now, just call, and I'll come, no questions asked." I didn't expect her to promise the same in return. We'd spent three years together, and Morgan's depths were still fundamentally a mystery to me, but I knew she valued her independence.

"I'll remember that," she said, and that was the last significant exchange we had until we said goodbye at the airport.

It's something you say to people you love. "If you ever need me, you only have to call. I'll get on a plane the next day, no questions asked." You trust they won't abuse you. You trust that, if they call, it's because they really need you, because you can make a difference.

But you don't sit around waiting for the call, because you don't truly ever expect it to come.

Five years later, Morgan called. I still had the same phone number I'd had in college, still lived in the same house (though it was all mine, now, not shared with four housemates), still made a nice living. As far as the IRS knew, I ran my own collectibles business, selling old books and records and folk art and tin toys online, but I secretly supplemented my income by selling pot and mushrooms, with a clientele that included lots of college professors and even a couple of young cops who liked to relax on their off-duty days. Morgan was right, I guess; I hadn't really changed. I'd just

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settled in. I was an indispensable part of the college town ecosystem -- the reliable dealer, not too sketchy, not involved with anything too heavy, just the guy you came to if you needed to make the weekend memorable or finals week more bearable.

"I need you, Rob" she said. Her voice was flat and didn't quite dare to be hopeful.

I could have asked questions. I didn't. I think it's because I've read too many novels, watched too many old movies. I was too fond of grand romantic gestures, disappointed by the pedestrian contours of my life, hungry for wonder. So I said "When and where, Morgan?"

Turned out she lived in the same state, several hours north, so I packed an overnight bag, got into my car, and drove through the day, listening to Cannonball Adderley on the stereo and thinking about loves lost and found.

I sent Morgan a few letters, when she was in Italy. I liked to believe they just got lost in the mail. Overseas postal service had to be unreliable, right? If she had an e-mail address, she never told me about it. She said you could never say anything important by e-mail or in letters anyway. Important conversations had to happen face-to-face, or laying side by side in the dark. And if you weren't saying something important, she once asked, why were you bothering to talk at all?

Morgan didn't waste time on pleasantries. After barely any hellos and a quick embrace, she said "Come on. I need to show you something in the basement." I was grungy and road-dirty, conscious of the twenty pounds I'd put on since she last saw me, feeling scruffy and unlovely. Morgan was the same as always, but sharpened by the world, body slim and athletic, not gym-cultured but earned honestly with hiking and running and rock-climbing and bicycling, all the pursuits she'd loved in the old days, too. She grabbed my hand and dragged me down to her basement. She lived in a rambling old house with ancient added-on rooms and a screened-in wraparound porch, and the basement stairs were rickety and narrow.

The basement was lit by bare bulbs strung from the ceiling, and it was catastrophically messy, filled with boxes and metal shelves, car parts and sawhorses, empty aquariums and busted televisions, workbenches strewn with wire and gears and bolts. The walls were invisible, hidden behind

heaps of crap. It smelled like engine oil and dust. "Jesus, Morgan, when did you become such a pack rat?"

"All this came with the house." She stood at the foot of the stairs, arms crossed, gazing into the basement's depths. "The former owner disappeared a few years ago, and the bank foreclosed on the mortgage. We bought it from them."

We? Who was we?

"My husband Kyle is a collector—that's how we met, he sold some items to the folk art museum where I worked—so he took the basement as an added incentive, certain there'd be some treasures down here."

"Ah. You're married."

She ignored me. "He was right, too. We found all sorts of things down here. I'll show you the most interesting one." Morgan led me down a corridor of brown boxes and jumbled oddments, into a maze with walls of junk. The box-lined passage took several right-angle turns until I began to wonder just how big this basement *was*—it clearly extended some way beyond the limits of the house above. Eventually the light bulbs gave out, and Morgan wordlessly handed me a flashlight from a little stockpile of them on a shelf. She flipped hers on and continued through the gloom. "Did you ever read the Narnia books?"

I'd seen the movie, anyway. "Sure, kids go through a closet and meet a talking lion, right?"

"Right. No closet here, and it's not Narnia on the other side, but you'll see what I mean."

Before I could ask any questions, we reached a wall of ancient red bricks, mortar crumbling between the stones. There was a huge, ragged hole in the wall, five feet high and twice as wide, with dim light beyond. "In here," Morgan said, ducking through.

Did it lead to another basement? Tunnels? A trove of pirate gold?

I ducked after her, and then shrank back against the wall, claustrophobia replaced by agoraphobia.

There was a sky beyond the wall, a sky so gray and dull it hurt to look upon, and the jumble in the basement was recreated ten-thousandfold here, a gargantuan scrapyards land, a junk drawer for giants. "What the *fuck*," I said.

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Morgan scrambled up on a heap of bashed computer hard drives, with a broad butcher block table resting on top like an observation platform. She offered me her hand, and I took it, quiescent, unable to give any resistance or ask any questions in the presence of such simple impossibility. I didn't for an instant think I was having an acid flashback or hallucination. This place was too absolutely real for that. I got my feet under me and stood beside Morgan. She pointed, though the gesture was unnecessary.

"Mountains," I said. "My god, they're mountains." Jagged, impossible black outlines against the gray sky.

"Some of them are," Morgan agreed. "The low ones. But you see those? The tallest ones? Watch them."

The highest mountains moved, shifting, and my perspective changed, too. They weren't mountains. Skyscrapers, maybe, shifting in an earthquake, or—

"It's a dragon," she said. "Those are just the spines on its back."

I think I whimpered. I might have pissed myself if I hadn't stopped to pee at a gas station before arriving at Morgan's house. The word "enormous" doesn't just mean "big" —it means *grotesquely, monstrously* big. That's what I was looking at. Something enormous.

"Let's go back upstairs," she said. "I'll tell you all about it, and you can decide whether you want to help me or not."

During our first night in the land beyond the basement—not that it was night, not that the sky ever changed in that place—Morgan told me about some of the wonderful things she and Kyle had found there. "We found a trove of pre-Columbian artifacts, though we weren't able to sell many of them. There are a lot of legal issues surrounding things like that. Bits of Greek statuary are easier to deal with. We had a good run with some vintage car collectors when we found a bunch of parts about a mile out, rare stuff. I mean, this place is *full* of rare stuff—" she picked up a half-melted turn-of-the-century kewpie doll from the ground by way of illustration—"but most of it's worthless."

"There's no... organization?" I asked, trying to keep my eyes focused on her, trying not to look toward the towering spines of the dragon that Morgan said had eaten her husband a few weeks before. "I mean, the stuff's in no particular order?"

“There might be some scheme, I guess, but it’s not known to me.” She sat cross-legged, leaning against an old steel safe, like something from a movie about a train robbery. “I don’t even really understand how this place works. Everything here is lost or thrown away, I think, but does that mean the objects disappear from our world and appear here? Or are these analogues, platonic ideals of lost things, reflections, or what? Who knows? Some things are broken. Some things are in better shape than they should be, given how many centuries old they must be. We’ve found artifacts here were *can’t* sell, because they don’t look old enough, and everyone would think they’re forgeries. I’m sure there’s Biblical apocrypha here, Hemingway’s lost manuscripts, the original cut of *The Magnificent Ambersons*, everything that’s ever been lost, but there’s no way to find any of it short of random chance. There seem to be some organizing principles, piles of mostly-similar things. There’s a hill of old reel-to-reel tapes, CDs, eight tracks, videotapes, and film canisters half a mile from here, for instance. I was satisfied foraging within a mile or so of the doorway—we could have spent years going through everything there—but Kyle was always the explorer type. Did I tell you he once climbed Everest?”

“Yeah, you mentioned,” I said, wondering how I could be jealous of a dead man I’d never met.

“He set off on longer and longer hikes, spending days out here. He brought a few things back, but it was clear he wasn’t really out foraging, not as his main purpose. I went with him a couple of times, but he barely paid attention to me, just kept pushing harder and harder.” She lowered her voice. “He wanted to see the dragon.”

“How do you know it’s a dragon?”

She frowned. “I don’t know that it’s a big fire-breathing lizard. It could be something different, in the particulars, in the details. But it’s alive. And Kyle had this theory. You know, in the stories, dragons have hoards, piles of gold they sleep on? Like in that Dungeons and Dragons crap you used to play?”

I’d never played D&D, but for a few years I’d played a homebrewed RPG created by a guy who’d gone on to become a successful fantasy novelist. I didn’t correct her. “Sure.”

She spread her hands. “This is the dragon’s hoard. That’s what Kyle thought. And he thinks there are lost things here from all over, from other

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worlds, alternate Earths, and it's true that we've found a few things we can't explain, old history books that don't resemble the history we know, weird technological stuff that we can't identify. Kyle thought the dragon squatted at the nexus of universes, snatching things, like some kind of kleptomaniac gatekeeper."

I mulled that over. I couldn't decide if it was any more incredible than what I'd already seen. "So Kyle went looking for the dragon?"

"Two month ago."

"You think it ate him."

"If it hadn't, he would have come *back* to me," Morgan said, utterly certain.

"And now you want to kill the dragon." I glanced toward the spines, big as skyscrapers. "Fuck, Morgan, we can't hurt that thing. We can't kill it any more than we could kill the *moon*."

"This place is full of lost things, Rob. Including a weapon that can kill that dragon. I know. I've *found* it."

"What kind of weapon?"

She shrugged "A spear. It will work, believe me. But I can't do it alone. That's why I called you. I needed help, and I knew you'd come."

"You're planning on killing the dragon because you think it ate Kyle?"

"That's right."

I shook my head. "This is crazy, Morgan."

"Did you have something better to do? Some more important way to spend your time?"

I didn't have an answer to that. All I had were parties, drugs, movies, video games, the pleasant unspooling of my days. At least here I was doing something important.

And I couldn't help hoping for some reward. If we survived this, with her husband dead, there might be a place for me with Morgan, after all. When I was with her, I'd felt life and brightness and purpose, even if it was all borrowed from her energy and ambition. I felt it still, now—she was a woman with a reason to live, and I wanted her to be my own reason for living again. "I'm here for you," I said. "Let's do it."

In Morgan's living room that first day, still shaken from seeing the doorway in the basement, I noticed a bright yellow plastic rattle poking out

from under the couch. I grunted, leaned over, and picked it up. "You have a kid?"

Sitting in a chair across from me, Morgan raised her eyebrow. "No. Kyle never wanted children. We babysat his nephew a couple of months ago. They must have left the rattle behind."

I shook the rattle like a maraca, absent-mindedly, thinking about the things she'd shown me in the basement, and the things she'd told me since.

"Well?" Morgan said.

"Of course I'll go," I replied.

She looked away, out the window. "You're a good man, Rob. I don't think I knew that, back then, in college, but you came when I called, and you're willing to help. I'm sorry if I hurt you and treated you badly. I was young."

"Water under the bridge," I said.

She gave me a smile. It seemed a little forced, but her husband was missing, probably dead, so was that any surprise? "We'll leave in the morning."

"Okay."

Morgan extended her hand to me. I took it. The feel of her skin on mine was achingly familiar. "It's been a lonely couple of months," she said. She gestured toward the walls with her free hand, and I saw lighter squares of wall where pictures had been removed. "I had to take his photos down, and I haven't been able to sleep in our bedroom. Too many memories. I've been staying in the guest room." She squeezed my hand, looked into my eyes. "Would you like to see it? To come to my room?"

Of course I did. I'd been making love to Morgan in my mind and memories for years, and I wouldn't say no to the real thing now, even if she only wanted to sleep with me out of gratitude, and grief.

I still remembered how to touch her all the ways she liked best.

"The first valley," Morgan said. "This is as far as I've ever come before. Kyle went farther, of course."

We stood on a ridge of busted cars. There were other mountains around us and across the valley, including one made of airplanes and helicopters, and another of houses and trailers that looked tornado-wrecked, scooped

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from the plains states of some possible world and dropped here in a pile. Beyond the house mountains, the tapered dark towers of the dragon's spikes rose, moving up and down almost regularly, as if shifting with a great body's breath. A bowl-shaped valley spread out below us, like the caldera of a volcano, and at the bottom, cities stood, clashes of culture and geography jumbled together in a valley-sprawling metropolis.

"Kyle was an amateur archaeologist," Morgan said, and I sighed—Kyle was an amateur in every field he wasn't an expert in, it seemed. "He thought that one, with the squat mud buildings, was from ancient Mesopotamia. And those with the step-pyramids—"

"Meso-american, sure, I'm not a total idiot, Morgan. What's that place with the statues?"

"We hiked all the way down there once," she said. "The statues are of people, but they have fins, and slits in their necks. The buildings are made of coral." She shook her head. "Kyle said they must be from Atlantis, but since he doesn't believe Atlantis ever existed in our world, he took that as proof for his many-worlds theory. Do you see that hideous lump of black rock?" She pointed, and I did see it, an angular obsidian structure built on an inhumanly large scale. "We couldn't even get close to it. The walls are marked with these bas-reliefs, ugly sinuous things, and there's this horrible squealing noise in your head if you come near it. Some things are better off lost." She scowled. "Maybe most things."

I wondered if that was directed at me, and decided it wasn't. "Where to now?"

"Down the slope, around the edge of Atlantis. That's where the spear is. From there, we make our way over one of the house mountains, to the dragon. And... I'll do what I came to do, with your help."

Morgan descended like she knew the way, and the slope wasn't steep, so I was able to pick my way down after her easily enough, hopping from car hood to roof to back bumper. The pile of cars was so huge that none of the cars even shifted when my weight—considerably greater than Morgan's—landed. The buildings of Atlantis were not smooth marble, but lumpy coral, and if we'd been barefoot their streets would have cut our feet to ribbons. Being near empty buildings made this whole experience in the world's crawlspace even more eerie, since it seemed like there should be living people here. I was exhausted, sweaty, and hungry after the long day

of pursuing her, and it all felt like too much. "I don't think I'm up for dragon slaying today," I said, jumping the last foot to the valley floor, where she waited, toe-tapping impatiently.

"You don't have to do any slaying. I'll slay. You just have to get the dragon's attention."

"How do I do that?"

"Scream. Throw things. I don't care. Just get it to turn its head, so I can strike."

Its head. If the spines were any indication, its head would be the size of an ocean liner. Bigger. I didn't understand why Morgan was being so short with me. If we were about to attack the dragon, shouldn't we have a plan, something less vague than what she'd just offered?

"Huh. Look over there," Morgan said. "Kneel down, look underneath that overturned Cadillac."

I crouched, joints protesting, and peered. I only saw oily darkness. "What?" I said, turning my head. I saw Morgan, armed not with a spear, but with a sheared-off section of steel pipe, almost three feet long. She swung it like a baseball bat, cracking me on the forehead. I fell back, everything all stars and blobby darkness, but it wasn't like in the movies, where people get sapped out into instant unconsciousness. I was dazed, though, eyes watering, scalp bleeding, when she turned me over and bound my hands and ankles with colorful lengths of wire. I lay on my side on the rough street of Atlantis, trying to raise my head away from a sharp bit of coral cutting into my cheek. Seeing Morgan then was like watching a fragment of film about a stranger—her person and purpose seemed divorced from any context, impossible to comprehend. Why was she doing this to me?

Morgan lifted a car door leaning against the slope of the housemountain, set it aside, and then moved a scrap of sheet metal, and another, until she revealed the open two-car garage the wreckage had concealed.

I lost some time, then, I think, because the next thing I knew I was on my back, and Morgan was wiping blood out of my eyes with a handkerchief, looking down at me with an expression of infinite sadness. It was the same way she'd looked at me just before she got on the plane to fly away five years before.

"I feel like I owe you an explanation," she said. "I'm sorry, Rob. I didn't bring you out here to kill the dragon."

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My brain was still muddled, the world blurred by the thud of a deep headache. "But, the spear?"

"There isn't any spear."

Of course there wasn't. The whole idea was absurd. I'd only believed her because I'd wanted to believe, because it would have made a good story if there'd been a spear, if we'd gone to slay the dragon and then spent our life afterward in love, with that great accomplishment behind us.

"There is a dragon, but I don't think it can be killed, any more than tides or gravity can be killed. It *looks* like a dragon, sort of, parts of it, but I think it's something more, and we just see it as a dragon because it has to look like *something*. But Kyle was right. It is the linchpin beast, the keeper of corridors and other worlds, and it does collect lost things." She wiped tears from her eyes with the back of her hand. "And it can find lost things. I told you there was no rhyme or reason to the way things were arranged here, but the dragon knows where everything is. And it's willing to trade. One thing for another. If you agree to let something of your own be lost, the dragon will give you a lost thing back in return." She touched my cheek. "You were my great lost love. I don't think I realized how great until you came so quickly, without asking questions, just like you promised all those years ago. I know what I'm giving up, now, and believe me, Rob, it hurts me."

"You planned this," I managed to say. "All along. Did you ever love me?" It was a stupid thing to say, a line from the Hollywood movie they'd never make of my life.

She looked at me with some of that familiar impatience, a line appearing on her forehead. "Yes, Rob, sure, of course, I planned this all along—I seduced you five years ago so that, someday, I could sacrifice you to a dragon in the crawlspace of the world." She shook her head. "Don't be an idiot. Of *course* I loved you. I think I still do. I just love my son more."

I wondered if the blow to the head had scrambled my memories. "What son?"

"My *boy*," she said, and there were tears again. She squatted on her heels and wrapped her arms around her own body, hugging herself. "You held his rattle. I didn't know it was under the couch, so I didn't hide it from you. Kyle took our son. He tied me up and stole our boy and brought him here, and gave him to the dragon. I don't even know what *for*, what lost

thing Kyle wanted to regain, what could possibly be worth giving up our baby for. Ben. He turns two this summer. He *will* turn two."

So that was it. Lies, and betrayal, and a blow to the head, and soon I'd be fed to a dragon—or if not fed, exactly, then somehow given up for lost. All because I'd nursed a memory of my great college romance, read *Love in the Time of Cholera* too many times, and hoped for reconnection beyond the limits of caution or care. And now I was just something she could trade for her child.

"Fuck you, Morgan," I said, voice slurred but emphatic. "You were a selfish stupid bitch in college, and you still are. I'm not yours to give away. You can't just *use* me."

"If that's true, Rob," she said, almost gently, "if you aren't mine, then why did you come when I called? If you'd ever had anything in your life you *really* cared about, the way I care about my baby Ben, then you'd understand why I'm doing this."

I wanted to shout at her, to say, *You were the thing I loved that much!*, but then something moved in the darkness of the two-car garage, and Morgan dropped to her knees, heedless of the sharp coral that must have sliced right through the denim of her jeans to the flesh beneath. I did scream when the eye filled the opening of the garage. It wasn't even a whole eye, just a quadrant, part of a black pupil and purple iris. The dragon must have been curled up half underground, the mountains hollowed out, its spines bursting up through the ground.

The dragon didn't speak. If something that large had made a sound, we would have died in the resulting avalanche, our eardrums burst by the noise before our bodies were crushed by falling debris. But I felt an icy spike in the center of my forehead, and I knew there was something coming from the dragon, some communication.

"Yes," Morgan said. "This is him, the one I told you about. You can have him, if you let me have Ben back."

Another icy inquiry.

"No," Morgan said. "I don't want Kyle back. No lover-for-lover exchange, no matter how symmetrical it is. Just Ben."

The dragon's eye rolled and fixed on me. I looked back at it briefly, but had to close my eyes. The dragon's eye wasn't bright, it didn't shine, but it was still somehow like staring directly into the sun, an unbearable searing

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sensation.

And then something happened.

The dragon asked me for a counter-offer.

Not with words, not a telepathic communiqué, just a cold bundle of knowledge dropped into my forebrain. I was trussed there, blood on my head and on my cheek, muscles burning from the long hike, wires cutting into my wrists and ankles, beside the woman who'd loved and betrayed me, and I had to make a decision that would change my life forever.

But since the alternative was death—or, worse, being lost forever, wherever Morgan's stolen child was, part of a dragon's hoard—I made my choice.

"Are there other worlds?" I said. "Other worlds, where things worked out differently? Other versions of me?"

The dragon told me there were, world upon worlds, a great jumble only the dragon could navigate.

"What are you saying?" Morgan said, standing up, reaching for the steel pipe. "My head hurts. What's happening?"

"Then I'll give up everything," I said. "This life, my whole life, everything."

The dragon gave me to understand that my life was already forfeit under his agreement with Morgan. The dragon would break its agreement with Morgan if I made a better—or perhaps "more interesting" is a better translation—offer, but I would have to give up more than just my *life*. What *else* did I have to offer, the dragon wondered? Anything?

I did have one thing, I thought. I looked into myself, gauged the truth of my emotions, and knew that, despite all this, I still loved Morgan. For what she had once been to me, for how she'd made me feel about myself, for her courage and determination and confidence. Even the way she'd brought me here, as a sacrifice for the dragon, was an astonishing act of will and resource that I couldn't help but admire. I loved her.

But she'd betrayed me, so I didn't owe her anything any more, not even love.

"I'll give up my love for her," I said. "In every possible world, I'll give up my love for Morgan in exchange for my life."

"Shut up!" Morgan screamed, and rushed at me with the steel pipe. At least she wasn't stupid enough to attack the dragon's eye—she wanted to

kill me, instead, to end our bargaining.

The dragon let me know we had a deal. Trading love for life. The dragon thought that was pretty interesting.

“Rob,” Morgan said, leaning against the sink in our sun-filled house. I sat at the kitchen table we’d picked out together, sipping a cup of coffee, thinking about what we should do next week, on our fourth wedding anniversary. What was the fourth anniversary? Flowers. Fruit and flowers. I could do something grand and romantic with fruit and flowers.

A shadow fell across the window, and when I looked up, I saw the smallest segment of an enormous eye passing beyond the glass, a glimpse of purple iris, a flash of scales so green they were almost black. I remembered, then, and understood. The eye withdrew, and sun streamed in again.

I held the memories of a thousand lives in my head. Two were at the forefront: a life of slacker drug-dealing and flea-market hunting, moving from one pleasure to the next; and this life, a life with Morgan, with trips to Europe, and our own antique shop. There were other lives, various permutations, and in many of them, I met Morgan, and in all the lives where I met her, I fell in love with her.

And in all those lives, now, that love dissolved.

“Rob,” Morgan said again.

All those lives were real, but there was only one me anymore. I would pass through each world, every life, and experience this loss of love a hundred times. The dragon would show me the true consequence of my bargain. I had my life—*all* my lives. But not love.

“I’m pregnant, Rob,” Morgan said.

I looked at her. I put my coffee cup down. *Dirty trick, dragon*, I thought, but it was empty, only an echo of outrage. Looking at Morgan, I felt no love for her at all, and the thought of having a child with her—something else she’d love better than me—was just asking for ashes and misery and heartbreak.

“Hey, Morgan,” I said. “Look there, under the table.”

Morgan cocked her head, frowned. “Did you hear what I said?”

“I did. I did. But you need to see this. Just kneel down and look underneath the table.”

Morgan arched an eyebrow in that way she had, pushed her chair back,

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and knelt down to look.

I reached down, and beside my chair I found a length of steel pipe, heavy and cold, just like my heart. I stood, lifted the pipe, and looked at the back of Morgan's head.

"I don't see anything," she said.

I felt nothing for her—certainly not love, not even a distant hum of regret—and so I swung the pipe, overhand, hard. And waited for the next world to arrive.



TIM PRATT's fiction has appeared in *The Best American Short Stories: 2005*, *The Year's Best Fantasy*, and other nice places. His next collection, *Hart & Boot & Other Stories*, is coming from Night Shade Books in early 2007.