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SCIENCE FICTION

Tales of the Human Kind

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Personal Notes of Dr. Lyle Thaddius

Accepted a new patient named Juan Gris. Have only talked to him by phone. Insists that he cannot come to the office, since he *cannot* leave *his* house.

He is willing to pay triple my normal fee for house call.

Obviously agoraphobic but, in addition, seemed to be suffering from both temporal and spatial disorientation — had great difficulty in telling me just where he lived, and when he wanted to see me. Note: agreed to pay for five sessions in advance.

He *believes* that in five sessions he can be *cured* of his problem.

Obviously delusional, quite possibly schizophrenic.

Schedule for Tuesdays at 3:00.

Excerpts from Session 1

I've lost my way." Dr. Thaddius nodded. He listened to the words, but didn't attach any real significance to them. Years of experience had taught him that words rarely meant anything — and especially not at a first session. Dr. Thaddius had built a career on his ability to read patients *by* their covers. The covers were what told the real stories — everything else, everything inside, was just words. And words meant lies — the lies you'd tell the world and, more important, the lies you'd tell yourself.

Dr. Thaddius was in search of the truth.

So he stared past Juan Gris.

He looked at the living room.

This was part of Gris's *cover* — a very major part.

The room was an immense cavern — a cavern that at one time had been the fashionable sitting room of an Eastside brownstone. Dr. Thaddius was certain that it had once been a place of velvet drapes, Persian carpets, warmed brandy snifters, and the stuffed corpses of anything that once galloped across an African savanna.

That was all gone.

Even its echo was dead.

What filled this place now had been touched by insanity, stained with something that had been twisted past anything recognizable as being human. It was the home of a *madman*. The place was a cavern whose walls were covered in shattered mirrors. Infinite reflections filled the place, all of them cracked, all of them splintered.

But the mirrors were almost invisible.

It was what they reflected that filled the room.

Colors.

Paintings hung down from the ceiling, supported by nearly invisible wires. Each canvas was splattered with a nightmare, a slash of rainbow color, angular and savage, filled with images of people and places, distorted and twisted, as if shredded by surgical steel and then reassembled by a blind person.

Something hot and sharp jabbed behind Dr. Thaddius'

eyes — something that, just for a moment, felt like a surgeon's scalpel.

He looked away from the colors, from the shattered landscapes and people, but, more important, away from his *own* reflected image, one that was just as broken and twisted as any of those that filled the paintings. The surgeon's knife vanished.

But the memory of the pain lingered.

He looked at Juan Gris.

He sat on a paint-splattered three-legged stool, one almost identical to the one that Dr. Thaddius sat on. The little man was ancient, possibly one hundred years old, possibly even more; yet there was an ageless quality to him — as if he'd fought his battle with time, and the fight had been declared a draw. Dr. Thaddius had never seen anything so ravaged by time, yet still alive. The old man looked like an over-wrinkled raisin that had been stuffed into a paint-splattered artist's smock. But his hands were young, that part of him seeming filled with life. His fingers were long and tapered, and stained the colors of a rainbow.

The fingers floated up, touching the wire rims of his *first* pair of glasses. He wore *two* pairs.

The first looked as if the lenses had been hacked from the bottoms of ketchup bottles. They magnified every broken blood vessel and yellow splotch in his cataract-hazed eyes. But it was the second pair, the pair that Dr. Thaddius could only get a glimpse of when the old man turned his head, that most fascinated him. Juan Gris wore them on the *back* of his head, held fixed by thick strands of black electrical tape that were wrapped around his ears.

They were *mirrored* sunglasses.

As Dr. Thaddius wondered what Juan Gris could be hiding behind those mirrored lenses, he felt something itch deep within his head, something that hadn't itched for years. He found himself curious — actually interested.

And for just a moment, that frightened him.

But he buried the fear.

Years of practice had taught him that skill.

"Could you elaborate on that?" asked Dr. Thaddius, the phrase coming effortlessly, with Pavlovian ease. "Just how have you become lost?" He stared at the deep, paint-filled creases in Juan Gris's face, and at his yellowed, almost brown, teeth.

"Directions change. North won't stay north. It twists and turns. North can become south, south can become east." He blinked his eyes and pushed his ketchup-bottle glasses up the bridge of his prune-like nose. "But sometimes north becomes *up*, or even *left*. Once it even became *blue*." He smiled, and the tips of his nose and chin almost touched. Reaching within the folds of his smock, he pulled



Rauschenberg
The Artist 87



Larry Blamire
1989

out what looked like a capless tube of toothpaste. "It was wonderful," he said in a dreamy-sounding whisper as he squeezed the toothpaste tube and covered his bare feet with glistening aqua-blue coils. He stared down at his feet and wiggled his toes.

"Does north ever become *right*?" asked Dr. Thaddius as he gave his most sympathetic psychiatrist smile, hoping to draw the old man out before he drifted away in some toothpaste-generated fantasy.

Gris jerked his head back up. The joints in his neck crackled. He blinked, and his eyes narrowed to slits. The rosy-blue veins in his forehead pulsed. "Never," he said.

Dr. Thaddius just nodded.

"Is that why you've asked me here, to help you regain your sense of direction, so you can find your way outside this house, so you can go back out into the world?" Dr. Thaddius turned on his stool, and swept his hand in the direction of the door.

The door was no longer there.

He found himself looking at a distorted and splintered image of himself being reflected back from a canvas that was filled with a woman who was nothing more than icicle-like burning hair and a wide screaming mouth filled with a cracked mirror. For just a moment, the barest fraction of a second, he could no longer feel the stool beneath him, but he felt himself falling, actually vanishing, into the mirrored darkness of the screaming woman's mouth.

He blinked.

The stool was once again beneath him, and he could see the door just past the painting of the screaming woman.

He'd become disoriented.

But only for a moment.

Living in this house, in this place full of splattered paint and cracked mirrors, he suddenly realized just how easily the old man could have lost his sense of direction. He'd been here for less than an hour, and had almost become *lost* himself.

"Directions are of no consequence."

Dr. Thaddius turned back around.

Juan Gris pulled at the flabby skin of his cheeks. "Directions aren't a matter of concern. Directions are an artifact of the human mind. If humans didn't exist, directions wouldn't exist. I have to see beyond directions, to transcend a world that is masked by the human sense of self. I have to see the world for what it really is, not just the flickering shadows that my mind tries to convince me are the *true* reality. That is why I've called you. You will show me how to do that. You know the pathway."

Dr. Thaddius felt his heart race and the surgeon's scalpel being reinserted into his head. His eyeballs bulged outward as his blood pressure soared. "What makes you believe that I will be able to show you this pathway, to help you *transcend* what it is to be human?" he managed to ask. His voice had actually cracked and squealed, sounding as if it had come from some old static-filled radio.

Gris blinked. His lips twitched. "Because you're the mathematician who once walked that path."

Something reached into Dr. Thaddius's gut, something with taloned claws and, grabbing a fistful of intestines, twisted and tore them out. He *had* been a mathematician. But that had been a lifetime away, a world away. And he wouldn't return to that world — couldn't return to that

world.

He stood.

Closing his eyes, he walked toward the door.

He couldn't risk opening them, couldn't risk what he might see staring back at him from a shattered mirror.

Personal Notes of Dr. Lyle Thaddius

I should have known.

You can't hide from the past. I tell my patients that, tell them that the only way to face the future is to understand the past.

Physician, heal thyself.

The past has found me.

Yesterday the name of Juan Gris meant nothing. And that's because I'd buried it, buried it deep. And when I met the old man, of course I didn't recognize him. I'd never actually seen his *face* before. What *I'd* once seen, years ago, had been what *he'd* seen, the way that *he'd* viewed the world.

I'd seen his art.

I'd collected his lithographs.

But all that was a lifetime ago.

Juan Gris *was* a Cubist painter, a contemporary of Picasso. His paintings still lived, but the man himself had *supposedly* died almost seventy years ago. If he were in fact still alive, he would be more than a hundred years old now. The old man I saw yesterday must have been more than a hundred years old. Does that make them one and the same? I don't know. Gris was the *purest* of the Cubists. Before becoming a painter he was trained as an engineer and *mathematician*. He attempted to view the world from a mathematical perspective, from a perspective that wasn't touched by the human mind.

Did he really not die?

It doesn't matter.

Only one thing matters.

This Juan Gris knows *my* past, a past that no one should know — a past that even I managed to forget — almost. I should not go back and see him. But I know I will. He opens me up to my old memories, unseals my past. And now that I've tasted it once again, seen the distorted mirrors, I can't turn my back on him.

I can't go back to sleep.

Not now.

Because I'm awake.

Excerpts from Session 2

I saw *below* a corner today."

"Below?" asked Dr. Thaddius. "Within the floor?" He controlled the tone of his voice. He couldn't show fear, couldn't show weakness. That was what had nearly killed him the first time, thirty years ago — he'd given in to the fear. But not this time. He refused.

Gris pulled on his ears, then fingered the black electrical tape, as if checking to see if it was still secure. "Not below." He then pulled a piece of paper and a stub of charcoal from his smock's pocket and began to sketch. "Not below," he mumbled to himself as he drew something frantically across the paper. He then looked up and ran the charcoal across his left hand, scribbling something that to Dr. Thaddius looked like Sanskrit. Grinning and tossing the charcoal across the room, where it bounced from mirrors, he held the paper above his head, and stared up at it for several seconds. "Definitely not *below*." He then sat straight and lowered the piece of paper into his lap.

"If not below, then what?" asked Dr. Thaddius.

"It's obvious," said Gris, as he leaned forward and handed the paper to Thaddius. "I can see *through* corners."

Gris's hand was steady, as if it had been carved from a solid chunk of deeply stained maplewood. Dr. Thaddius's hand shook. Taking the paper and staring at it, all he saw was what looked like a random swirl of charcoal streaks. But after several seconds, he could see a pattern.

Meaning coalesced from chaos.

It was a drawing of Gris's living room, a room that was twisted, bent at odd angles, and turning back on itself until the floor and the ceiling merged together — but it was the room that Dr. Thaddius now found himself in. The drawing looked as if the room had been viewed from under water, simultaneously seen from multiple perspectives. In the center of the room sat two men. One was Juan Gris, but not the Juan Gris whom Dr. Thaddius now sat across from. This Juan Gris was young, his face smooth and his hair dark. There were no glasses, just black little eyes, piercing eyes that seemed to stare through the man who sat across from him.

Dr. Thaddius could not *see* the second man.

He was broken and torn — actually twisted — with his arms and legs bent at impossible angles. His face was built up of ragged slabs that were stitched together. Teeth that looked like shards of ice showed through transparent cheeks, while what remained of his left ear hung by a strip of bloody skin from the side of his neck. The eyelids were shut, but the eyes still saw, somehow turned around, able to look through the *back* of a shattered skull.

Dr. Thaddius reached up and touched his face.

The scars were no longer visible.

But within, deep within, where muscle had been ripped and bone shattered, he could still feel the damage, still feel where the glass had sliced through his face, still feel that place in the back of his skull that had splintered when it had bounced from the concrete.

He dropped the drawing.

The fear consumed him.

"How do you know me?"

He stared at Gris, trying to see into him, trying to see something behind his cataract-clouded eyes. He wanted to see what Juan Gris saw.

"I don't know you," said Gris while shaking his head. "What matters is that you know yourself. You can't hide. The past is here, in the present, superimposed on the future. All three are one. It's the nature of simultaneity. The math won't permit anything less."

Dr. Thaddius felt his head nod up and down.

What Gris said was true.

It was a fundamental truth — a truth greater than any understood in *mere* human terms.

The math won't permit anything less.

Personal Notes of Dr. Lyle Thaddius

Juan Gris is a ghost. He's my own personal ghost, summoned up from my past, come to haunt me, to reopen the old wounds, to try to throw me over the edge once again. I will not let him. I'm stronger now. It was thirty years ago when I last fought him — last fought myself. I was little more than a boy then, not strong enough to understand what I'd found, what I'd seen.

But I'm strong enough now.

I hope.

I pray.

I *understood* the nature of simultaneity.

It had become my life. But it was more than just the simultaneity of time, more than just the overlapping of past, present, and future that obsessed me. Space was also superimposed upon that mathematical landscape. Yesterday could become depth, tomorrow would flow into height. I had proven it mathematically. The equations demonstrated it. They showed a reality from a simultaneous, non-human perspective.

It was a perspective that only God could understand.

It was a perspective that the Cubist painters had *tried* to see.

It was pure math, lifeless, incapable of touching a human mind. But it had touched *my* mind. The math had shown me the Cubist perspective, a perspective not tainted by the human mind.

And that perspective nearly killed me.

And it is reaching out for me again — reaching out from thirty years in the past.

I have to find my old papers, my old thesis. This time the fight will be to the death. That much I understand. I'll have to remember all that I once knew to have any chance at all of surviving.

Excerpts from Session 3

Gris stood back from the canvas. Red paint, looking like blood, ran down his brush, over his fist, and seemed to spurt from the wrinkles of his wrist.

"Still Life of a Pipe."

He took another step back.

"Can you see it?" he asked without turning around.

Dr. Thaddius didn't answer at first, but looked away from the painting and at the back of Gris's head, at those mirrored sunglasses. He watched his own eyes reflecting from the back of Gris's head.

"Not in yourself, beyond yourself, without yourself!" shouted Gris.

Dr. Thaddius's gaze jerked away from the back of Gris's head and returned to the painting. It showed a table, distorted and two-dimensional, having almost a dozen legs, none of which was quite touching a shattered black marble floor. And hovering above the table, seeming to rise beyond the plane of the canvas, floated a pipe. But it was only a phantom pipe, the outline of a pipe, the wood-grain surface of the table clearly seen through it. Yet, despite the pipe's ghostly presence, it cast a dead-black shadow against the tabletop.

Gris turned around.

"It both is and isn't there," whispered Dr. Thaddius.

"The pipe is a metaphor."

Dr. Thaddius knew that.

"It is you. Part of you is locked in the here and now, casting that black shadow in this world, while the real you, that part that holds your soul, that makes you human, hangs beyond this world, just a ghost, almost completely invisible to you."

"Why did you call me?" asked Dr. Thaddius. "What do you *really* want with me?"

"I didn't call you." He wiped at his nose with his paint-smeared hand, leaving a bloody-looking streak that dripped over his upper lip. "You called *me*, summoned me

up from your past."

Dr. Thaddius couldn't believe that, refused to believe that. He hadn't summoned this nightmare. He tried to sink through his stool, tried to dribble into the floor so that he could escape from this insanity.

He began to feel himself flow through the stool.

"You've summoned me, asked me to help you!" shouted Gris. He reached out his paint-stained hand.

It shifted and stretched, growing flat.

Dr. Thaddius tried to close his eyes. And he did close them, but found that he could still see, could see far more than he knew he should.

Gris's hand distorted, at first growing angular, the fingers turning to rectangular cubes of flesh, then rotating, the thumb and index finger vanishing as the skin turned to the texture of wood, then grew translucent, glistening like crystal.

"You can't let yourself forget."

Dr. Thaddius cried.

But the tears didn't run down his face.

They filled the *inside* of his head.

Dr. Thaddius felt himself drowning.

Personal Notes of Dr. Lyle Thaddius

Juan Gris exists only within my own head.

I've come to accept that.

That much is easy to accept.

What is not so easy to accept is the realization that I no longer know what else may exist *only* within my own head. How much of my world is imagined, how much of it is not real? I have no way to measure, no way to judge. Once you question the smallest slice of reality, the rest unravels itself like some old sweater — you pull on a single dangling strand and soon a pile of yarn covers the floor.

I'm unraveling.

I may be imagining *all* of this.

But somehow, that doesn't make it any less real.

Not to me.

I found my old thesis.

I found my old medical records.

I can feel the scars beneath the face that the surgeons reconstructed. The scars are real. That I know. That is a fact. At least, I think that it is a fact.

I will not return to Juan Gris's home.

If I do, I will die.

Excerpts from Session 4

Dr. Thaddius stared out at the living room. He had *not* returned. It had come to *him*. Gris's house now sat on every street corner, and this living room was behind every door he opened. He could not avoid it, could not escape it. Dr. Thaddius now understood that he would have to face Gris.

And he would have to face himself.

The living room had grown, now covering acres. In the distance, at a horizon that was unnaturally close, the ceiling and floor melted together. He knew that all this space could not be contained within the house.

But that didn't disturb him.

Because he knew that this house, the living room, and Juan Gris existed only within his own head. And within his head was more than ample space for this nightmare. What really frightened Dr. Thaddius was realizing just how much space *was* in his head, just how *large* this

nightmare could grow. It could fill a world. It could fill a universe.

He once again thought about the equations, about *his* equations, that had filled a thesis thirty years ago. They showed how fragile reality could be, how formless it truly was. They showed how it could be changed.

"The Cubist artists were on the right track," said Gris.

Dr. Thaddius didn't even try to close his eyes. He knew there was little relationship between closed eyes and trying to block out the image of Juan Gris.

"Don't you agree?"

Gris moved nearer.

He still wore both pairs of glasses, but the sunglasses were no longer on the *back* of his head. At this moment, *back*, as a concept, no longer existed. It was not part of the universe that Dr. Thaddius had suddenly slipped into. Gris's head consisted only of *front*. The ketchup-bottle glasses sat in the center of his face, and to the left and right of those thick lenses were his ears, and beyond each of them, a mirrored lens from the sunglasses.

Dr. Thaddius didn't answer Gris.

He was too busy remembering.

This was happening as it had before.

Just as it had thirty years ago.

Just as it had when he'd been certain that the only way to get this nightmare out of his head was to *open* his head and let the nightmare escape.

He'd run through a plate-glass window — a window that had been on the third floor of the UCLA Computer Science Building. His skull was smashed when he hit the pavement below. But the doctors managed to put him back together.

They said that he'd had a complete breakdown, become so obsessed with his thesis, with a strange set of mathematical equations that no one else seemed capable of understanding, that he'd tried to kill himself.

He hadn't tried to kill himself.

He'd tried to save himself.

He'd tried to remain human.

"Did you hear me!" shouted Gris.

Dr. Thaddius looked *up*.

He thought it was *up*. It might have been *down*. It might have been *north*. It might have been *blue*. He felt something sizzle. The sizzling might have been *inside* his brain. It might have been *outside* his brain. He realized that it made absolutely no difference.

"Yes," he said. The words floated from his ears.

"The Cubists felt their way in an intuitive manner.

They tried to see the world without the preconceptions that humanity carries. They tried to look at the world from God's perspective, seeing all sides simultaneously, all times simultaneously. But their vision was limited. They didn't have the mathematical tools that are at your disposal."

Dr. Thaddius reached out a hand.

He squinted his eyes and focused on Gris's *front only* head. He pulled down the concept of *depth* from somewhere distant, somewhere hidden. Gris's face bulged outward like an inflating balloon. His ears ran to the side of his face, and his sunglasses vanished *behind* his head.

Gris nodded his head.

"You do understand. The artist could only imagine that simultaneous perspective, but you can manipulate it, control it."

"No," whispered Dr. Thaddius.

"There's no turning back now."

Personal Notes of Dr. Lyle Thaddius

I don't know if this tape recorder is on. On implies knowledge of off. I have no knowledge of off. How can anything ever really be off? I don't know.

I did not leave Gris's house. I simply found myself not there.

The world is now a liquid place of sharp and contrasting angles. Behind every smile is a knife, behind every tear a shard of hate. I find myself walking streets that are paved with molten lead as I try to outrace the rainbow shafts of light that fill this landscape, trying to escape, trying to find a way out.

No.

Trying to find a way *back*.

Back is the key.

Back is both spatial and temporal. The two can merge, be viewed simultaneously, can interchange and become one and the same. *Back* is a place of mirrored sunglasses, showing me where I've been, where I will go. Yesterday is nothing more than a step back. That may be my salvation.

Excerpts from Session 5

"They put you back together," said Gris. "They reset the broken bones, dropped a steel plate in the back of your head, and sewed your face back together. They said you were as good as new."

Dr. Thaddius didn't try to focus his eyes.

He knew that it was pointless.

There was nothing to focus on.

Gris's living room was a spinning collage of paintings and mirrors. He saw everything, simultaneously, from all perspectives. He saw it, but his brain could not interpret it. He saw more than his brain had ever been designed to accept. He had once believed that he could master the equations that defined reality.

But they had mastered him.

"But you weren't," said Gris, his voice echoing from the mirrored maelstrom. "After you discovered the math, understood that it was possible to manipulate reality, you found that knowledge crushing, almost killing. You then hid from yourself, hid from the equations, and started on the path that would make you *Dr. Lyle Thaddius*, the good doctor who would help so many discover themselves, discover those secrets hidden deep within themselves."

Dr. Thaddius knew that there was only one way out.

Only one way to cope.

He tried to stand.

But standing implied knowledge of up and down, the relationship between floor and feet. It was there, buried somewhere in the torrent of information that now flooded over him, but he couldn't see it, couldn't pull it out.

He had waited too long.

He was too lost.

Even death was now beyond his grasp.

"But you couldn't rediscover yourself, hiding in your new world. For thirty years you couldn't find yourself. But the equations were still with you, chewing at you from the inside, making your existence something hollow and lifeless. You knew that, understood that you were not really alive, so you called on me, wanting me to help show you the way *back*."

"There is no returning!"

Out of the swirl of mirrors and rainbows a face materialized. It was Juan Gris's, but he no longer wore his ketchup-bottle glasses. The mirrored sunglasses seemed to fill his face. Dr. Thaddius stared at them, but saw nothing. They were filled with a light-sucking blackness.

"Thirty years ago you lost yourself, lost your way. Instead of pursuing the math, understanding what it was that you'd discovered, you ran and hid, building a life that was dead and empty. But you can go *back*, can touch that place again and choose the path that you didn't take."

"And become not human!"

The fear smothered Dr. Thaddius. He remembered what he'd seen when waking after the doctors had put him back together. He'd opened his eyes and seen a world that had never existed before, a world that no eyes had ever seen before.

He'd no longer been human.

"No," said Gris. "The essence of being human is to *accept* change, to seek it, to throw yourself into it. You know that, and you want that. That's why you've called me. I can show you how to go *back*. I can give you what you want."

Back.

Dr. Thaddius remembered the hospital room.

It had been all angles and colors, a collage of shapes with no meaning — with no substance. And he'd rejected it, bolted from it like a frightened animal.

Like an animal.

Not a human.

He felt himself stand.

His feet touched a floor that wasn't there.

"Simultaneity is the key," said Gris. "To move *back* in time, you merely have to move *back* in space. You've known this for thirty years. You could have returned whenever you wanted."

"I was frightened!"

"Yes!" screamed Gris. "You saw a world that no human had ever seen before, and you were frightened by it. The perspective was alien, but the emotions still human. Emotion will remain with you; it is something that you will not lose. Fear will give way to curiosity and curiosity to wonder. *Those* are the things that make you human, and those are the things that you have not felt for the past thirty years. To walk *back*, to return to that place, will save you. To go *back* will make you human once more."

Dr. Thaddius felt his feet slide backwards.

Mirrors and paintings exploded, paint and glass vaporizing.

"To be human," said Dr. Thaddius.

"To be human," said Juan Gris.

Everything vanished, eaten by darkness. Only one thing remained. The mirrored sunglasses floated in front of Dr. Thaddius.

He jumped into them.

Jumped *backwards*.

Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow

Lyle." Something behind his closed eyelids moved.

"Lyle Thaddius!"

His eyes opened.

She hovered over him. Her hair burned, sizzling with electric discharges. Her face was a cracked pane of stained

glass, her mouth a black slash, her nose sliding down her throat, and her eyes slowly floating across her forehead.

Lyle didn't run, didn't hide.

Fear beat at him, tried to smother him.

But he fought it.

He focused.

He reached out a hand, passing it *through* her face. He could feel her thoughts, feel the concern, feel the compassion. Her thoughts, all blue and green, *smiled* at him, *caressed* him.

Curiosity filled him.

He removed his hand.

But then quickly reached out again, *without* actually moving. He touched her.

Her face shimmered. The angles softened and the bright colors dulled. Her eyes stopped floating across her

forehead, her nose crawled to the center of her face, and her mouth turned into a smile, a smile full of white teeth.

Wonder filled Lyle Thaddius.

Again he raised his hand. It was flesh and bone. Again he focused. It shimmered and shifted. It inverted. It was now bone-covered flesh. He relaxed his eyes and his hand inverted back.

He controlled the math.

It no longer controlled him.

"We thought we'd lost you," said the nurse. "The surgeons said that it was a close thing, that for a while it didn't look as if you were going to make it."

"I made it *back*," whispered Lyle.

"You certainly did," she said. □

Fear

(Continued from Page 5)

he was alone because he was crippled and could not hunt ("the extra mouth to feed," David's words echoed in her mind), and he had hinted darkly that the others would not be friendly.

They came on the fifth day. They were silent and terribly fast, appearing just at twilight as Bridget started back for supper. The leaves did not crackle under their feet, and the first sounds she heard were a sickening thwack and Shay's yelp of pain. She turned as they were upon her and saw blood on Shay's face, made more grotesque by rage and panic. He tried to wrest her from them but was driven off with stones that thudded with a rustle into the bracken after hitting him. She drew breath to shriek and inhaled only the stench of the hairy hand that clamped over her mouth and nose. She had never passed out before; she struggled violently against it, with bursting lungs, until the glittering blackness filled her mind and she couldn't see Shay anymore.

Bridget had never before felt anything like the cold terror that filled her when she came to. She told herself that these short, ragged men were trouping fairies, friendly folk who wanted perhaps to swap a fairy baby for a real one. But their hands were too rough, their voices too harsh, and they had tied her up as if she were a bag of mending. She was carried through the forest, through darkness so complete that she wondered if she'd really woken up. After a while — perhaps a hundred precious breaths — a flickering light began to grow, and she heard voices. She was dropped to the ground, dragged past a huge, scorching fire, and left in a damp stone structure. A man stationed himself at the opening; in the firelight, his white hair and pale eyes made her cringe.

Shay had not followed them. By dawn, that realization ached inside her almost as much as her need for Mam. But she looked up from her misery and saw that the guard had gone, and she was able to roll herself to the opening and look out.

There were eleven other huts, no two alike, standing

in a ring around the hole where the fire burned. Near it, animals picked and grazed and several tiny children played.

She found that someone had left her some food, but she was sick after she ate it. Her retching drew a group of silver women to hover over her, and she felt comforted when they stroked her hair and cooed over its red color.

"Are you banshees?" she asked in Irish. They drew back in surprise at these first words from her. One of them, apparently the youngest though they were all wizened and hollow-eyed, offered her a carved bowl of water and sat before her as she drank.

"We are not banshees," she said slowly, as if sensing Bridget's newness to their tongue. "I am Mora. Are you of the Tuatha?"

Bridget thought about the legend of the Tuatha and said she didn't know. "Bridget is my name."

This elicited a solemn nod. "They said you would return and take the land one day."

Bridget remembered what her mother had said and stared at the wrinkled, pale face before her. She thought desperately of something to say with her small store of words that would show she was a friend; then she remembered her leprechaun swatch, and reached out with her bound hands to tug at the woman's rags. "Mora, I can fix these," she said, and managed to draw the small needle from its sheath in her pocket. Mora's eyes grew wide at the sight of the gleaming stainless steel, and she watched in fascination as Bridget unraveled a long strand from her embroidery and threaded the needle deftly, barely hampered by her bonds. "Look," Bridget said, and stitched up the largest hole in Mora's tunic as neatly as she could. "See? Better." Some of Mora's clothes were woven, but some were of a solid cloth Bridget had never seen before, fastened with large, rough thongs. Bridget's whipstitching looked delicate and sophisticated by comparison, and to her relief, Mora smiled broadly.

Bridget spent the rest of the day with the women, who told her that the men were out hunting. She learned to milk a goat and to tell time from a stone's shadow. Mora had an ancient, crack-faced watch, and Bridget wound it for her, as amazed that they had forgotten this simple thing as they were that she did not know what animal skin was.

When the men returned, Mora told her she was to see the priest-king. Frightened, she struggled a bit as she was