



JOHN T. ELLIOTT

The Song of Sirens

ELLIOTT

That lord that counseled thee
To give away thy land,
Come place him here by me,
Do thou for him stand.
The sweet and bitter fool
Will presently appear;
The one in motley here,
The other found out there.

King Lear: Act I Scene

Every day when I leave the office, I go to the park. I don't really like the park but I'm getting used to it. My favorite place is a gazebo overlooking the pond. Sometimes I feed the ducks, if I can remember to take some leftover bagels from the Sweatshop (that's what we call the interns' work area).

The Crazies relive their past lives at the gazebo. I go there to learn what to expect when my time comes and I lose my last marble. The sick and homeless ghosts who haunt the park, are the only ones in this city who know I am going to end up like them. When brain chemistry stages a coup d'état, everything that seemed to be held

with an iron-grip, slides between the fingers like melted butter.

The Crazies are made of flesh and bone, like you and me. Their haggard faces and twisted fingers only suggest what they really are; their curse is worse than exile to the urban underworld: panhandling for change, flashing a cracked-tooth grin, weaving stories of unfathomable sorrow for the well-dressed passerby.

They sing too. Their music is the wail of the banshee, and the sweet song of sirens. Thankfully, most of you can't hear them: like the tones emitted from a dog whistle, they sing in pitches unrecognizable to the 21st century sound-bite trained ear— a marvelous product of accelerated evolution.

The Scottish king heard them in the night.

The antebellum plantation fields grew fertile with their songs. Soil turned black by the bleeding song of the Choctaw slaughtered by Manifest Destiny or hemorrhaging dysentery, mixed in a cotton gin with the moans of dark princes, betrayed by his people and sold for jewelry and gunpowder.

•

When the sun sinks below the magnolia trees, I go home. I don't drive a car anymore; my wife picks me up

at the train station when I call her. She thinks I do it for the exercise and was too giddy about having the keys to the Mercedes SLK to consider anything being wrong. I frequently get cold sweats these days, I smell like the inside of a bum's mouth when I get in the car.

"Oh my God, what is that smell? Is that you babe?" she asks with her nose wrinkled, after a couple of minutes.

My answer never changes: "It was a helluva long day at the office and I forgot to reapply deodorant at lunch. Just send everything to the dry-cleaners in a plastic bag." I look out the window without saying a word the whole time.

My name is Frank Harrigan: I'll be 43 years old next month. My life as I know it will be only a waking nightmare soon.

My wife's name is Margaret, she smells like daisies and the living room of our first apartment. I married her when I was 23 and she was 21. The best man at our wedding died in a car accident on the way home from the reception. He was drunk then, he's worm food now. We have a daughter named Jane. I think she was named after a lady who talks to gorillas, or maybe it was that

Victorian novelist. She eats dinner with my wife and I on weeknights; we don't see her much on weekends. Next year she goes to Vanderbilt and wants to study advertising. Her boyfriend reminds me of a pig with Down syndrome. He calls me "Mr. H" sometimes; he's the only one who's ever called me that. Our boy goes to Dartmouth, like his dad; his name is Grant.

A life that everyone is jealous of, that's all I ever wanted to have. Now I watch it burn a little more each day. The blue flames creep out of the corners of our Persian rugs and lick the curtains softly. They quiver over the keys of the baby grand piano in the living room, strings expanding and breaking at two octaves higher than actual pitch. I can only chew my tongue at the dinner table and watch Margaret's face, waiting in agony and praying that she will mention the blue flickering flames. It never happens. After I dragged a garden hose into the house and soaked the burning China cabinet I realized it would never happen. There is no flame. There is no home. There is no perfect life anymore.

I first noticed that something was wrong when Grant called home to check-in with us a couple of months ago. I was lying on our bed, propped up against the headboard and barefooted. I remember it like it was an inescapable childhood memory that continues to resurface: he had

made the Dean's List again and was voted vice-president of his fraternity. When he told me the news I began to weep like Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane; I wanted to congratulate him but all I could say was "My boy, you're going to be a big-league hitter someday," over and over again. Each time I said it, I laughed. I shivered and laughed harder until he said, "Um, I love you dad. I'll call again this weekend". Margaret picked up the phone a few seconds later; the sound of her voice scared the shit out of me. Like a teenage girl caught talking to a boy late at night, I quietly hung up the phone. I don't much like telephones.

I felt my lungs expand and contract, breathing in a strange new breath laden with fuzzy infinite misery. Cries and moans flowed through my veins and reverberated in my heart like the vibrato of a thousand violins. I lied there in the same position for what seemed like an hour—mouth agape, eyes wide open. I undressed, then dressed myself again in the same clothes, and climbed into bed.

When Margaret came into the bedroom she stopped in the doorway for a second before turning the lights out. I tried to keep my eyes closed and fake sleep, while watching her move about the room. She walked to her side of the bed and clicked on the dim lamp. I watched

her through the slits in my eyelids: zips open the back of her dress and pulls each arm through, slides it down over her torso and steps out, one leg after the other; she sits down on the bed softly and turns her head towards me. I don't dare say a word or bat an eyelash and focus on the rhythm of my fake sleep breathing. She methodically rolls her silk stockings down her leg, her torso bending to meet her thigh. I grunt and rub my nose while turning on my side away from her as if adjusting in my sleep, so I can discretely bite down on my knuckles to silence the wave of horrible weeping I feel welling up inside me.

The firm I help run hasn't realized I'm sick. I'm the chief-financial officer.

Chief Harrigan make profit growth; Chief Harrigan make good investment returns on side. Chief Harrigan fire anybody he want. I can't tell you the name of it because we're under federal investigation right now. Chief Harrigan no like Washington tell him how run business.

When the other executives find me out and realize I'm not going to get better, they'll pay a good severance salary. I have worked for the firm for nineteen years. I helped to build it up. Now we work in big glass castles. Sometimes I see clouds just outside my office; in the summer, the smog comes and sits on my windowsill.

My doctor is a good man; I can't ever remember his

name, he's Indian and the pronunciation always hog-ties my tongue. He's the only practicing Hindu I know. He doesn't even kill spiders, karmic retribution and stuff. Once a month we get together for a round of tennis at the club, he embarrasses me in at least four out of five matches.

Doc (Al-i-bukyur is what it sounds like to my American tone deaf ears) walks to the examination table where I'm sprawled out in a posture of listless despair. I tell him that I smoked pot a few times when I was in college. "Smoking marijuana a handful of times doesn't cause this, Frank. Let's have a look at the MRI results." I tell him the pictures of my brain look like a bloody vagina, he coughs and laughs and wipes his glasses and said, "Yes, it does doesn't it?"

"Frank, are you awake?" Margaret whispered just behind me. I sat up violently and whipped around to face her before she finished talking.

"I had a headache. Much better now." *Our boy is going to be a big-league hitter someday.*

"You've still got your clothes on? You're going to sweat like a pig if you go to sleep in them." She gets out of bed and walks around to my side. "Let me help you babe," she says as she descends onto her knees. *I want you now Margaret.*

Barefoot and bare-breasted she stood in the wan yellow glow of my desk lamp. She smelled like water lilies and vermouth.

We ran through the rain to my dorm, every drop of rain falling in slow motion and refracting the pale moonlight into explosions of pure color. Pure color and draft beer swam through my head as I imagined the opulence of our life together. I saw all of it: the German sports car, the beautiful wife, the country club membership, the children we'll have, the family vacations, it was on the horizon.

Her torso glistened as she milled about my room: hanging her shirt up to dry, drying her hair with my towel. The stubborn beads of water that clung to her shoulders gleamed for a nanosecond being rolled away by Margaret's shivering body. New Hampshire was cold until May that year.

Her hair fell heavy on my shoulders as she straddled my lap. Brunette ropes of tangled towel-dried hair draped around my face when she pulled my mouth into hers. Even in the darkness, her eyes gleamed like iridescent emeralds. I saw the light of all lights that night. We didn't speak until *she said "Good morning". The bedroom flooded around me as if it had been zoomed in through a camera lens. Margaret was lying on her side, furrowing her brow*

at me and nibbling on her lower lip.

“What?” was all I could safely say.

“I said ‘good morning’. Frank, are you feeling all right? I’ve never seen you act like this. I’m worried that you’re working so much and not taking care of yourself?” She meant it. Panic rose up in my throat like unexpected vomit. An impetus of spine and pelvis jerked me like a puppet, I had to run but I didn’t know why or where. The wallpaper began moving like wet sand: the maritime patterns sliding up and down the walls, bleeding colors breeding hideous colors.

“Margaret...Do you love me?” My tongue felt like a sack of cornmeal trying to do somersaults. A bead of sweat slid down my neck and sent spasms of shivers all through my spine.

“Of course I love you Frank. You’re the best husband I could ever hope to have. You know that I love you right? Why do you ask? My God!” she heaved in a thick overdue breath, “Your eyes are shaking. What the hell’s going on? What are you staring at?” She slid to the opposite side of the bed and pulled the sheets up under her chin, waiting for any response to cue her next move. She looked so fragile and sexy with her knees pulled up to her chest. I let out a tiger growl and licked my teeth and smiled. She didn’t return the gesture.

It was soft at first, easily mistaken for the wind: it was the wind I thought until I heard the scratching coming from the interior wall of the bedroom. Rats! They must have infiltrated through a hole under the house and filed in through the basement. The patter of little feet marched in the attic above us. Rats! I knew exactly where each one was as soon as I heard it and could almost picture their fleshy pink tails dragging behind them. The scratching became louder and grew in number. Tearing out the drawer of our bedside table, I searched for the earplugs Margaret wears when I snore. She was yelling something at me but I couldn’t make it out over the scratching. She hears them too. That’s why she’s screaming.

I crammed the plugs into my ears and bolted to the closet. “Oh where is it dammit?” I said frantically. The walnut box Margaret’s dad gave me where did I put it? A platoon of rats scurried above me. “They’re heading for the bedroom,” I yelled over my shoulder? I found a box with his initials engraved on the gold lock-plate. *I’ll make you proud Mr. Chancellor. Margaret will have everything she wants in a husband. I love her dearly and want to spend my life with her.*

“I know you’ll take care of her Frank. Her mother and I are very happy for you both,” he said as he ex-

haled a plume of cigar smoke from his massive chest. The mosquitoes were ravenous that summer and the July temperatures broke local records.

We sat opposite each other, in wicker chairs on the screened-in porch, watching the fan blades circle, drinking homemade sweet-tea and puffing cigars. It was his time to feel assured and my time to feel relieved. He told me how the old days are almost over and soon people won't need to go to the bank as often, thanks to computers but that will end up crippling the banks, because people will keep less money in the bank and someday we'll be caught with our pants down cause they won't stop lending money even when they don't have any.

She came out to the porch and quietly shut the screen door. She still had a yellow ribbon in her hair.

"Hello sweetheart," Mr. Chancellor said as he beamed at me. "We were just talking about you."

"Well that's not very nice," she replied, pretending to be offended. She sauntered over to the loveseat and put her hand on my right knee. I hold her dainty hand, her eyes lower. *"Frank!" she screams in a shrill voice. "Are you crazy?" I dart my eyes at her.* I see she is terrified, frozen in place on the bed with her knees pulled up at her chest, quivering a little. Of course she's scared, there's a regiment of rats invading our home. I throw the box on the

bed and scramble to the armoire to find the key. "Baby, where did I put the key to your dad's pistol box?"

"What? Pistol box? Oh my God! Frank!"

I find it in the box with my cufflinks.

They're fortifying their position. It's only a matter of time before reinforcements arrive and they get on the offensive.

I turn the key and pull out the .38 snubnose. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. I stuff my robe pockets with handful more rounds. Locked and loaded. I'm ready now you bastards.

For a second I look at my wife. No time for sentiment Frank. You're no use if you're weak. You must protect this house.

"Margaret, I want you to go to the bathroom and lock the door. Don't come out until I say it's safe."

Directly behind me, the windows splashed hot-light through the blinds, illuminating spots on the wall in front of me. "They've done it!" I shrieked excitedly. "Reconnaissance has spotted where the rats are stationed!"

"I'm sorry Frank!"

As I line my shot up an explosion in the back of my head sends stars and quasars rushing by at the speed of light. Then all went black as I felt my knees buckle.

I smelled plastic and Listerine. Flutter. The alarm

clock is beeping; I reach for the snooze button. Flutter flutter. My arm won't move. I'm paralyzed. Those rat bastards got me! Oh Margaret, I'm sorry I couldn't protect you. Please forgive me. My eyes flutter open into the sterile light above the bed. I try to turn my neck. "Owww goddammit!" The back of my head throbs a crimson beat when I move my head. I look down at a blue hospital gown and restraints tied to my arms and legs. An I.V. tube is in my right hand. I try to sit up and read the words on the plastic bag dripping the clear liquid into the tube. Immediately the throbbing pain arrests my efforts and forces me to stay motionless. But I can move! So what. Those cowards took her and left me for dead.

I hear my name being called out from down the hall, followed by a figure dressed in white taking blurry quick strides into my room. My head begins to swim.

•

*Swimming in the harvest moonlight,
The Chattahoochee River's black as night,
That's where I saw Little miss Everdeen,
Washin' by the river to keep her petticoats clean.*

Lying on my back, I smell rich soil. I have no idea

why I'm on the ground. Who is singing? They began another verse. I get on my feet and look around into a dense forest losing the battle against winter. A river fifty yards away from me flows steadily. I approach and feel certain that I somehow ended up on the banks of the Chattahoochee River but the water...it's clear to the bottom. Like all the grime has been pumped out of it leaving only pure water.

At the river by Highway 9? Is that where I am? But it's too quiet here. Birds never sang so clearly. Not the sound of a single car. "Footsteps?" I say out loud, startled by the sound of my voice breaking the silence. I turn my ear towards the sound of cracking branches and crunching leaves. My dumbfounded steps bring me within eyesight of a group of twenty or so men dressed in the grey-coats used for the annual Civil War reenactment. I have no idea of what today is. "Excuse me gentlemen, I'm very sorry to interrupt the reenactment but I think I'm lost."

They seemed bewildered by my presence. I had no idea where I was and thought their reaction was normal under the circumstances. Five of the grey-coats were approaching with their muskets pointed at me. I ventured closer and asked, "Could you point me towards highway 9?"

They stopped on a dime and stood like wax statues, muskets still aimed at me. “Wilmont!” one of the actors yells out of the side of his mouth, his eyes locked with mine, he spat a line of chewing tobacco with incredible velocity.

“Yessir Sergeant!” A short, pale actor comes running out of the bunch, trying to balance his uneven knapsack. He plants his feet and stands at attention.

“Go inform Captain Rhodes that we’ve captured a possible Union spy. Bring back Captain’s orders of what we do with him,” said the actor.

“I’m not with the reenactment, although it is a very well done production. I’m sorry I’ve held you gentlemen up; I need to find my way back to Buckhead. I’m not exactly sure how I got here,” I say while slowly shaking my head to hopefully shake out some memory of where I came from or where I had parked the car.

“What’s that you say stranger? the Sergeant asks with a raised eyebrow. “Where’d ya say yer headed?”

“Buckhead,” I raise my eyes to theirs hopefully but there is no sign of recognition from the grey-coats. “Oh you know, north Atlanta?” The tree-top canopies begin to swirl a little. I sink down onto a boulder with my head between my hands. “You mean to tell me that none of you know where Buckhead is?”

“There’s an outpost just north of Atlanta called Irbyville, other than that, ‘taint much else. Some say ol’ Henry Irby killed a buck big as a moose and put the head up on the wall of his tavern,” said one of the grey-coats wearing the stripes of a Corporal, he looks to be Grant’s age, just a kid really. His eyes had the flickering spark of unfulfilled dreams. *Some dreams will be very vivid Miz Harrigan, about 50% of the patients we see suffer from night terrors.*

“Don’t beat yourself up Miz Harrigan; you did the right thing. His cranium x-rays don’t show any fractures and the CT scans didn’t find any bleeding. Go home and get some rest ma’am,” said a short squat blonde nurse with an uneven perm, her hair resembled a bail of hay mixed with blonde horsehair.

My eyes were closed but I could see everything in the room perfectly. I was dreaming. It was a dream.

The room was vibrating and a high-pitch tone was ringing steadily. I felt gravity as a living monster pulling me towards the center and squeezing the breath out of me. My eyes still closed, I saw the shadow-vision of Margaret through my eyelids. She leaned carefully over the wretched guardrail of the wretched hospital bed and kissed me on the lips, the way she did when she was 20. Then she ran her fingers through my hair, kissed my

forehead and left the room without a word.

The bed began to shake under me. My eyes opened wide with the onset of the Fear. I fumbled around me with my free hand, hoping to find the bed-control pad, but found nothing. The Fear has a voice. It speaks to me from the center of my stomach, It talks to me the way I want to be talked to.

How long have I been here? I remember it was Thursday when I was in the bedroom with Margaret. Thursday morning. It's getting dark outside now. Dark happy night. Shiny and dark like Margaret's black silk stockings when she rolls them off her thigh under the light of the bedside table lamp. The shaking slows down. I press a button on the control-pad until the bed is flat. Now. The bed is still. The lights above me are mean and florescent; everything in the room looks sick and pale. I want the shiny dark thighs again. I want them wrapped tight around my neck To tear the silk off them with my teeth and sleep on them; when she has a pillow between her legs I sleep like Romeo with my head on the outside of her thigh. I know I'm losing my mind minute by minute. I can feel it coming. The Fear, The Sickness, The Madness.

GOD,

IF YOU ARE THERE, THEN YOU TELL ME

WHAT I'M BEING PUNISHED FOR. I HAVE A FAMILY! YOU MOTHERFUCKER! WHAT did I do to deserve this? TELL ME!

There is no more sick pale light, only the black shiny shapes of Margaret's stockings. Gleaming in the starlight. A sky that no one ever sees in the city, brighter than the lights of any city. Moving and burning and lighting up the craters of the moon. There is no man on the moon. There never was one until electricity made the moon into a beat-up cracked golf-ball. Leonardo took the face of the moon and painted it on Mona Lisa. She has the Lunar Smile. *It looks like the planetarium only brighter.*

"The what?" Sergeant McMillan says out of the side of his mouth as he works through a fresh plug of chew.

"I said. 'the sky looks like how it looked at the planetarium,' It's never been this bright. Not even in Alaska." I was becoming annoyed with these country-bumpkins. They didn't seem to know shit from Shanghai.

"Plan-uh-tare-ee-um?" repeats the Sergeant while rubbing his jaw. "Hmmp. Uh-las-kuh?" He turns these over in his head more than once before looking down at his worn, muddy boots. "I don't know who you are or what you're business is sir, but you're not making much sense. I ain't heard of none of these places you

talk about.” He cocks his head at a leery angle and asks, “Where’d you say you’re from again?”

“Atlanta. I was born here. I went to school in New Hampshire and Massachusetts, but other than that I’ve lived here all my life.” His eyes grow wide when I mention the Union states. I roll my fingers into fists by my side and clench them for a second before relaxing and saying calmly, “Sir, I understand this reenactment is a solemn event and a tribute to our ancestors. I’m sorry I’ve held y’all up, but would you mind breaking character for five minutes here to help me, I seem to have gotten myself into a bind and I just need directions to get back to Atlanta. I’ll be out of your way as soon as possible.”

He stared at me for what seemed like five minutes. Then he said in an exhausted tone, “Friend, I believe your story. But there ain’t no way to get back to Atlanta right now. Ain’t no reason to if you could. General Sherman’s army has shelled her to rubble; anything that wasn’t destroyed by thar artillery got burned to the ground two weeks ago when them yeller basterds marched through the streets like a damn emperor’s court.”

He continued in a bewildered tone. “I’m pretty sure you’re not a spy; you are awfully peculiar though, those clothes ain’t fit for a grown man to leave the house in, if

you don’t mind me saying so.”

I could barely make out what he was saying. My head felt completely detached from my shoulders, kind of floating in the chilly autumn breeze. I called out to her, “Margaret”. *Margaret. Margaret. It’s all right Mr. Harrigan, she’ll be back in the morning.* There was only a black nurse. She was leaning over me and checking the machines I was hooked up to. Her face was clear and bright, she was young and petit.

“Is it too cold in here?” She had retracted to the other side of the room. It was dark except for the dim lights coming through the hallway. The magnolia trees outside cast ghostly shadows upon the nurse’s face.

“Where’s Margaret?” I felt like a child lost at a theme park, asking complete strangers the whereabouts of a parent.

“She said she’ll be back in the morning. You must’ve been having another nightmare. You’re safe here Mr. Harrigan. It’s all right now.” The way she said that so sweetly and honestly sent a shiver up my spine. I looked away from her direction, out the window and lapsed into the darkness.