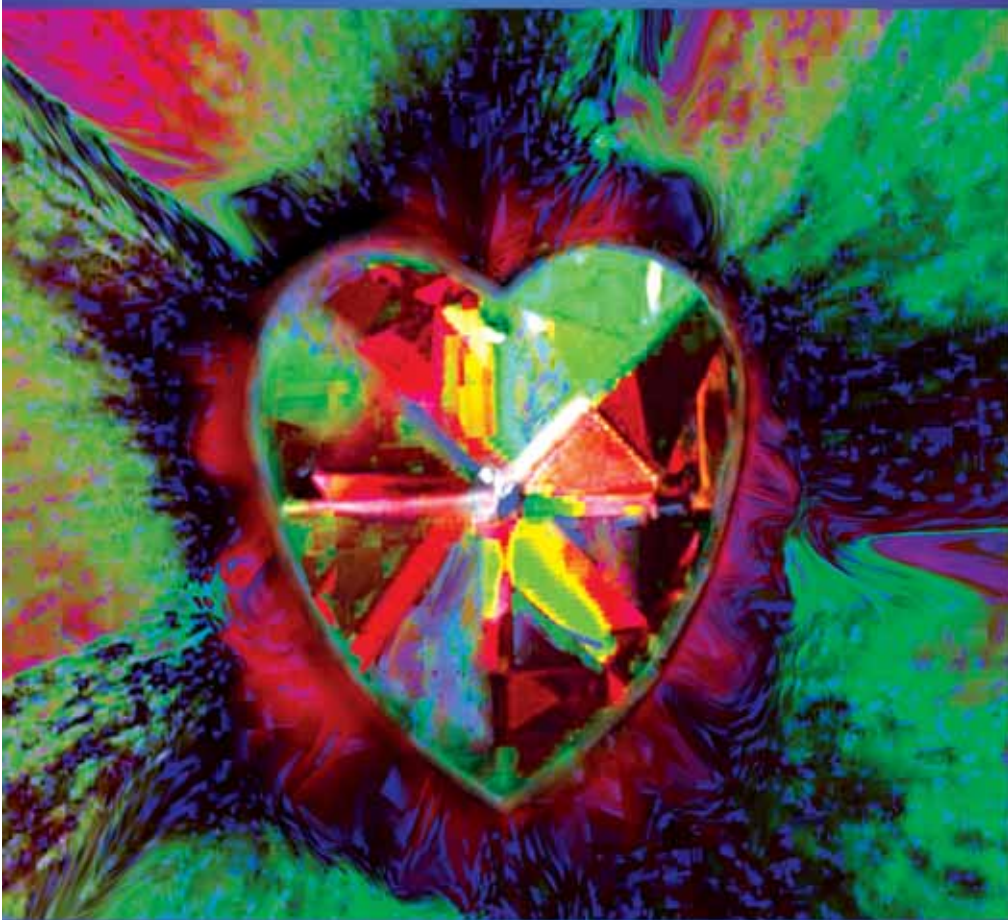


A HALLOW HEART



JOHN STRYSIK

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For Miriam
Always In My Heart

A HALLOW HEART

*December 21st
Winter Solstice*

From the Diary of Frederick Templeton

... he, or she, will be greater than batman or superman or flash and will be baptized in the fount of REAL history, the secret history hidden and locked and buried in the vatican and the pentagon/pentagram/pentangle and nixon's so called library—he/she will be a SAVIOUR with ten billion pages AND ALL OTHERS WILL PALE, AND ALL OTHERS WILL FADE, AND I WILL BE THERE AS I AM MEANT TO BE

*a dick
to their bruce*

helping through the sicknesses—helping him, or her, when he/she comes to the water this night of nights—helping to battle the motionless war they've been waging since fifty-four when data replaced bullets—programmers/infantry—bankers/generals—a silent and bloodless and cowardly fight fought for stupidity and separateness and remoteness—nations controlled by the great pirates fuller saw behind the masks

*but all will be revealed
all laid bare
on this Fifth*

Chapter One



Eileen O'Hare dug five sharp fingernails into the tender flesh of Bill Zapalich's left knee. She did so with the strength of perfect panic, and Zapalich felt thankful that this insane mountain drive was obscured by night and fog—the love of his life really didn't need to see the drop offs they were probably missing by millimeters.

“This part of the trip does seem to go on forever,” Robert Ikagami said from behind the station wagon's wheel, obviously trying to boost their road weary spirits. “But we're almost there, we really are, and pretty soon we'll all be neck deep in magical water. Did you know Napa is known for its spring water? Even more than the grape thing.”

Suddenly the climbing stopped and the fog disappeared. For a moment they seemed suspended—weightless and without worry. But their weight quickly returned and they were diving, going straight down a steep twisting grade enveloped by an even denser fog. The limbic part of Bill Zapalich's brain chose to ignore this new terror. It flashed, instead, on a long forgotten carny ride of his youth, an ancient memory Ikagami was doing his damndest to re-create. *The Comet* it was called, an old Riverview Amusement Park coaster famous for a mind numbing plunge into pitch black at eighty-plus.

They were driving this treacherous mountain road because Eileen's work-buddy Robert Ikagami had smooth-talked them into it. At the last minute Ikagami's Boston friends couldn't make the Christmas holidays and he found himself with an extra room at a Napa resort that was "just next door to Paradise" and "it would be a sin to waste it."

"So, how long have you been coming to this place?" Zapalich sputtered, hearing the station wagon's bald tires screeching across another two point turn. He wondered again why he let himself be talked into this trip when they could be safe and snug on top of Twin Peaks watching forgotten TV stars croon about Baby Jesus.

"Oh, for about as long as I've been trying to get *Eileen* up here," Robert said.

"Oh, you have not," Eileen chided the slender Asian with a severe yellow crew cut. "Stop it. You've barely mentioned the place."

"That is such a *lie*, girlfriend!" Robert chirped. "You *know* I've told you all about this place, about how it was a commune, and..."

"Wait a minute," Eileen said. "Harting is a commune?"

"*Was* a commune, *was*," Robert shot back. "That's when I first heard about it. A friend of mine used to live up there doing drugs and screwing everything that moved. Now he's a button-downed Republican banker with a wife and a family and a place in Sausalito, so go figure."

"A banker?" Eileen asked.

"Not from our bank, sweetie. No, no, no, no, no. I mean, U-Fed is the Caring Bank but not *that* caring."

"But it's not a commune anymore, right?" Zapalich asked. Nightmares of tie-dyes and headbands were dancing in his head as he saw himself being dragged to a Napa version of the hippie/druggie Haight Street entrance of Golden Gate Park.

"Oh no, not anymore," Robert said like a concerned mother. "Now-a-days Harting is very respectable, very clean and above

board. Been that way ever since Frederick Templeson got his claws on it.”

“Templeson,” Zapalich repeated, sounding as if he knew the name when he really didn’t have the slightest idea who or what it was.

“Templeson,” Ikagami said. “The last couple of years the man has really turned Harting around. I mean, before, when it was a commune it was just a dump with great hot water, a party place for freaks. They would come up on the weekends and just *trash* the place. You know, if it got cold, they would burn the furniture—some of it was absolutely *fabulous* and I would love having some of those pieces now. Harting goes way back, it was a big resort a hundred years ago. Anyway, these freaks were just *trashing* the place. Smashing through walls, using the hot pool for a bathtub, letting crap pile up in the toilets. You get the picture. But all that changed when Templeson bought it. Like I said, he really turned it around. Got it back to a place you actually want to visit.”

“So then, who is this Fred?” Eileen started to ask, quickly corrected to *Frederick* by Ikagami.

“Frederick. Who is he?”

“That, girlfriend, is the sixty-four hundred dollar question,” Robert laughed. “Or is it the sixty-four thousand dollar question? I *always* get that mixed up.”

Tapping into an over-packed RAM of useless but usually interesting knowledge Zapalich told them that both ways were wrong: originally, it was just the sixty-four dollar question, the winnings of an ancient radio quiz that kept getting inflated over the years.

“Well *anyway*,” Robert Ikagami continued, “the point is nobody knows too much about Frederick Templeson, except that he comes from old money and still has a lot of it. And he’s supposed to be very eccentric. You know, very old money San Francisco eccentric. They say he’s completely paranoid and obsessed by comics. Supposedly he has a mansion that’s just

filled to the rafters. Can you believe it?"

"Filled with what?" Zupalich asked.

"Comic books," Ikgami answered. "Stacks of them."

Zupalich felt the downhill grade straighten. The fog quickly faded and he saw a city sign in the harsh headlights.

"*Centerville*," Ikgami announced. "Gals and guys, we is almost home."

An empty street neatly dissected the tiny country town. Ikgami made a hard right at a painfully green glowing BP sign and took them deep into a back road wilderness. A dark forest of leafy trees reminded Zupalich of the pissed-off apple orchard in *The Wizard of Oz*, complete with barking faces and branching arms telling him that, *ho-ho-ho*, he was absolutely screwed. He should be back home in their apartment with the fire blazing and the stereo playing, rubbing scented massage oil into Eileen's Christmas candle kissed flesh.

The strains of synthesized Christmas carols were beginning to sound awfully good in his head.

"Now we really *are* almost there," Robert announced.

The dirt road twisted up a gentle grade to a tiny shack. Zupalich saw a hand painted sign reading: HARTING HOT SPRINGS.

"We're here," Robert bellowed, bringing the old station wagon to a clattering stop a few feet beyond the shack. "I'll check us in."

"Gotta stretch," Zupalich sighed to Eileen and he slid out the passenger door. Eileen was about to follow but the cold country night air stopped her and she turned back to the sputtering heat in the idling Malibu. Outside Bill Zupalich twisted skyward, glad he came. Stars sparkled through silhouettes of huge swaying trees in a moonless country night so clean and clear he could actually see the Milky Way. Old winter constellations looked brand new and remade into jewels. A billion zodiacal diamonds glimmered over his head, almost close enough to touch, new and ancient and overpowering.

Zapalich had always loved them. But it was a long distance affair done mainly through pictures or tiny dots inside planetarium domes. It was a rare thing indeed when Zapalich actually had a chance to romance the stars in person, in their naked glory undiluted by city lights, and he couldn't stop wondering how all this beauty, how all this incredible mind-bending reality above and below, how all this and the creation that created it had anything at all to do with a place like LINC, INC.

Not a particularly insightful or inspired or incisive thing to think of when stars met soul. It wasn't Einstein in his patent office, or Pythagoras notating the spheres.

LINC, INC.

What a goofball thing to think of.

A crisp breeze blew. Zapalich felt a kind of electricity running up and down his spine. He took a lung-cleansing breath, breathing out thoughts of work and the every-day world, splicing himself directly into the power of night, his mouth very dry in the cold dry air.

A primitive water fountain was planted next to the Malibu and Zapalich bent over for a drink.

"Right from the springs," he heard Ikagami say. "Great stuff, huh?"

The water did taste different. Water was supposed to be essentially tasteless but this had a kind of richness about it. A dry dark flavor instantly recognized.

"Well, don't drink the entire spring William. Save some for us."

Zapalich was drinking a lot more than he intended. The water really did taste wonderful. Ice cold on the outside—warm like barrel-aged cognac inside.

Ikagami walked down a slight slope to Harting's Admitting Shack. It was a small wooden building about ten feet square with a shop style divided door, it's closed bottom making a small counter, the open top releasing waves of warm light into

the night. Ikagami stood at the half-door wanting to know if they gave him the corner room he had requested.

Zapalich took another drink and walked over to the shack. Ikagami was talking to the woman inside.

She sat next to an ancient potbelly stove. A writing board was balanced on her lap, and she dipped a silver pen into a brass inkwell, intently scribbling in what looked like a diary.

The woman had thick red hair pulled up into a flowering bun, her slender neck gracing the top of a white blouse with balloon sleeves last in fashion about a hundred years ago. An ivory shawl covered her shoulders and an ankle length wine colored skirt draped the outlines of long legs.

Zapalich could only stare.

He had experienced his fair share of lust at first sight but what he felt gazing at the woman went way beyond that. He was a pimple challenged teen again, complete with throbbing heart, idiotically pretending to use whatever ESP he possessed to make her look up. But the Goddess inside the shack kept her gaze fixed in the book, furiously writing, pausing only to dip the split tip pen in the inkwell.

“*Look up!*” Zapalich silently shouted, wondering what the hell was so important about that damn book.

Ikagami cleared his throat. Loudly. With great annoyance.

The Woman in the shack finally looked up and Zapalich saw *crystal eyes—brighter than the stars—blue pools inside a medieval face inside ageless beauty.*

The woman in Victorian dress looked at Zapalich and Zapalich could not look away. She returned Zapalich’s hungry stare. She amplified it, enhanced it, embraced it as the universe shrunk to him and her.

“So do I have it?” Ikagami asked again with the annoyance of a simple question repeated. The Woman obliterated the bonds as she looked at Ikagami and answered by nodding *yes.*

“Good. Because I *always* ask for a corner and almost never get it. Glad somebody *finally* listened.”

She nodded again and smiled. She smiled and a sprinkle of freckles Zapalich hadn't seen lit up her face like the constellations shining above. She wore no make-up or lipstick but her lips were amazingly red with just a touch of moisture between.

"Okay. Think we've got everything then," Ikagami said scooping up the room keys. He started back to the station wagon.

But Zapalich was frozen—a deer in headlights. There was a different kind of shiver stinging his spine.

He was sweating.

His heart was racing.

His tongue stung and he needed to get out of her eyes.

The Woman, the Victorian Goddess, went back to scribbling in her book—her journal—her diary. Zapalich grinned the way a moron would after smashing into a glass door. He turned and followed Robert up the incline to the station wagon. He suddenly glanced back at the shack. He saw that the door was closed.

And it was very, very cold.

Chapter Two



“Old fashioned around here, huh?” Zapalich meekly asked Ikagami.

“Old fashioned?”

“Well, you know. That woman in there. With that old dress and all.”

Ikagami looked at Zapalich. The kind of look old friends share when one is putting the other on and both know it.

“But she wasn’t wearing a *dress*,” Ikagami said. “You know she was wearing sweats.”

“*Sweats*?” Zapalich said a little too loudly. “She had on like this Victorian thing.

“This Victorian thing?” Ikagami laughed.

Zapalich felt stupid and he felt angry. He saw what he saw. They both had. The old dress. The old pen. The writing board. Why was Ikagami pretending he hadn’t?

“The only old thing I saw was an old sweat suit that was *much* too small for her,” Robert said slipping into the driver’s side as a very confused Bill Zapalich walked to the passenger door. “What woman were *you* looking at?”

“Woman?” Eileen asked, giving the love of her life a loud *what’s-all-this-then?* sideways glance.

“Like I said,” Ikagami continued, “the woman I saw was wearing sweats and she was the only one in there.”

Zapalich sat silent. He couldn't shake the image. She was trapped in his head, imaged in a million neurons that refused to let go.

What was Ikagami up to?

Zapalich didn't want this silly mind-game with Robert to go any further, especially with Eileen sitting next to him looking as if he had just killed Khufu.

"I saw the same woman you saw Robert," Zapalich feebly said. "I was just kidding."

"Oh? Well, I thought that when you kid someone the kidding is supposed to be, oh I don't know, funny maybe?"

Eileen chuckled and took hold of Zapalich's left arm, pressing it deep into her breasts.

"To most people, yes," she said. "But to Bill, well, let's just say my sweetie's sense of humor is unique."

Zapalich smiled the smile of a complete and utter imbecile for once thankful that the subject was being dropped.

Robert bounced the Malibu up a steep hill, ultimately bringing them to a rocking stop directly in front of a two-story hotel crusted with all sorts of 19th century Queen Anne gimcrackery.

"Is this it?" Eileen asked.

"This is it," Robert said. "We're up on the second floor."

Robert galloped to the rear of the station wagon, unlocked the swing-down door, and pulled out their suitcases. Eileen was all giggles and grins. She nestled into Zapalich.

"Oh honey, this is going to be fun, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"I love you so much."

She covered his mouth with a hungry kiss, their breath passion-fogging the cold car windows. But Zapalich's heart was still at the shack with the Woman who was or wasn't there.

What was little Robert Ikagami up to? He *had* to have seen her—he'd been talking with her, for Chrissake.

"Okay love birds," Ikagami suddenly announced behind

the driver's door window. "Let's get going. I'm freezing out here!"

"Poor Robert," Eileen laughed as she swung herself out the passenger door. Zapalich followed, quickly taking their suitcases from Ikagami's overburdened arms.

"We go this-a-way," Robert said leading them up a slight rise, through a small wooden gate to a concrete courtyard.

A woman.

Naked.

A naked woman stood before Bill and Eileen in the concrete courtyard as a kind of halo, an aura made of steam, rose up off blonde hair matted on breasts shaded pink by hot water.

"Hello," Robert Ikagami said to the nude woman who nodded and twisted her hair into a glistening ponytail revealing distended nipples and two extremely large aureoles. She smiled then turned and mounted a set of curving stairs illuminated by two red outdoor spotlights. Her perfect heart-shaped butt quickly disappeared at the top in the dark.

"That goes to the warm pool," Ikagami said to the flesh-shocked faces of Eileen and Bill as he led them up the narrow stairway of the Victorian hotel.

"I did tell you. Didn't I? I did, I know I did," Robert said.

"Oh, you *know* you didn't," Eileen scolded without a hint of anger. "I mean, it's hardly the sort of thing I'd forget!"

The narrow stairway led to an old fashioned verandah. The porch was long and wide, built for cool nights; and the footsteps of proper Victorian ladies in bell skirts and puffed sleeves.

"You're twenty-four and I'm twenty-five," Robert said slipping Zapalich a gold room key on a day-glo green wrist band.

"You're such a shit, Robert," Eileen said through a smile.

"Why Eileen Kathleen O'Hare!" Ikagami exclaimed. "I hope you don't kiss your mother with that mouth!"

“You didn’t tell me ‘cause you thought we wouldn’t come, didn’t you?”

“Well...”

“Didn’t you?”

“Well, Harting *is* clothing optional. People do wear suits, you don’t *have* to be naked. But it’s a lot more fun without ‘em.”

“Robert, Robert, Robert.”

The impishness always on his face, imprinted there like a corporate logo, suddenly disappeared and he looked genuinely concerned.

“Did I screw things up? I thought...”

“Oh stop whining, Robert. You’re such a silly shit sometimes. No, you didn’t screw things up. But it would have been nice to tell us before we got here, don’t you think?”

“I know, I know. I’m sorry,” he said. “Trying to be clever, I guess. But you’re sure you’re okay with it? I mean, like I said, you don’t *have* to be naked here, it’s perfectly all right if you...”

Eileen muted him by unzipping her leather jacket and unbuttoning the blouse beneath, revealing—superhero style—a lacy blue bra.

“All right, all right, let’s not get gross, girl,” Robert said smiling. “I’ll give you fifteen minutes and we’ll hit the water.”

“So are you?” Eileen asked, wrapping around Bill, kissing him so hard their noses almost collapsed as she giggled like a kid at Christmas. “‘Cause if you are, I will. But I won’t if you don’t.”

It took a second or two for her rhyme to penetrate.

She laughed again and asked:

“So, you getting *dressed*?”

It really was no big deal. During the summer Bill and Eileen had discreetly visited the nude beaches hidden across the sands of the Bay. Places like Land’s End and Baker—Red Rock and Stinson.

They had been led to them by the *Bay Guardian's* yearly nude beach review and had enjoyed them immensely. Within two weeks Bill and Eileen had become old hands at stripping in front of strangers. Since said strangers were also naked, it would have been stranger still wearing a suit. They had absolutely no compunctions over shedding their clothes. The only really strange thing about the nakedness at Harting was the surprise of it all.

“Yeah. Sure. Why not?”

Eileen left to use the communal second floor bathroom a few doors down leaving Bill standing in a room culled from a different century. It was a small space without radio, television, magic fingers or bathroom.

In the center of the room was an antique iron bed made of exquisite iron castings and French curves. Zapalich put his hand inside the sculpted metal. He let its oldness wash over him, feeling the almost electrical charge age makes, the validation of years.

Age.

Oldness.

Most do everything in their power to stop it. They want to kill it, make it suffer. They spend vast amounts of money and time running away from Time, using face-lifts and hair plugs and implants to keep the years away. They squander fortunes, small and large, to buy age they can control, searching for things substantial, things real and unique. Antiques of brass and iron and wood used as counter-weights to instant polls and inter-day stock market swings. Oldness giving meaning to lives lost in meaningless numbers—like the ten years he had been working at LINC, overseeing the translation of endless legal briefs and transcripts into zeroes and ones on CD-ROMS.

LINC again. It had been way too much on his mind. He had just been made a manager and at the ripening age of thirty-six, was losing sleep worrying that he really had

nowhere to go but vertical. It twisted at his gut knowing that he could only advance by: 1. striking out on his own and starting another service to compete with LINC, INC.; or 2. wait until one of the founders quit, died, or cashed out.

Bill Zapalich knew he would do neither; he had gotten comfortable.

His income combined with Eileen's gave them just enough cash to live up on Twin Peaks, in a boxy Bauhaus apartment with an incredible view of the city's rolling carpet of hills, homes, and business towers. A much sought after sight bounded by the twisted circle of sparkling bay and silver suspension bridges spliced by Treasure Island. It was a glorious Panavision panorama. But on this night, at this place, with the stars above and below, it was as hollow as the hollowness that had always been inside his heart.

"So, you want to really do it?" Bill heard Eileen ask as she bounded back into the room, smiling a sly smile of anticipation.

"Yeah, let's do it," Bill said.

Chapter Three



Though it was near to freezing, Robert Ikagami wore only a *Gumby* beach towel slung over his slender frame like the toga of a Roman Senator. Zapalich was extremely grateful that Eileen had the foresight to pack their warm and lumpy terrycloth robes.

Ikagami led them down the old hotel's creaking stairs repeating apologies with every step. "I really am sorry about this—I can't imagine what you think of me. I mean, if I was in your shoes I'd really be wondering what this guy got me into. Bringing me to this weird hippie-nudie place."

"Robert, will you please *stop?*" Eileen demanded. "It's really no big deal. Don't give yourself a heart attack over it."

"But I feel like such—such an absolute ass. Listen, why don't we do this? How about if I pay for your room? Would that help?"

Both Zapalich and Eileen tried talking him out of it but Ikagami wouldn't take 'no' for an answer, completely destroying Zapalich's ill-conceived Victorian Sex Goddess/Ikagami Blackmail-Sneak Attack Theory.

Soon they reached the concrete courtyard where the naked blonde had climbed the curving stairs.

"By the way," Robert said, "you have to shower before using the pool. Soap's already in the stalls. They use a special

liquid kind. Comes out of a dispenser.”

“Where are they?” Eileen asked. Ikagami pointed to twin doorless shower stalls fronting a two-story building he called the Changing Room. Through a large window Zapalich saw both men and women, red as demons, dressing and undressing under the glow of heat lamps.

“Well, let’s hit it,” Robert said hanging his *Gumby* towel on a hook as he entered the shower on the left giving Zapalich and Eileen a glimpse of a perfectly smooth and hairless Asian ass.

Eileen O’Hare couldn’t stop smiling. This unexpected vacation was turning into an adventure, and one of the stranger ones of her twenty-six years. She felt so wonderfully free being naked with the man she loved—naked and outside in cold country dark. It was an incredible escape from the daily routine of checks and transfers and balances, a world away from the miasma of ever-moving money and lonely phone voices.

“Christ, this is *hot*,” Zapalich whimpered as he fumbled for the cold water, totally confused by a faucet twisting clockwise to turn on.

“Yeah. Must be right from the spring,” Eileen said.

The faucet finally opened and cold water quickly cooled the hot.

“Better?” Bill asked.

“It’s fine. But I like it hot.”

Eileen pumped some liquid soap from the plastic dispenser under the showerhead.

What Eileen wanted was Bill. Right there—up against the shower wall. Not loving him—just animal raw sex with him in the cold night and hot water.

She wanted them all to see—all the lonely unseen that filled her head—voices that never stopped, pleas never ending.

She wanted them all to watch. To see what they were missing. To feel what money can’t buy.

She bent forward and put Zapalich's flaccid penis between her butt cheeks, playfully wiggling him with a sensual snaking motion, feeling warm water filling the space between them.

"Don't know if this is a good idea," Zapalich sighed.

Eileen answered by reaching around and lathering the stubby hairs on his chest, slowly moving down a small stomach bulge as a couple of skinny bearded men happened by and grinned at her handiwork.

"Let's save that for later," he whispered.

"Mmmm," softly purred Eileen. "Still thinking about her?"

"Who?"

"*Who*. The woman."

Zapalich's eyes went wide.

"No, of course not! What woman?"

"What woman. The woman we saw. The naked one. Who else?"

"No. No, of course not."

"Saw you looking at her," Eileen whispered, hot water and breath filling his ear. "You liked her breasts, didn't you?"

Bill didn't answer, but Eileen laughed, and with a bit of an effort she turned around in the small shower stall and hugged him very hard letting a tendril of liquid soap snake down his back, feeling his heart beating much too fast.

Bill and Eileen followed Robert up the curving stairway the blonde had climbed, feeling late December cold tearing away any shower warmth. Bill walked directly behind Eileen, fascinated by the rill of her spine as it snaked between the dimples above her ass. Halfway up the steps she stopped. She smiled and put her hand on a molded iron handrail.

"Look, Bill. Like a snake."

The only scales interesting Zapalich were the ones appearing on his skin.

"Honey! I'm freezing!"

Eileen hurried up the remaining steps. Another set descended

into dark water made red by the faint illumination of twin red spotlights almost overhanging the pool, mounted on the corner of the changing room building.

Another cautious step and Eileen quickly descended the submerged steps, bending at the knees to immerse every part of herself. She floated off the last step and stood next to the pool wall, shivering and sighing in a happy rush of warm endorphins.

Zapalich quickly followed, hoping that the faint red light would hide any remnant of the shower erection.

“This isn’t so bad,” he loudly announced immediately feeling a touch of warmth, the water a not-too-hot relief from the December night. “I thought it...”

A sharp *SHHH* erupted from the far end of the pool and Zapalich dropped to a whisper.

“...*thought it’d be a lot hotter...*”

“This is the warm pool,” Ikagami softly said. “The hot water is in the back. That’s where the hot spring is.”

Ikagami drifted through the water like a lily pad and Zapalich and Eileen followed through a pool that couldn’t be more than five feet deep, forcing Zapalich to bend his six-foot two inch frame forward to keep below and out of the cold.

All around them were bodies, an archipelago of silhouettes, naked singles and couples plastered against pool walls and each other. The water kept any sex play well below the surface, yet Zapalich was sure he heard an orgasmic *yelp* from a woman apparently impaled on a man.

As they waded through the pool, Zapalich found himself slowly scanning the dark shapes for red hair. He felt an intense, almost overwhelming desire to see *her* again, stripped of Victorian skirt and blouse, fire red hair untied and falling onto neck and shoulders and floating on the water. He looked for crystal eyes cutting through the dull red of the dim spotlights.

He still couldn’t get her out of his head. A woman barely seen, a momentary meeting.

Meeting?

Wasn't even that. Less than the glimpse old Mr. Bernstein had of the girl with the white parasol, the woman who didn't even see him, the one he thought about every day for the rest of his life.

Naturally, like every other red blood pumping American Male, beautiful women were eternal inspiration. Tight jeans and tighter shirts were locked inside his head and quickly stripped for frolicking and fornication. Imaginary bodies were endlessly bent into impossible positions creating gymnastic couplings straight out of doubled-wrapped magazines and cheap videos direct from San Fernando porno factories and Miami pay-per-view Web sites.

But nothing had ever affected him half as much as the Woman in the Admitting Shack.

It was more than lust.

After all, the frumpy blouse and long skirt she wore couldn't be considered remotely erotic. No, it wasn't lust. It was desire, passion, need, want. It was gut-twisting craving on a cellular level. But this silly salaciousness had to be put out of his head as the real flesh and blood love of his life slowly floated in front of him—long auburn hair matted across her back in sensual brush strokes of an unpainted Vermeer.

As they continued through the pool the water got noticeably warmer. Zapalich looked up and saw a small house-like structure directly above, flush with the edge of the far end of the pool.

"That's where the hot spring is," Ikagami said as they floated into a burning current. "This pool is just the overflow."

Zapalich wandered in front of a small vent directly below the hot spring house. He felt the heat from its current prickle the hair on his stomach and quickly backed away into cooler parts. He had no intention of being boiled alive like a two-legged lobster.

Eileen and Robert immediately took his place and Zapalich

backed up against a smooth pool wall. He leaned against it and looked around, his eyes finally adjusted to the dim red light; his fellow bathers no longer featureless silhouettes.

Zapalich saw couples in their fifties with wrinkled skin and meticulously coifed hair rubbing naked elbows with pierced skinheads and left over hippies. Hair and body piercings were the only markings of station and class, and Zapalich marveled how there was no escaping them, even in this naked pool.

But the hair he was looking for was nowhere to be seen. There was no red.

He closed his eyes and rubbed warm water on his face. It smelled of sulfur and even in the dim light he could see that it was amazingly clean. Totally pure. Spring fresh straight up from the earth. With a satisfied sigh he stretched and looked up at the brilliant country night blazing with stars.

The warmth of the water was affecting him. It was relaxing him—soothing, quieting. He felt an intense peace settling on the pool. He reveled in it, watching warm wisps of mist rise from the water and fragment between the stars. He took a deep tantric breath and tasted the crisp clean mountain air. He felt himself—*floating... pulled from the pool... high above the trees... past planets... the Trapezium... the swirling gases... deep in Orion's Sword... floating... with HER... antique Goddess... from the shack... in his head... his eyes... his heart...*

hishearthishearthisheart

“What are you looking at?” Eileen asked brushing Zapalich’s biceps with her breasts.

“Stars.”

“They’re so beautiful up here, aren’t they?”

“They are.”

Eileen turned skyward. Bill wanted her to love the stars the way he did and was always dragging her to new sky shows at the Morrison. “The only place in the City,” he had ruefully said, “where you can actually see them.” They were nothing

more than faint imitations projected on a tiny dome; the real star-bright sky-spanning vastness lost behind layers of Bay Area light. But here, on the fringe of Napa Valley, man-made light was no problem. The stars made their own night light—divine fires holding ancient superheroes forever in the sky.

Bill showed Eileen the outline of Orion, named for the mighty Greek hunter accidentally killed by his lover Artemis who tempered her grief by immortalizing him in the night sky. The same stars were Osiris to the Egyptians, the great Lord of the Dead, a vast and terrible Deity brought down to earth in the three Great Pyramids of Giza mirroring his star-belt of Alnitak, Alnilam and Mintaka, a reminder in stone of an age when gods left footprints in the sand.

He showed her the Pleiades, seven bright stars named for Atlas' seven daughters holding up Heaven's roof. The image of Taurus, the great Bull, plowing the sky for the bounty of the earth. The twin stars of Gemini, Castor and Pollux, old Roman symbols of life and death. Perseus, a son of Zeus and slayer of Medusa eternally saving King Cepheus' beautiful daughter Andromeda from being devoured by Poseidon's sea monster Cetus.

He outlined the Triangulum, Aries, and Pisces.

He painted the wide and glorious Milky Way, the light-filled stream over our galaxy's heart.

In the warm water they looked into the everyday miracle of every-thing-that-is: the stars above and below, eternal inspirations sometimes caught in paint and on canvasses, in books and movies and unexpected glances.

Unmentioned was the profound mystery of how these miracles happened. The supposed virgin birth of every-thing-that-is from a particle smaller than a quark some fifteen thousand million years ago, inflated to a cosmos bursting with incredible objects: walls of distant suns millions of light years long, vast space currents pushing entire galaxies, billions of unseen planets, billions more comets and meteors and nebulae

and clusters. More objects, more matter, more reality than our simple simian minds can possibly fathom.

Incredible, miraculous, religious wonders were surrounding us on all sides. Miracles ignored by minds drowning in the trivia of lives lived in cubicles and in front of computers, worrying about numbers in bank accounts and how to afford the latest and greatest SUV. But the night sky was the womb of everything. Our ancestors were not apes or fish or bacterium, but children of the stars they worshipped, created from primeval hydrogen and helium. Gas and space dust fallen into matter. Stellar vapors weaved and twisted by space/time into the double helixes of DNA.

Naked in the water, the water lifting most of his body weight and the stars filling most of his hollow heart, Zapalich put an arm around the love of his life and felt her flesh pressing against his chest. He held her so tightly their breathing became one, breathing night breezes scented by pine and eucalyptus. The holiness of simply being. The rarefied breath at creation's heart.

"So sweetie, you going in?" Eileen asked rubbing Bill's stomach, her hand slowed by the water.

"You should," Ikagami said pirouetting from a corner of the pool. "You'll *love* it. It's what Harting is all about."

"Well, I dunno," Zapalich said. "I mean, it's not real, real hot, is it?"

Ikagami horse-laughed an explosion of air through loose lips. "It's real, *real* hot Bill."

Zapalich rolled his eyes to the night sky. All during his astronomical rambling there was an almost uninterrupted soundtrack of groans, yelps, whistles and moans. The sounds came from the hot spring house perched at the far end of the pool. Some would interpret them as ecstasy noise made on submerging cold flesh into a pool of very hot water, but Zapalich had never been a fan of hot water, steered away from it by a mother who thought hot baths bad for the heart—

especially his heart. He was a sworn shower creature with the water verging on freezing. To him the vocalizing from the hot spring was nothing more than an *a cappella* score to the Inquisition.

“Come on, honey, it’ll be okay. You’re not afraid of a little hot water are you?” Eileen softly said as a loud *GRRRRRAHHHH* exploded out of the hot spring house sounding like an embrace by The Iron Virgin.

“Maybe later,” Zapalich said.

“Oh, come on girlfriend”, Robert exasperated to Eileen. “Let Mr. Wimpy enjoy the safe water while you and me get hot.”

Eileen chuckled and gave Zapalich a quick kiss. He watched her float away and follow Ikagami’s slender, almost non-existent rear up the stairs leading to the hot spring as her own perfect ass cheeks, wet and glistening, disappeared into the wood-framed doorway of the small building that housed Harting’s hot spring.

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John Stryzik

John Stryzik was born in Joliet, Illinois and studied filmmaking at Columbia College in Chicago where he had the honor of being the first recipient of the William Friedkin Film Scholarship. After college he moved to Los Angeles and was hired as a staff director for George Romero's internationally acclaimed television series *Tales From the Darkside*. Stryzik directed four seasons of *Darkside*, then returned to Chicago to co-write and direct his first feature, *Uneasy Silence*, a tragic love story set in the hard world of the homeless.

Stryzik returned to Los Angeles to direct Laurel Entertainment's production of *Monsters*, a nationally syndicated anthology series, and *Land of the Lost*, an action/adventure series produced by Krofft Pictures for ABC Television. He also wrote and directed *The Spirit Gallery*, a supernatural thriller inspired by *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

As a writer John Stryzik has penned teleplays for *Tales From the Darkside*, *Cyberkidz*, *Nightsearch* and *Dark Romances*. He has adapted and directed award winning short films based on stories by Franz Kafka and H.P. Lovecraft and in 2002 Stuart Gordon and Full Moon Entertainment produced his original screenplay *Deathbed*.

He has written articles and short stories for *Amazing Stories*, *Creative Screenwriting*, *Film Threat*, *Lovecraft Studies*, *PLOT* and *Mindmares*, and has co-written a guide to the film adaptations of H.P. Lovecraft called *The Lurker in the Lobby*, currently in its second edition.

A Hallow Heart is his first novel.



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On a foggy December night Bill Zapalich and Eileen O'Hare are spirited to a trendy New Age resort in California's Napa Valley. They soon find themselves up to their necks in a hot spring of incredible water, the clear

spring relaxing their bodies while filling Bill's mind with visions of a beautiful woman in Victorian dress—a spirit who wades into the water and literally takes him apart.

The water and the woman open Bill's eyes to a world filled with suffering and give him the power to change it. But the power comes with a fearful price. The spring has made Zapalich into a powerful shaman and he's thrown down a rabbit hole of myth, visions, and hallucinations.

The spring and the young Victorian have opened his eyes.

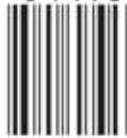
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