

BOXES

- for Rose

i

Something caught her attention. She blinked; looked around. What was it? A sound? A movement? She frowned, trying to think of something her mind wouldn't grasp. It was there, and then – her face cleared. She forgot whatever it was and sat down to dinner.

ii

She stared at the sapphire velvet drapes, so pretty against the pale blue wall and behind the creamy-gold plush couch. A breeze was nudging them, ever so slightly. She shivered. Where was it coming? The question died, to be replaced by another thought. The couch. It was there – why? Because she wanted it there. So she couldn't reach the drapes. And open them.

Fear began to tickle her stomach. If she opened the drapes, she would see only the gray mists suckling up to the windows. That's all that was out there. So what was that fleeting non-memory of rolling green and white-flecked blue and . . . and . . . something. But it was gone. She frowned at a ball of lint clinging to her pretty drapes. The place needed a good cleaning. She bustled about, humming happily.

iii

He was looking at her. The drapes were drawn and he was standing there, looking in through the window at her. She was vaguely aware of soft green mounds behind him, and a blue above him that shone like her walls never did, and a bright, bright light over all. But mostly she saw *him*. He was smiling, he was beckoning, he wanted her to come through the window. But that was impossible! She couldn't leave her room! She wouldn't be –!

She woke, trembling, wanting to cry, not sure why she wanted to. Darkness was all around her; warm, comforting darkness. She needn't be anxious. She was – safe. She fell back into a dreamless sleep.

iv

She was admiring her hair in the mirror when the door opened. She froze. She had never seen the door open before; had even forgotten it was there. Something warned her not to appear to notice. But she watched, frightened, out of the corner of her eye as she primped. They were both dressed in gray (she thought of the mist), and they wore gray gloves and gray shoes that made no sound and gray helmets with dark plates that hid their faces. They set her table and brought her food and then vanished through that same door, all in silence. She stared for some time at that forgotten door before she slowly sat down to eat.

v

She lay awake, staring into the warm, comforting darkness. These were *her* rooms, *her* place of safety, furnished over a lifetime with cozy furniture and candles and silver and beautiful clothes and dozens of mirrors. And now *her* rooms had been invaded. From – out there. Out there!

She clenched her fists, digging her immaculately colored nails into her powder-blue satin sheets. Her mind skittered from terror to fascination, fascination to terror. She saw silent figures draped in gray, and she saw a man with a beautiful smile who beckoned her to come out. Out there.

Out there. That's what frightened her, excited her. For the first time, she realized that something existed beyond her pretty, pale blue walls. But what? She remembered the smiling man and hoped it was

nice. She remembered the gray mist and feared it was horrible.

She lay awake and stared into the darkness. And as she lay there, a new emotion crept in. Yearning was unknown to her, until now. Now she suddenly yearned to know what was – out there.

vi

The next time the door closed, she stood in the center of the room and stared at it. Her food cooled, but she ignored it, feeling last night's yearning once more. She walked unsteadily across the room and seized the cold doorknob. Fear almost overwhelmed her. She took a deep breath and turned the knob.

vii

It was horrible. But not as horrible as she feared. She could have been in another room, except that the floor stretched endlessly to the right and left, and there were only two walls, the one on her side, and the one across from her, two or three room-widths away.

She glanced left, right. She couldn't see very far. The floor, the walls, the ceiling were all gray, like the figures that had invaded her rooms, like the mist outside her window. A muted light came from somewhere above her, illuminating only a few hundred paces to either side before fading to murk. Empty murk? She had a sudden, terrible feeling of being exposed to watchful eyes. She took a step back, feeling for her door. Her heels clicked loudly on the floor, and the hollow echoes fluttered away beyond hearing. She cringed. The desire to hide in her bed welled up. She fought back, stood without moving, almost without breathing. Nothing stirred in either direction.

When she finally crept away from her door, she left her shoes – and their clicking heels – behind.

viii

There were other doors on both sides. They were not very far apart, only about the length of her rooms. She slipped silently past them, afraid they might open, but there was no sound or movement besides hers. She grew a little less frightened, until she realized that she had no idea which of the doors behind was hers. She nearly panicked and ran back, but she didn't know where she would run. She crept on.

She eventually thought to try one of the doors. It was locked. (Hers wasn't. Why?) She listened at it, but could hear nothing. She crept on, wondering what she thought she might find behind that door.

The next one was unlocked.

ix

It was a room, like and unlike her own. A man sat in a deep armchair against the heavy brown drapes, smoking a pipe and reading a book. Bookshelves lined every wall, tall bookshelves crammed with volumes bound in leather and stamped with gold. She tried to read the titles, but the words made no sense to her.

She stepped forward, trembling slightly. The man puffed at his pipe, turned a page. She cleared her throat. He smiled at something he was reading. She spoke.

"Hello?"

He turned another page.

"I – I don't mean to bother you...."

A cloud of smoke, the color of her walls, drifted past.

"Your room is very nice...."

He closed the book, set the pipe in an ashtray on a small chair-side table, leaned back, and closed his eyes.

She slowly backed out of the room.