

## CRIMSON EMBERS

Years pass and the path of one's life can look as simple and straight as a draftsman's ruler. A sudden movement and the pencil is jarred away leaving a dark streak across the paper. Even if one tries to erase the mark, there will always be a faint memory of the event.

—Now listen up! I'm going to recount a story that will not soon be forgotten; that no eraser can change. Make yourself comfortable.

Several months after the departure of the djinn, I overheard the occupants of the house say they were leaving for the weekend—to a place where leaves rustled in the woods and a brook babbled aimlessly along, an ideal place on a gentle slope where man could live contentedly with nature; where there were no sounds of the city, cars screeching or radios blaring; and the world was at peace. They had been meaning to go there for quite some time and for some reason they chose now to go.

At times like these, alone in the house, I'd often dream in my corner, where I rested beside an old steamer travel trunk that had faithfully cheered me up. It was a gentleman's trunk, designed to stand the roughest use. I'd carefully counted seventy-four rivets purposefully exposed to give the impression of quality—probably the most notable quality—and, for strength: three straps and four metal corners all finished in the best style, apropos the discerning traveler. As any proper *trunk* man would know, an H. R. Fitzgerald manufactured trunk eclipsed anything else available in its day.

The deserted house was covered in silence. As I gazed at the trunk, I let my dreams waft over me, like soothing infusions of incense. I wanted to be guided to a land of beauty, a land of charming cherry orchards and ripe grapes hanging in clusters on a thousand vines in the vineyards; where the fading sun decorated the hills with veins of gold. Alone, the room was the sort of place where I had come to imagine the strangest of unexpected surprises. I didn't like to admit it, but I missed Djinn and his wonderful stories.

Just then, a hummingbird hovered outside the window. Her eyes looked frightened and I noticed a tiny tear drop fall. She darted nervously back and forth across the glass. A big grey squirrel with a bushy tail ran across the patio; and then came another behind the first, running even faster. Though deer were not prone to jump the fence, one came bounding over, its face contorted and its short tail stiff.

—What do they think this is...a nature reserve?

Piercing sirens split the air. I found it impossible to relax. Other inhabitants of the house that roamed about mostly unseen were the occasional spider, a caterpillar that had come in on a slimy dog bone, and the sweetest ladybug. But now, as the coast was clear for them to appear, they did not. I notice these things as I've nothing much else to do.

—If I’m boring you, please let me know.

An eerie glow cast shadows on the garden. It wasn’t the kind of sky that one sees at dusk or dawn or in the dark of winter. To make matters worse, there came a looming tower of smoke, unlike anything I had ever seen. It was as if a hundred factory chimneys had belched over the town, and the solution to the mystery wasn’t a simple chicken burning on an over-oiled barbeque...though I noted that might have been something Louise would have accomplished.

It wasn’t an hour and a half later and the landscape turned a silvery hue, and the air thick and acrid. Ribbons of smoke swirled around the window. Suspicious sounds could be heard. I caught sight of what looked like flames rising into the sky from a distant hill. One minute they were visible, and the next they were gone. The wind had picked up and the temperature in the house was rising.

—Help! Somebody help!

I cried out in vain. I envisioned the orchard cherries splitting and spewing out their juice; and the grapes drying up and turning to prunes. Ghastly waste. What heathen would have started a campfire on a hot summer day? Or maybe it was some careless tourist who threw his cigarette butt out the car window. Reprobate!

—Will anyone know I am here? Will anyone come and save me? Is this what they mean by *burn in hell*?

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—Damn it! What is going on?

I glanced around and noticed that I wasn’t in my home anymore. The travel trunk was nowhere to be seen. Instead, I faced a mountain of chairs stacked on top of each other which gave me the heebie-jeebies. And so much other furniture tossed about recklessly. What was this place? A shop? If it was, I divined it must have been closed, because only the yellow glow of night lights occasionally broke the darkness; and thank goodness for the absence of the usual stream of people strolling around touching everything with their contaminated hands, complaining about the enormous prices, or chatting up the sales clerks hoping for some sort of deal. The place smelled awful too...musty, of old damp socks. It was cooler, though. I’ll give you that.

I was afraid no one would ever find me. With luck, maybe this was just a dream, and when I woke, I’d be back in my familiar surroundings. I felt tears forming, and had to swallow hard. Weird. Being able to cry was something people did. I’m a chair, after all.

“Meeoooww.”

The air around began to swirl, like a gentle wind. Sofa covers billowed up, waving slightly. I heard a piece of china shatter on the floor.

“Meeooowwww!”

A ginger cat jumped up on a settee and began frantically scratching and clawing like, *ahem* pardon the expression, a cat on a hot tin roof.

—Would you just make like a tree and leave?

It was then I detected the sweet scent of cloves and cinnamon, and the powerful fragrance of ancient myrrh. Could I be mistaken? A massive shadow appeared on the distant wall. I recognized him as soon as I saw his silhouette. Closer, it was his dark eyes and thin posture that struck me.

—Ah! So, you've arrived, have you? Did you find a crack in the wall to slide through? In this country, it's customary to knock at the door and wait to be invited in.

I was being unnecessarily rude.

The djinn unbuttoned a large parka, one like those worn on an Antarctic exploration, but threadbare in spots with the lining falling below the hem. Inside, a long striped nightshirt hung down to his knees, but was gathered at the waist and fastened with a square belt and buckle like a leprechaun's tunic. On his hands were frayed, wool, fingerless gloves. He looked quite unlike the dashing, love-struck Djinn that I had met in the house. In fact, even his face was noticeably dirty.

—A pauper! Pul-eeze. It's not becoming of a genie. Surely you can do better.

It would be wrong to say that I was not relieved and happy to see him. He grasped me under my arms and lifted me up off the floor, and held me high in the air briefly before setting me down. I realized in that moment, it was he who had rescued me from the heat of the fire and brought me here to this place of safety. Had he brought all the household contents here too? Is that what all these boxes around me are? Nothing was simple. I shuddered to think that with the whole world at his beck and call, he felt it his responsibility to stand guard over one meagre plot of land. Why? But had I not called out for help? He was my guardian angel and had given me a new lease on life.

—I thank my lucky stars you came along when you did. How can I thank you, dear friend!

There were no grounds to suspect Djinn was angry, but he certainly wasn't interested in talking to me. He stood somewhat nervously, wringing his hands as if he had something he wanted to say that might not be pleasant. His head had sunk into his shoulders and he stumbled with a sense of weakness as if he had exhausted all his energy. His face showed a picture of disapproval for having failed in some way, and he was unsure how to act. He slumped onto the floor as if spent from all the activity of moving hill and dale. His parka hung open and the belt-buckle had popped and dangled by his side. It occurred to me his strength was abandoning him. What had come over him? His world had collapsed so completely. He was like a magician without a wand; or a music box without a key. With great effort he raised his arm to rub his eyes. I could hear the beating of his heart as it grew slower, softer and fainter...

Finally, it dawned on me: his thoughts were elsewhere—on *her*, finding *her*, the one he longed to see, the single most beautiful woman for him.

—Wait! I know where *she* is, I called out.

In the dim light, I couldn't make out his expression, yet I knew there was an understanding that was absolute and complete. Not a word was uttered from his lips. I had told him all he needed to know.

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Let's face it! Most of the population was driven away by the smoke and the only humans left in the community were emergency response teams and a few minor criminals. A flagman, draped in a fire-retardant uniform, waved a firetruck on through the congested traffic escaping the grey shroud of ash that hung over the valley. A persistent wind prompted the evacuation of smaller communities located in the path of the fire—a fire which had by now scorched over a hundred hectares of forest and destroyed homes and shops sending crimson embers high in the air.

Water bombers skid across the lake and labored to ascend the mountain wall and release their belly onto the fiery woods. The hillsides, once carpeted with spruce, fir and pine would be left naked and charred as the blaze threatened to come down to the lakeside and devour the summer cottages. Security guards were posted on the main arterial roads with orders not to let anyone through.

—Permit me to go on. What I'm going to tell you is what I've been told happened, so you might have to go on a little faith.

The road exited off the freeway and narrowed to a point where there were no shoulders. Djinn had been waiting in a long queue that had been dragging along all morning. What they said was that his vehicle veered off into the woods and disappeared into the smoky haze leaving not a trace. The story goes, that having overtaken a long column of parked vehicles, he reappeared back onto the road, looking like Batman in his heavily armored Batmobile, only to find that passage ahead had been blocked by a meandering river, and the crossing heavily guarded.

He had risen up out of the vehicle and, with a gesture as if throwing his cape over his shoulder stood firmly with his hands on his hips. "I'm not going to be pounding about the bushes. You must be giving me a pass. I am urgent to be on the other side. It is matter for a life and...oh, oh, what is word...not life!"

Djinn had been trying to sound ferocious. The guard's hand reached for his holster. Djinn brought his arm up around his shoulder as if swinging his cape and, pouf, he became Father Christmas!

The guard stared momentarily stunned, then had started howling with laughter. Djinn felt his face and neck turning red, realized he had made a terrible mistake, and tried again. Another wave of his arm. Swoosh. He underwent further transformation. Now he had assumed the precise shape and form of Hercule Poirot, complete with the magnificent moustache and black, homburg hat. At this, he had become completely befuddled as if his software had a glitch, and he was stuck somewhere between the age of floppy disks and hard drives. All along, he had meant to become Hercules, son of Zeus.

The guard whistled to his colleague and pointed. "Holy cow! Did you see that?"

"No cow! No see cow!...Ah! You mean what you say, cash cow! So, it is money you are wanting?"

Djinn hadn't wanted to draw attention to himself by engaging in one of the primary functions of wizardry and simply fly across the river, but, when your back's against the wall, well, I guess that's precisely what he did.

—Over here. Come a little bit closer. Move in your chair. The story gets better.

He had not travelled far when he was confronted by a giant, impenetrable tower of fire. Flames roared and crackled up into the mountains and raced down to the shores of the lake where water hissed and sent plumes of steam high into the air. He heard the screams of trees as their limbs burned and snapped from their tall forms, and fell helpless to the ground. The earth beneath the once soft moss and gentle ferns cried out in pain, but there was no respite from the ravaging inferno. There was no earthly justice.

A red-throated hummingbird hovered near his shoulder. Sobbing inconsolably, she set off to pour out her tears onto the fire, enough tears to fill the lake. In an unceasing number of visits, she managed to tell Djinn that a tiny deer had fallen and was trapped; her tears had kept the flames from reaching him; and without her help the deer would surely suffocate and die. Her anguish for the deer softened Djinn's heart, and he was feeling so humiliated he too would have burst into tears if he could. And so it was settled that he would set aside his personal quest of salvation for the moment and submit to rescue the deer.

He was afraid his magic would not work, though he saw no point in explaining this to the innocent hummingbird. To top it off, he looked absurd, beleaguered, and furthermore unconvincing since he had converted back to his shabby clothes, mindful though he was, of the effortless destruction, a *tour de force* if you will, going on around him, crushing all the hopes and dreams of the townsfolk like the streets of Pompeii.

—Well, now there's an image you don't expect every day!

But this was no time for dilly dallying about. Djinn stood poised as if he was about to shout: Abracadabra! With a flourish, he spun himself around furling and twirling ever faster until he became none other than a hummingbird, and set out with his companion to find the poor-fated fawn. He made a tactical error or two given he was unaccustomed to being a hummingbird, though nothing that impeded the mission.

“There he is! There he is!” cried the hummingbird.

It was time for Djinn to get to work. He spread his wings wide and, while doing the back stroke, pointed his angry long beak at the fire. Suddenly, the flames held back like the parting of the Red Sea. Djinn leaned and whispered into the fawn's ear. I presume it was something like: *Don't be afraid little one*, for the fawn's eyes opened and his body began to lift into the air, two tiny hummingbirds hovering at its side.

— You don't believe me? Please, have some Fritos. If you think that's amazing, hang on. There is more.

The hummingbird was over the moon with joy, but still she implored the djinn.

“His mother! The fawn needs his mother.”

In total, Djinn rescued a black bear and her two cubs, a cow moose, sixteen squirrels, a skunk—oooowee, the smell—and the fawn’s mother.

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I could picture Djinn in a meadow far from the wrath of the fire, with a zoo of animals, cozy and intimate, in weary celebration, pleased with himself, laughing good-naturedly with them. This time the hummingbird began to sing softly and gently, her grateful voice singing a song of praise. The squirrels danced and the two cubs rolled around playfully in the dirt. No one worried where they would sleep come nightfall. They were enchanted and simply glad to be alive.

Their revelry was interrupted by a small, plump woman in a long green dress who came up to them, smelling as though she had recently bathed in *Evening in Paris* eau de toilette. She had a flowery bandana wrapped around her head, a tie-dyed scarf with fringes draped over her shoulders, big gaudy rings on several of her fingers, and corkscrew curls that were tangled and matted. She was a palm-reader, a fortune-teller, and had been reading tea leaves and holding séances for people all around the world, or so she would’ve had you believe. “I’ll have you know, I’ve read the palms of high ranking diplomats and their attachés. You should count yourself lucky to have met my acquaintance.”

—If I had to judge, I’d say business hadn’t been prosperous of late.

Djinn wondered curiously where this woman had come from. On the fringe of a forest fire wasn’t exactly a place where throngs of in-season tourists would emerge. Furthermore, he hadn’t called the Clairvoyant Hot Line recently.

All ears perked up. They stared at each other for a moment, then, looking at Djinn she asked, “And what do you think your life has in store for you, old man?”

Blinking up, he regarded the woman thoughtfully. “Top of happiness.”

She felt his penetrating smile and wondered oddly if he was trying to read her mind. “Cross my palm with silver old man, and I’ll tell you what you are looking for. Evelina is my name, and I’m here to tell you, your deepest wish will be granted.” She found it easy to make predictions: If their past wasn’t any good, their future probably wasn’t likely going to be any better.

Djinn played coy and told her he couldn’t scrape together two nickels. And, as far as he knew, they didn’t contain any silver anyway, just nickel.

“You are being uncommonly cheap, old man.” She settled herself on a rock and started a rhyme:

*Fiddlesticks and ancient tricks...*

She held her arms out, palms up and looked at the sky above as if checking for rain, then rummaged in her sack and pulled out a deck of cards. She shuffled the cards and drew the top one. “It may interest you to know...wha....the Magician?”

She would normally have professed something as generic and innocuous as one would find in a Chinese fortune cookie: *You will be forever fortunate and have much wealth and happiness.* After which she would have held out her hand for a further donation. She had never truly believed she owned psychic powers, yet she began involuntarily speaking as if in a trance.

“I feel the spirits hovering around you. There is a powerful force...a supernatural force...no, wait...it’s more than that...I see you have a thousand years of worldly experience.”

She drew the Five of Cups and laid it on the rock. She tilted her head back and her eyes fluttered as if she was getting another message. Her voice carried over the crackling forest. “The Five of Cups...the union of souls...a romantic relationship, karma. ...Yes...yes, it is...I see it... You know the warmth of a woman’s love, but you must accept that she is lost to you and you must move on.”

Djinn laughed uproariously as though the woman had said something irresistibly clever. *Goofy lady*, he uttered quietly. The sound of an airplane overhead distracted him. A little robin hopped on a branch that lay in front, and shoots of fern waved nervously.

The woman shifted her position on the rock and squinted through her shut eyelids, measuring the impact of her wisdom. Was she wrong? Who was this mysterious man dressed in scrubby clothes, looking like a rumped peasant? Somewhere in the back of her mind she knew he was not betraying himself in the way most do. This was not her typical routine performance: staged, theatrical and emotional.

Her nose twitched. A clot formed in her throat. Her mouth turned dusty and dry. She could smell burning flesh and saw the unpleasant image of bones scattered on a beach. What did this mean? She tried to cry. Even that was phony.

She drew another card and paused a lengthy time: “The Two of Swords. You have a feeling of loss, but while that loss is real, there is hope.”

She didn’t tell him she drew the Tower, the single most unwelcome card in the Tarot deck: the demons of madness and despair were about to be released from ancient hiding places; disaster was about to strike.

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—You asked me to tell you what happened to Melissa and her husband Michael, or Mike as he prefers to be called, the ones who had left me alone in their house. Well, hang on to your britches, and I’ll tell you the story exactly as it was told to me.

The place where they went had been difficult to reach. Few people came to this place, except those who wanted solitude. There were no signposts, and it wasn’t to be pin-pointed on any map. It was touted to be an idyllic spot along a swooping bay of fresh water with a modest timber frame cottage that sat perched near the edge of the lake. After a long twisty drive over narrow roads and deserted snaking trails, they had stood at the top of a small hill and admired the cascading sunlight shimmering deviously over the water on the hot summer afternoon. Spread out before them was

picture perfect the place they had expected to find. Melissa had used her uncanny power of orientation and guessed correctly they had arrived.

—Huh? No, they are not idiots!

The two dogs—yes, they took their two bull terriers everywhere they went—wagged their tails and scampered quickly down the hill to quench their thirst and cool their hides in the water, while their masters breathed in the air, wheeled out their bicycles, and unloaded their foodstuff and gear; and, to pay homage to the cabin in the best way they could—cracked open two coolers and toasted to the weekend retreat.

They spent a rare evening gazing out on the water, watching the rays of the setting sun dance gently as it fell below the hills, their two valiant pooches nestled comfortably, legs stretched out behind and noses resting on mother earth.

By morning, all that beauty had changed. In the half-light of the morning, they awoke to the smell of smoke and the snapping sound of trees on fire. The hills were silhouetted like a great black bear. From off in the distance they heard the sound of honking geese and frightened ducks. But when they ran outside and looked up at the ground that rose up from the hollow where the cottage lay, their deepest doom loomed over them. They had hardly grasped the inevitability of their situation when the flames hissed ever closer.

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Djinn had wanted to be like *Indiana Jones* and take bold and decisive action, to do something remarkable that countless other djinns had tried before and failed. But he had to be cautious; he mustn't reveal himself. At first, he thought he'd do the Red Sea act again, but because the ground was smoldering hot, the tires of their 4 x 4 would surely rupture. And walking was definitely out of the question. He thought a hot air balloon would be ideal to let drift along the shoreline. But how would they get in the bucket?

A boat? Yes. That's it. He stretched out his hand and snapped his fingers. Nothing happened. A shroud of silence fell over the land. He snapped again. A shadowy figure strode slowly toward him. He was wearing a long black robe that ponded at his feet and a black cowl hung over his head. The eyes under the cowl were like the black pits of coal. In his hand, he carried a scythe. Of all the cockamamie...

—*It's the Grim Reaper!* I screamed, for what it was worth.

The fortune-teller turned over another card and laid it over the Tower. It was the Two of Pentacles, reversed, a symbol for a magical talisman. "This is a time for action. You must hurry. Go now and find her!"

Snap! Snap! Djinn willed the ominous figure to disappear. The cloak and its contents went sailing through the air, off into the distance until it was a mere speck.

Djinn blinked. Shazam!



The cutest ship you'd ever seen made of chocolate, caramels and licorice floated up the lake. It had a striped lollipop on the bowsprit and a marshmallow boson chair. But in no time at all, the heat from the fire melted the chocolate hull and, alas, the ship sank, leaving only the lollipop bobbing on top of the water.

What was happening to his powers? All his commands were haywire. So utterly flummoxed, he had been unable to imagine his next course of action. He would be disgraced among his peers if they knew of his terrible performance. In his over-riding desire to protect his favourite primate, he had become disoriented and impotent. It's not as though he hadn't been warned often enough not to get involved with this species. They'll steal your heart and you'll become the faintest shadow of your former self, the elders had prophesized. But he hadn't heeded their advice and had thrown caution wildly into the wind. Love! He hadn't sought this experience, yet these strange longings had crept silently into his heart like an ordinary human. Now, as he stood staring out over the water, just beyond the cabin site, he realized he would have to push aside these human failings if he was to succeed. He began to concentrate hard to regain his strength and power.

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Melissa and Mike would recall that fateful day in the forest. It was a most uncanny sight that defied all heavenly logic. They couldn't quite believe it. The sky was cloudless, yet raindrops fell on the ground around them, gently at first, then heavier and more urgent. The rain sizzled and hissed at the fire, threatening and menacing, as though the fire and rain were two fencing champions in a bout. They couldn't quite believe it and for a moment danced and hugged each other, for their joy was over the moon, and the two terriers bounded up and down as though performing jumping jacks. Meanwhile, out of the blue waters of the lake, a little harbour tugboat had appeared drifting along the shoreline as if it had lost its way. It had a tall blue smokestack with a red and white life preserver fastened to its side, wore a red baseball cap, and had huge, happy, oval eyes that peered out of the cabin.

"Look! Look!" Melissa pointed. "It's Theodore Tugboat!!" As the tug drew closer, they could hear its engine gurgling and the strains of some sea-going ballad. Without wasting another moment, Melissa plunged into the water and swam out to secure the little tug's line.

To this day, they cannot explain coherently and convincingly their luck. They say it was a miracle.

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Djinn's spirits—if you can even say a djinn has *spirits*—were lifted. He had been so preoccupied with the sight of his love that his face shone crimson, like the embers of the fire. I'd have sworn he wept, though he'd never admit to owning such a mortal emotion. Without saying a word, he retreated from the room and faded away to his familiar place in the desert.

I looked at the trunk resting beside me, its lid gently closing, and I smiled.