

The Black Veil

By Scott A. McCain

Apparently, they were all out of her desired pattern—the pattern she had deliberated over for several months, until she and her husband-to-be had resigned to select the alabaster and sea moss triangulations with the extra large salad dishes. It didn't cause her to become irate. She more or less sank into a mild torpor, and trudged forlornly out of the small ceramics boutique, this time defeated. It was not a cause for immediate concern. The dishes could wait. She was to have her fitting tonight, an event that far surpassed any eating ware design, the gleam of new flatware, the tintinnabulation of new wine glasses, both Bordeaux and Burgundy-styled. No, the fitting was the ne plus ultra of the wedding event. The door slid silently open to the busy street on which her auto was carefully parked. This door, too, opened without a sound. The journey back to her domicile was marked by few thoughts, and these were meaningless. The communication beacon on the console woke her from her small reverie.

“Janie! How are you? You look dim. What's up?” Maggie's face was distorted in the image, as if in a fishbowl filled with a bit of static.

“Hey, Mags. No. It's just the dishes. They didn't have what we wanted. Typical, you know?” Now Janie's face appeared in Maggie's device, although less distorted, as hers was the home variety. She spoke behind a veil of white.

“Aw, I'm sorry Janie. Can you order them?”

“Discontinued.”

“Well, forget about the dishes. What does it matter what they *look* like, anyways? Come on over. Let's have a glass of wine.”

“I can’t Mags. You know I have my fitting tonight.”

“All the more reason...” Maggie’s voice trailed off incoherently. Her wedding fitting fiddled between two digits.

“Huh? What’d you say?” Janie disregarded the comment almost as quickly. She had for months been preparing for this evening. Some women said that the fitting was more monumental than the wedding day. To believe that is insane Janie thought. How can something so miniscule as a little fitting outweigh the joining of two souls? Was that reassurance? The small, hydrogen powered transport lodged successfully into the port. Janie alit to the interior of her small, urban apartment. Lights illuminated around her as she traversed the room, extinguishing themselves as she left them behind. Her greeting module sounded.

“Good afternoon, Miss Janie,” subdued, electronic voice.

“Hello DOT. Coffee please.” The sound of water, metal devices. Percolating. Digital Organization Technology.

Janie reclined in a small chair near a gray, octagonal window facing the street below. From her fifty-third story window, she could make out the upper-traffic nearest her unit. The small, compact autocrafts traveled high above the sluggish commuter traffic below. Noiselessly, taxis hurried desperately late businesspeople from one side of the city to the other. Her thoughts again turned to the dishes, her failure.

“Fuck the dishes,” she said aloud.

“Unknown idiom. Please choose an alternate communication.”

“DOT retire.”

“DOT will now log off. Are there any last requests, Miss Janie?”

“Wake me at 4:30, DOT.” Silent shut-down.

Effortlessly, Janie slipped into an uneasy somnolence. She struggled mightily with her sleep, her dream. The same dream as before. Him coming to her. Her watching third person. The smell is paraffin and artificial plant scents. Flowers, but waxed. Scented candles. A boudoir, large comfortable bed. Her face veiled, unseeing. A white veil. A presence there now. Unknown but familiar. There is no sound save the faint crackling of the candles, the sateen sheets as she wriggles. No footsteps. No voice. Ne plus ultra.

“The veils are white for a reason, honey.”

“But whyyyy, mommy?”

“They are to protect us dear. We need them. All good girls need them.”

“But whyyyy mommy? I don’t want to wear one, mommy. I don’t want to.” Sobs.

“Are you a good girl, Janie? Are you?”

“Yes mommy. Yes, I am a good girl.” The white light turns blue-black out as the doctor delicately places a small mask over her mouth. She can hear a faint hissing sound. It is the sound of a gas moving through plastic tubes. Her heart is manufactured digitally on a small screen. It mirrors every cadence of the heart in her body. Small, jumbled numbers appear and disappear without logic. The doctor and another person in white glance at the image occasionally, reading the numbers, as if waiting for water to boil. She is online. She is respiring. She is fading, fading...fading...fading out. She is condemned.

She wakes to the doctor’s face in brightness. She sees double, triple faces beneath a white ceiling. They are looking down at her, the doctor and assistant. They both smile.

“It’s a perfect fit!” The doctor claps his hands excitedly.

“Am I a good girl, mommy? Am I...?”

“...GOOD GIRLS. ALL SIZES. ALL SHAPES. NOW AT A REDUCED AGE. ALL SERVICES ARE SAFE, SECURE. COME SEE US AT JANUS VEILS 2516 WEST...”

Janie switched the mediavox to the off position. The image of a doctor in starched white faded into blue-black oblivion. She scanned her apartment. It was nothing more than a room, serviced by DOT, a mere container for a life she did not own. There was nothing to do on fitting day, *nothing*, she thought, but sit and wait. She would be leaving this setting very soon. She would not be returning. One cage to another. Her veil, non-prurient white, hung limply about her face, covering her mouth, surgically attached above her upper lip, a natural part of her countenance. Her veil. White.

DOT’s voice, sotto: “Please wake, Miss Janie. Your cleanser has been prepared for you.” 4:30. A small vestibule, the size of a human cadaver had already emerged from one of the four bare walls. In it was a lukewarm liquid. She stripped naked, a small chill overtaking her body as she stepped into the elixir. She placed her hands into the small, metallic clamps on either side of the basin. They latched themselves automatically around her wrists. Her own touch was forbidden. DOT proceeded to wash her soft skin with gentle, matron-like strokes, purifying her external self. The touch was inhuman, inchoate. It knew no love.

DOT gathered the gown around her pristine body. It hung lazily about her form. White. Her skin, the purest white. The veil. White. It was time for the fitting.

They were already there, the two men, nameless, faceless. They were very much out of place in this setting. They gathered her into the transport without saying words. Ceremoniously. The autocraft hung noiselessly in the air, detached from the holding pod. The two men in from entered commands into the colored instrument panel. The motion of the craft sickened her slightly. She closed her eyes as the lights of the city passed her. Silence. Immutable silence. Their journey led her through past memories. She felt the sting of a small scrape on her knee. She saw the red trickle of blood drip from her leg onto the closely manicured grass. She heard the boys laughing. She felt the cool water of the ocean, lapping at her puerile legs. The sound of the surf crashing onto the wet sand. She felt her mother holding her, closely. Her mother's bosom, warm, caring on her tiny cheek. The softness of her mother's veil. Her mother's veil. *Her* veil.

Her dreams. She dreamt them alone. They were nameless, nothingness. Even in infancy, grandiose dreaming. Dreaming. Dreaming...dreaming...exuent.

The journey did not last as long as she had wished. Her veil, her sick nonage, fluttered gently against her pale skin. Her gown, also fluttering, brushing against the alabaster surface of her body. She was naked underneath. Nothing else but nothingness, but something. The transport dispatched its cargo into the next portal. They were here. She had never seen this place before, but she knew it. She knew of its ephemeral spirit, obsequious and knowing. The two men guided her through a strikingly white hall. She only saw the backs of their heads now. They did not turn to look back. The ritual approached, cunningly, subfusc.

She could say nothing to these men, had nothing to say. She wanted to be dreaming. This was *his* domicile.

A door opened with a swift sound, then closed as quietly. Stark walls stared at her from great distances. *Are you...? Well...*The two men left through a small passage to the left. Janie, nameless now, stood between the two great walls. She drank in the miniscule light, her last. Her ritual, her fitting was to begin. She knew she was in his house. He would not see her until she knew only darkness. The black veil. Men are forbidden to see or to touch before the fitting. Women are forbidden, period.

Another man enters, much smaller, much tinier than the rest. She recognizes him. *Good girl...? Are you...? Whyyy...?* His coat is white and starched neatly. His collars are pointed, stiff.

“Hello, Miss Janie. Please have a seat here.” He motioned to the sterile metal slab next to one of the walls. “I certainly remember you. I fitted you as a child. Do you remember?”

Yes I am, mommy.

“Please lie down. Here.” He produced a small pillow. Two more men now. White clothing. As she lay supine on the metallic slab, two small clamps manifested themselves from somewhere within the table. They enveloped her wrists gently, making a slight clank as they secured her wrists to the surface. Her feet were next. Nothing about the procedure seemed real yet. She felt the cold doctor’s needle violate the surface of her skin. She winced. Blurry now. The doctor looking down at her vanishing. Vanishing. Vanishing...vanishing.

They are to protect us, dear. They are to protect them.

The doctor takes his time, knowing that this is a very important fitting. This one, this Miss Janie had been ordained long ago. She was to have the Watson Suture. The Watson Suture was very difficult, very delicate and very dangerous. He did not succumb to hastiness. He made several, small incisions across the brow of his patient. He pulled the corners of the veil upward, over her nose on Janie's face. With a cylindrical instrument, he gently sutured the veil to Janie's forehead. The Watson. Suture. Gently. Noiselessly. Perfectly. The doctor did not clap his hand joyously as he had done before. He knew his work was being watched. He marveled in the way that his lines blended so keenly with the lines of her forehead. His lithe hands worked magically. The veil, now covering the eyes of the woman, the bride-to-be, seemed a celluloid screen across her face. Expressionless. Its whiteness shone in the otherwise dark aspect of the room.

“Rest, dear Janie. Rest and awake as a completed woman.” Prometheus reviled.

Janie experienced no dreams as she lay unconscious for three hours. The procedure took a mere seventeen minutes to complete. She scraped her way out of the narcotic haze. She gasped slightly. She was completely awake now. A large, masculine hand took hers and gently squeezed, applying only a faint hint of pressure. The hand lifted hers, prompting her to rise from the soft bed in which she had been placed after the fitting. She was upright in the bed now, but her tears fell earthward, only to be gathered up and dissipated by a soft, white material near the corner of her cheeks.