

## The Gifted Ones

By David Powell

The boy's face stirred ghostly notes in the loneliest corners of Alida's memory. He was fifteen, but his face was creased, ancient. Harry Dean Stanton with better nutrition.

"Where did they find him?" she asked.

"Formal garden, what was left of it. He was the only one to survive," said Claudia DuMaurier, the estate lawyer, immaculate and stiff in her navy suit, white blouse and silk scarf.

"And he hasn't spoken."

"No."

Alida opened her memory, like pressing a piano's damper pedal, listening for sympathetic vibrations. There it was. She was six, surrounded by toys, left alone by the window in her father's office. Why couldn't she just sit beside him at the desk, listening to his pen scratching and his calm voice speaking into the phone? She wouldn't bother him.

She pushed the boy's folder aside and stood.

"Aren't you going to read that?" the lawyer asked.

Doctor Alida Laurent, Head Psychiatrist at Cowalin Institute, ignored her and pushed through the door into the chilly exam room. The boy smelled of smoke. They'd rinsed him in the shower looking for burns, but gray ash and charcoal grit still clung to his hair.

“Leroy, I’m Dr. Laurent. I want to give you something.” Alida took the boy’s wrist and turned it over, placing a single pearl in his open palm. “This beautiful thing is born of an irritation, a flaw.”

“The mollusk protects itself.” The boy’s voice rasped like a dull blade on a grindstone. “It *processes* the irritation. Using its own substance.”

The exact words she’d planned to say.

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“He... He knew what I was going to say.” Alida’s heart pounded a rapid two-step.

“His *alleged* psychic powers are documented,” the lawyer said, flicking at the file with a manicured nail. “If you’d read the file--“

“No! He knew *exactly* what I was going to say.”

DuMaurier sighed. “Dr. Laurent, have you, perhaps, made your speech before? To other patients?”

Alida stared at her. She didn’t want anything this arrogant corporate goon said to be true.

“Look, forget it,” the lawyer said. “The Durants had their ways, and they were rich enough to...pursue their odd interests. But this boy is now sole heir of the estate, and everything hinges on whether or not he’s fit to inherit. I need your help to establish his mental competence. Now please,” she said, closing her briefcase and standing, “read the file and don’t be distracted by parlor tricks. Your clinic stands to benefit greatly.”

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It was a strange document, compiled from the time Leroy was an infant by a Dr. Crenshaw, PhD from Charter Oak State College. A self-styled visionary, probably. The

kind of guy who might prop up a cult leader, or sell miracle supplements on late-night cable. Alida tried not to be judgmental--her dad and his colleagues had dismissed her as a quack often enough--but Dr. Crenshaw's write-ups read like Edgar Cayce meets Dr. Phil.

*August 3, 2009 -- His parents were wise to discontinue testing at the LSU Medical Center. The mental gymnastics those toadies perform to uphold the status quo are laughable--the child is unquestionably gifted.*

Alida took long, slow sips of the musky-scented mushroom tea and chuckled at the image of toads doing gymnastics. She looked out at the landscaped expanse of the clinic grounds. Her clinic, after her father's death a year ago. Freud was de-throned. Oedipus was out and neurology was in. Patients weren't bludgeoned with depressants; psychedelics were judiciously applied. She provided the most progressive mental wellness care in north Louisiana.

Or would, if she could pay her bills.

The money stream flowing from Medicare for expensive drugs and unnecessary procedures had shrunk to a trickle, and the herd of bureaucrats jostling each other to drink brayed unhappily. Instead of praising Alida's integrity, the clinic board threatened to sue her for mismanagement. Now the clinic was barely surviving on depressed parents, under-achieving teens, and opioid addicts.

Alida's head throbbed gently as the psilocybin bathed her neurons. She basked in the sunset filling her window with light. DuMaurier's face emerged, backlit by the setting sun. Our Lady of the Nuthouse, bestowing the vast resources of the Durant estate on the struggling clinic.

Alida returned to Leroy's file.

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“Tell me this,” the boy said. Relaxed in his crisp scrubs, he had lost some of the haunted look, but his face was still too old for fifteen. “The irritation, the thing that caused the pearl to happen. Does it stay alive inside the pearl? Or does the nacre kill it?”

She thought, but didn't say out loud, *You're afraid the pearl is tainted.*

“Tainted,” he said. “We torture and kill the animal to decorate ourselves, and you make it sound like bad milk.”

*You empathize with the mollusk.*

“Why not? You're asking me to *be* the mollusk. To make a pearl, create beauty from pain.” He looked at her with amusement, like a father watching his three-year-old twist a Rubik's cube.

“I'm asking you to consider the pearl as a symbol for--”

“You think a symbol is not a real thing. That I can make it into whatever I want.” He stretched out his legs on her couch, hands clasped behind his head. “That stupid book in your day room, *Life is What You Make It*. So naive.” He stopped speaking aloud. *Life is what it is. Things are what they are. An animal had to die to make this pearl.*

Alida tried to hold her excitement in check. DuMaurier was an idiot. This boy had powers, and “odd ways” didn't begin to cover the Durants' private life.

“Actually that's not true,” Alida said. “Pearl farmers extract the pearl without hurting the oyster. So the oyster can grow more pearls.”

“So they keep it alive to torture it, over and over. That's worse than killing.”

All this talk of death. Well, of course. They had found the boy, mute and shivering, covered in ash. Thirteen charred bodies in the burning house. She needed to

know what happened in that house, and how he had survived. She needed to keep him talking.

“That’s true. On a literal level.”

“A literal oyster was tortured to make this pearl, and you dismiss it as a symbol. This now...” He flicked a fingernail at the cameo hanging on a chain around her neck, a classic woman’s profile carved in shimmering mother-of-pearl. “The nacre itself had to be carved up to make her. When you make the animal a symbol, Doctor, you violate the meaning of its sacrifice.”

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“Just give me something I can use in court, please.” DuMaurier kept up an impatient staccato with her pen.

“He pulled out of his fugue state in one conversation. That suggests he’s accustomed to dealing with trauma.”

“Aha. Tough, resilient!” DuMaurier scribbled on her notepad. “What’s the buzz word? Grit? That’s useful. Anything else?”

“He went quickly to talk of sacrifice and death.”

“Is the psychological damage reparable in three years? With your ‘enlightened’ treatment?”

“I don’t know the extent of the damage, yet.” She watched the tapping of DuMaurier’s pen come to an abrupt halt.

“I’ll call that a yes,” the lawyer said.

#

“You’ve mentioned sacrifice twice,” Alida said. “Why do you suppose that is?”

Leroy's lip curled into a mocking smile. *Oh, you can do better than that.*

Alida smiled in spite of herself. There'd be no shielding her thoughts from this patient. "Okay then. Here's what I'm thinking about sacrifice. I've been asked to sacrifice *you*. To gloss over your trauma, write you up as normal. So the estate can keep your money and I can keep my clinic. Did you know that?"

"That's not a bad deal," the boy said. "One fucked-up boy to help so many others. You could sit in your office and trip your brains out with a clear conscience."

Alida smiled. This combative posture was so familiar, so thoroughly adolescent. She'd used it with her dad when she felt he was dismissing her.

"And what would happen to you?"

"As long as I sign the papers and don't make waves, they'll re-build the mansion and give me whatever I want."

"What would you ask for?"

The mocking smile hardened to a predator's grin. "The souls of my mother and father to play with, like Barbie and Ken."

*Show me how you'd play with them.*

She saw it. A pair of aristocrats struggling to keep the rags of their fine clothes pulled around them, to cover up drooping genitals and dried-up breasts. Leroy gigantic, leaning over to drop a cat in front of them, face business-like. The cat's hiss as it spotted the couple, and the couple's screams.

*Not terribly original, but that's off the top of my head. With a little time and imagination I could go Hieronymous Bosch on their ass.*

"So," Alida said, "you can push your thoughts to others, as well."

*Or maybe, Leroy thought, you can read me.*

#

Alida sipped her mushroom tea and studied the MRI scans spread out on her desktop. All this data, and the medical gatekeepers were finally admitting mushrooms could help with depression. Like saying radium could make your watch glow in the dark!

Mushrooms reduced blood flow to the connectivity hubs--like turning off the traffic signals, letting vehicles run loose. Drive at your own risk, but choose your own speed and go anywhere you like. Lysergic acid dissolved the dividing lines between sensory perception and the "self." You were literally one with the world. Like if cars, airplanes, birds, submarines, earthworms--all felt the truth of each other at once. No wonder highly compartmentalized minds--i.e. dad's--freaked out.

What if psilocybin had stumbled on a hidden thing in Alida's brain, and Leroy had nudged it awake? Maybe it would like a cup of coffee. 'Shroom tea plus a light dose, say 90 mics, of LSD might widen the inner eye.

Dr. Laurent cancelled her afternoon appointments. She had to prepare. This was more risky than her usual daytrips; she needed a tether to her everyday self. Even if she found the Leroy corner she'd need a lifeline back to herself.

Music. Familiar enough to pull her back gently. She cued up Johannsson's "Flight from the City" and set the timer for three hours. Trying, and failing, to push away the picture of Tina setting her alarm clock before going on the hunt for Freddie Krueger. Leroy's mind was not one to trifle with, not when he could read and project thoughts. Not when he took delight in feeding his parents to a hungry cat.

She measured out the dose and squeezed it onto her tongue. Sat at her desk and opened Leroy's file, the photo of his young/old face clipped to the cover. Deepened and regulated her breathing. Forced herself *not* to make a plan. To just let it happen.

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Colors began to glow and surfaces to slide. Alida studied Leroy's woeful, abandoned face as the office began to elongate and blur. She had redecorated her dad's inner sanctum in mauve and white, but now it slid back into the buff non-colors he'd favored. Artwork morphed backwards, too. Radiant Kali with her sickle and severed head became Freud and his cigar. The one painting she had kept, *Bienville First Meets the Natchez*, was a reminder, a bridge between girlhood and independence. The elegant French, the noble savages, the sumptuous color. The romantic fantasies of that girl, there, sitting by the windows. Gasping, she recognized her six-year-old self on the carpet, placing her X-Men figures in a circle around a wild-haired troll doll.

Leroy's voice came from behind her left shoulder.

"I like it here," he said. "Cozy."

Alida's vision shifted to her six-year-old eyes, her mind to six-year-old thoughts.

"*Great Sun, stop killing your own people,*" young Alida stage-whispered. She pushed Jean Grey and Rogue forward to face the troll. "*We bring civilization!*"

"Girls don't scare Great Sun," Leroy said. "Better send in Wolverine."

Alida gasped as Wolverine came to life and doubled in size. He stepped forward with a savage roar and slashed the troll into diagonal slices.

"Don't make so much noise," Alida scolded. "Dad is working!"



“Unharness yourself,” Leroy said. “It’s your imagination. You could take away dad’s ears, if you wanted to.”

“Don’t!” Alida whirled around to her left and saw nothing but walnut bookshelves.

“You won’t find me in *your* memories. I’m just peeking over your shoulder.”

“Where are you?”

“Come and find me. See if you can.”

Alida took a deep breath and relaxed her shoulders. He was right; this memory of isolation had been her first try at empathy with Leroy. Maybe he was behind this scene, or across from it. What, besides physical space, separated two minds?

She visualized flying over an enormous ocean. No. A desert. The ground flew away and she was sailing over the Grand Canyon, enroute to the other side.

Leroy laughed out loud. “What a cinematic eye you have, grandma. It doesn’t have to be so hard. Think! Why did you remember dad’s office?”

She brought up her first glimpse of Leroy, shivering as they peeled away the mylar blanket. His haunted face. She melded into a gelatinous wall, stopped struggling and let his face pull her forward.

A cave. No. A cavernous room, flickering with orange light. She peered over Leroy’s left shoulder. He was bound to a post, and he was laughing.

“*Your* power?” he was saying. “You’re using a nuclear missile for a doorstep!”

Alida’s eyes adjusted to the dim light. Stone floor, massive wooden arches. Candles set in alcoves carved into walls made of...clay? Low-burning fires in braziers shaped like wolves. Like bats.

“Ungrateful bastard!” said the woman facing Leroy. Robed and hooded. Silver five-pointed star on a chain. “You’ll sour the ritual! Yield! Honor the sacrifice!”

Alida heard low chanting. Robed figures circled Leroy and the hooded woman--his mother.

“If you had the slightest inkling of what this sacrifice means, I’d be insulted,” Leroy said.

The woman threw back her hood, gave a quick sigh of impatience. Her cheeks swept up from puffy lips toward a botox-smoothed forehead. A claw-like hand--thirty years older than the face--clutched a curved dagger. It’s razor-edge glinted in orange firelight.

“Pentagrams, backward Latin,” Leroy said. “Bunch of ridiculous cliches. Like a Troma devil worship movie.”

“You don’t own these powers!” his mother snapped. “You didn’t give birth to yourself!”

Leroy howled with laughter, and Alida felt his glee, a thin crust over a molten sea of contempt.

“Stop indulging him!” A male voice from the circle. “Just *do* it!”

Leroy’s mother flicked her hood down and raised the knife, but white light flared before she could move. Flared and receded, leaving a blind spot that sprouted orange snakes of flame in a twisted corona. The mother’s shriek rose. Alida turned her head and saw, with peripheral vision, fire leaping onto the mother’s robe and her hair catching fire. Searing orange and white engulfed the robed assembly until they writhed like caterpillars

in a forest fire, puny screams lost in the roar. The inferno swallowed wooden beams, earthen walls and stone floor in an instant.

*Like a galaxy being born*, Alida thought, as the opening chords of “Flight from the City” began their stately march, drowning out the screams, making a solemn soundtrack to the sacrifice of thirteen misguided supplicants.

Calling Alida back to herself.

#

Alida stood by the wall of windows, watching late afternoon glow soften the curves of the manicured clinic grounds. *Nature tamed*, she thought, turning back to the painting of Bienville meeting the Natchez. She heard Leroy’s appreciative chuckle just over her shoulder.

“Could I get you back on earth for a moment, doctor?” DuMaurier was saying. “I need an update on your progress.”

“How much do you know about Louisiana history, Ms. DuMaurier?”

The lawyer sighed and capped her pen.

“When I was a child I could get lost in this painting. My ancestors bringing civilization to the savages. The explorers so elegant and dignified. The Natchez people so colorful, so...pure. I would imagine being one group, then the other. Finally dad dropped *Civilization and its Discontents* in my lap and ordered me to read it. It was shocking, finally, to dig behind these images, to learn how empires spread.”

“You’re wasting your time on this bureaucrat.” Leroy’s voice from just over her left shoulder. So. The pathway between them remained open. Alida wondered if he would

always be there, if she would ever have true privacy again. She giggled at the thought of keeping a teenaged boy in her head, peeking at her in the mirror, in the shower.

DuMaurier looked at her watch. “Growing up is hard on all of us, Dr. Laurent. Could we please--”

“Did you know that the Natchez people called their leader ‘Great Sun?’ Their myths say the first *Grand Soleil* and his wife came directly from the sun, so dazzlingly bright you couldn’t look at them directly. They placed the sun’s fire in a temple and charged the Natchez never to let it go out or calamities would crush them.”

DuMaurier yawned and Alida decided it was time for a test. She pictured a hand the size of her desk pushing at the lawyer, and smirked to see the drowsy bureaucrat flattened against the back of her chair, shoulders pinned.

“Now that’s fun,” Leroy said. “Mom and dad were so prosaic. They couldn’t get past the goats and pentagrams.”

Alida drew the hand back and raised it, as if preparing to swat a fly, just above DuMaurier’s head.

“Easy now,” Leroy said. “We need her for the paperwork. Her blood doesn’t matter.”

Alida relaxed the hand and gently circled the lawyer with her thumb and forefinger. Considered making the hand visible, but decided that was overkill. Just a slight squeeze.

“Perricaul wrote about it in his journal. While the French were visiting, a great storm came up. Lightning struck the temple where the flame was kept and burned it to ashes. The people were terrified. Started throwing their children into the fire to appease

the sun. Perricaul estimated sixty people died before the do-gooder French, those ambassadors of civilization, put a stop to it. The Natchez were doubly horrified that they weren't able to finish. There were two hundred people lined up, waiting to join the sacrifice. They never trusted the French again. Which was wise, as it turned out."

"I love that story," Leroy said. "I understand it went viral in the colonies."

DuMaurier tried to rise and the fingers tightened. She stared at Alida, wide-eyed. Alida released the lawyer and she fell forward, gulping air.

"Write whatever you want," Alida said. "The estate will be fine."

#

Leroy had lost the haunted look. Leaning at ease in his Comme des Garçons shirt, his expression gave Alida the idea that Cole Sprouse had just murdered his twin brother.

"Who is Cole Sprouse?" he asked.

"Never mind. Head of an empire doesn't have time to watch TV. Ms. DuMaurier is...oriented to her post?"

"Happy as she can be at \$1200 per hour. I understand you're planning a new wing for the clinic."

Alida launched into a description of all services the new ward would offer, but Leroy interrupted.

"Yes, fine. Your clinic will be a magnet for the gifted ones. The *genuinely* gifted. Keep a few ready. Now and then some blood will be required." He stood.

"What do you mean, *genuinely*?" Dismiss DuMaurier, fine. But Alida was a partner. Her research had opened her mind to his--*its*- mind. She'd found her own gift, a dessicated thing lying dormant, and used it to cross the barrier into Leroy's--*it's*--world.

Merged with an entity as ancient as the earth--perhaps more ancient. She was an evolutionary cell in the body politic of the cosmos, and she meant to evolve. She reached for his mind to tell him so, pictured the gelatinous wall, but nothing happened. The wall was solid--smooth and featureless as a steel bulkhead.

Leroy turned to face her with a wolfish smile. "Your gift? That was all me."

Alida tried to breathe, but couldn't. She felt pressure around her chest, as if squeezed by a giant hand.

"All custodians need something--a way in. The Natchez worshipped the sun, so the sun paid them a visit. Your ancestors, the plantation owners--" He shook his head. "Their god was conquest. They spilled more blood than I could possibly use. You, though. Probing the mind. You've been closer to the source than any of them. Don't let it go to your *head*." He laughed. "See what I did there?"

He released her and Alida took a gasping breath.

"Oh." He dug into the pocket of his jeans and tossed her the pearl she'd given him on the first day. "Save this for your patients. This one, though--" He lifted the mother-of-pearl cameo from her neck and snapped it free from the golden chain. "--reminds me of mom."

He left the good doctor alone, again, in her office.

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