

# The Shades of Morpheus

By Sean Malley

4:15

P.M. So Tom should have been on the street black mauling Mr. Sergio's peaches, but he stood staring at the mailbox in front of Myra's kitchen. He passed it every day on his way home from the factory, but it had never interrupted him before. He stood with his head tilted to the left as one admiring a painting.

Cautiously, Tom moved closer, again with a profound sense of discovery. He thrust his jaw forward, pursing his lips: "Mailbox", he ventured. The deated red and white form gazed back nonchalantly. Tom retracted his jaw and looked about sheepishly. "Mailbox...mailbox...mailbox," he muttered, shifting his weight from foot to foot, flicking his vision over the street. As was his habit, he rubbed his fingers together. "Mailbox...mailbox...mailbox..."

He turned his attention again to the mailbox; the handle gleamed seductively. He gingerly raised a grimy hand, but drew back with a sharp gasp; the handle was cold. "Mailbox...mailbox...mailbox..."

Tom wasn't habitually prone to such bouts of insight, for he strayed seldom from the comfort of repetition, from the security of familiarity. Although this in itself was largely the product of one of his rare apprehensions of the world: when he learned to read time, he understood that things happened in accordance with time, and so, in a particular way. Now to Tom this was revolutionary: the world was not chaotic, it was intelligible. When he learned to read and write, he put messages around his apartment. "Go to work at 7:40 a.m." "Eat supper at 5:30 p.m." "Feed the cat." The messages have provided an element of hazard in Tom's experience, but post was always on the doorstep at 7:15 a.m. and it always drank a half cup of milk. It cleaned its face afterwards, first with the left paw, then the right. He ate toast and marmalade for breakfast, and he swept the factory floor at 11:30 a.m. and 3:30 p.m., and he walked through the park at 4:35 p.m. past the girl with the sketchbook under the chestnut tree.

The supervisor was angry with him one day, because when Tom swept the stairs, he swept the soot onto himself, soot which messed up the coffee room at 3:00 p.m. to 3:15 p.m. But John, who worked the biggest machine, told him that he had to stand on the step below the one he was sweeping. This is the way he learned; this was the way it was done, and besides, the supervisor only complained once. That was the day the supervisor found out that Tom was making more money than John because of a government subsidy. Tom liked John. He nudged and poked people in ribs with his elbow in the coffee room at 3:00 p.m. to 3:15 p.m.

Tom lifted his hand again, this time firmly holding the cool handle. He pulled; the door yawped a torpid, macabre groan. The sound rattled his eaves. He almost let go, but he sensed that it would cross him.

He peered into the void.

"Mailbox" he whispered. He heard his voice glide across the empty black pond. He looked for his face in the dark pool. "Mailbox" he murmured. Monstrous jaws were visible in the gloom, welling from its black belly roared "MAILBOX!"

Tom didn't touch the door chain because he was running down the street toward Sergio's. A banana fell from his pocket.

Mr. Sergio was sweeping the sidewalk when Tom dashed by. This was a most unusual day, what with the girl with the sketchbook not coming by the store and now with Tom running off like that. Every day except on weekends and holidays, Tom stopped in front of the fruit cart and mauled the peaches. The food was always delicious. Back home Mr. Sergio would have chased him away, but everyone knew Tom.

Mr. Sergio liked to sweep. He liked the way the cornbroom rippled across the grey sidewalk, smoothly, soothingly. Sweeping focused his thoughts, cleared of course in the late afternoon when Tom came by. He had to be watched; sweeping was a good excuse. When he wasn't sweeping or otherwise occupied, he habitually rubbed the thick callus between his thumb and forefinger flat and made smooth by years of handling the broom. Sometimes, when no one was in the store, he would run his tongue along it.

Mr. Sergio was troubled of late. Today for instance, after cutting up the side of beef which had been curing in the refrigerator, he marched through the parade of canned beets, carrots, and tomatoes, furiously rubbing a stray bit of meat into his callus.

He had to close the shop at 6 o'clock. His son was too irresponsible to look after the place himself, and the store was no place for his daughter. He would have stayed until 9 o'clock, but he had to go to citizenship class at six-thirty. He had no family here to help him.

Yes indeed, it was a strange day, he thought, what with the girl not showing up and Tom running off like that. She had beautiful, stained fingers, hands which Mr. Sergio imagined his wife to have once been like. He picked up the banana and put it with those on the cart. Upon reflection, he put it aside with the ones marked half rotten and continued to sweep the sidewalk.

Mrs. Thomas was strolling through Westside Park with her daughter, Belinda, as was her habit in the afternoon. Belinda spotted through the leaves. Mrs. Thomas whistled "Pack up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag." Mrs. Thomas was usually vivacious on Tuesdays, for she sees Dr. Lamberth from 9 o'clock to 11 o'clock. He had such a pleasant voice. She could drift off to sleep for hours.

She had cassette tapes once—that men had a pleasing voice as well, but she found the waves of unconsciousness washing over her being somewhat unnerving, and that faceless voice which sought her through the night, well, too unnerving. Tom had told her that when Mr. Perkins went away for a convention, what began as gently lapping erupted into a fierce nine gale. But the earthly gnashing of the tapes in the living room annoyed her nerves; Belinda woofed on approvingly. So, she had to make her detour in the blender. This was destined to be no easy chore, since it had been buried long ago in the deep cupboard above the punch bowl. She stood on her chair and reached into the dark void. Her fingers groped through the dust. She drew back her hand with a sharp gasp; she thought she felt something move in there. She saw the cabinet rattled; Belinda was watching. Dr. Lamberth's image flooded her mind; his basso voice poured into her eyes. Relax...easy...move...away... she thought as she stepped down from the garden. She again reached into the cupboard; promptly finding the handle, she jerked it out into the light. It was stuffed with mason

paper. The mason paper was a worth substitute for those tapes. he has such an attractive voice, and she had given her garden to the waves, the one they walked through as if on a lotus floating on a black pond.

Mrs. Thomas reached for the sketch-book. She was asleep under the chestnut tree, and must have been dreaming, she thought, judging by the accumulation of droplets on the leather toward the gut, yawping excitedly. "Shit, my dear, you'll awake the dog's beauty. Let's go home, my dear, and Mommy

will be home." Mrs. Thomas pleased with her deduction; just like the detectives she read about, she mused, she reached for the collar closer about her neck. "Perhaps you can break. Daddy does love it so, and it's been such a long time. His plane will be landing

any day now. Her ebony skin glowed like pure obsidian; her high cheeks perfectly accented her dark eyes. Everyone loved her corn-braids. The men on the street looked over their newspapers. She walked with a graceful lunge, her tapered chin tucked back, her head dignified and lefty. Her dark eyes were as deep as those who didn't share in beauty.

Behind the trees Mrs. Thomas thought that Jackson Pollock had been painting her face. She was the source of things. Her hair was a mass of color, Impressionist stipples. The waves of her hair were a bouquet of colors in suffused tones and colored textures. She had to be watched, and she had to be watched, watching her tapered fingers instead of the

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Photo by Dave Smith

October 19, 1990

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