

# DEFILEMENT OUTSIDE OF HEAVEN, TWO MILES

*by* strannikov

The main approach to Heaven—well, it's not Heaven itself, duh, but it still surprises that so close to the main entrance there stands this shabby little sinkhole full of greasy scaly lizards shedding salmonella everywhere, but mixed with a cloying sweet perfume thick enough to choke even the unimpeded wisteria draped all over everything; so with all this horrid cloying sweetness exuded by miles of untended wisteria and all those damned salmonella-shedding lizards crawling all over everything, you'd know plainly that something's amiss.

Of course, I knew a girl from there, well okay, a few girls from there. Not dozens, maybe only about a dozen, maybe only thirteen, but twelve is still a good number. The kinds of girls you might innocently say “heavenly” about, although never within their hearing, let that slip once and you'd have to say it again untold times a day; but they always had these damned reptiles crawling all over everything, up and down the curtains, on the couches, the carpets, the pillows, the sheets, you couldn't roll over without looking first or you'd get a surprise you weren't at all eager for. It creeped me out most gloriously until I could stand no more of them (the lizards, I mean). They weren't venomous lizards, no monitors, no gila monsters, but I'm here to tell you, there were some large striking chameleons and some robust iguanas, most of them probably once native to Latin America, probably all from the Amazon basin itself, but here on the outskirts of Heaven they were positively infesting what would otherwise have been a quaint little spot along the wall around the corner from the very Pearl Gates themselves. (The walls and the gates, frankly, are strictly ornamental and afford no substantive partition or defense of any kind, since because et cetera,

et cetera, et cetera). But I never once saw any lizard creeping in through the wrought iron fence directly behind this one spot, that is the truth.

This one girl I met had set up a little lean-to there, really nothing more than a striped canvas awning on three sides and the top, with a fourth flap sort of taupe but maybe not so yellow that could be lowered for privacy, so's not to scandalize the occasional late-night passer-by. She served cordial and delicious coffee, her blend of Colombian, Costa Rican, and French Roast, just a touch of sugar and whole cream, wow! Year round, it was always just airish enough to keep the reptile population in her lean-to down to a bare minimum, and with the deck chairs she had sitting around her card table, it was easy not even to take notice of them, so to speak.

On another distinct occasion I was walking alone, heading generally north. I had to walk outside of town in order to do so, which was the easy part, and the quickest, the walk north itself was miles long. The prevailing topography was not merely flat but distinctly concave in several clusters of places. Leaving town, I passed the cemetery that was the provisional resting place for some folks I had once actually known. This cemetery was bordered on one side by the last of the town's open sewage ditches, a rank little creek in summer for such a small community. On the other end the cemetery was bordered close by the foul swamp the nasty ditch emptied into. In summer, this swamp would be host and home to thick clouds of mosquitos that'd come whirring out at sunset, but inasmuch as this particular walk was taking place in late November, I remained obliged to cross through on the narrow dirt track that cut across the swamp at its narrowest width. The swamp this road cut through was a little less than a mile across here adjacent to the cemetery, further downstream closer to the river it was well over a mile across, but a different road bisected the swamp there, and that road was paved. All across this swamp, in both the narrow and the wide stretches, treetops were strewn with spooky grey Spanish moss, the moss drooped from most of the low branches, too, branches of oak and cypress trees that stood in the muddy muck of

the swamp. In November a steadier breeze than could be found in summer would wave strand after strand of the dangling moss. And on the banks of the swamp itself, north and south, pine trees without a shred of moss in them hovered close around the oak and cypress that thrived in the thick mud of the edge of the swamp.

The road that passed through the swamp near where the cemetery stood, that is, the road that passed by the cemetery that stood near where the swamp lay—but no, that's not the case, because that's not the same road. If I'd been on THAT road—

A palm reader and Tarot advisor named Sandra Marblesnot, who was obliged by circumstance to work under the professional name of “Madame Curio”, had set up shop some years previous in a modest solitary white frame house about five miles outside of Middletonburg on Highway 54 West. Because the Feds decided to drop an interstate highway on the east side of town, Middletonburg began growing westward in subsequent years, so that its western limit was now only just over two miles away, and that was close enough, apparently, to bring her to the attention of—what was he exactly? A devotee? An imbecile? A suitor? A plain lunatic? Madame Curio could not discern his earnest intent, not with her initial reading of his ruddy palms nor afterwards with her Tarot deck nor even later with her crystal ball; but ever since he began showing up, he'd brought dried flowers and dry white wine on each of his weekly visits and left these gifts in addition to the twenty-five dollars she assessed for each consultation. She hadn't been able to shake him off and learned not to want to anyway, he was the first recurring customer she'd had in months, and even though she had no taste for Rhine wines, she could trade them with the wine merchant in Effingham for full-bodied chiantis pretty much bottle for bottle, and the dried flowers she could burn in the ash can out back in between his visits.

She was indeed the same Sandra Marblesnot who'd stood him up the weekend of a senior prom dance thirty-six years earlier; but in the intervening years he'd been in and out of the Marines, a one-ring circus in which he'd served as midway barker, and later worked

briefly as a Ferris wheel operator, among other occupations, in which latter capacity, owing one evening to a collision between the rotating Ferris wheel and his right parietal region when he was paying too close attention to the ample buttocks of one of two Ferris wheel passengers to've just disembarked—well, his memory had long since failed to be what it had been; however, he looked much the same, which itself fails to explain Sandra Marblesnot's failure to recognize him even all those years later, but then, she had put away a few cases of chianti in the interim.

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