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www.tettig.com

Also by Richard Pierce

Dead Men

The Failed Assassin

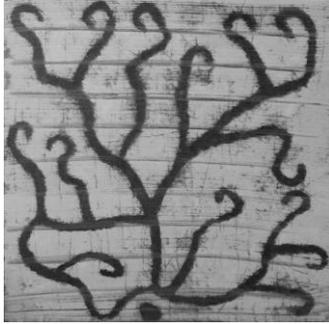
Bee Bones

A Fear of Heights

The Immortality Clock

TETTIG'S JEWELS

Richard Pierce



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For my heirs

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Richard, 21st November 2015

The past, like the future, is indefinite and exists only as a spectrum of possibilities.

Professor Stephen Hawking

IN A DESERTED PART of a vanquished town, a head wakes without a body. London. The ruins of rebellion. The soul is gone, eyes stale, blood caked around the face in a hollow grimace of ignorance. Her hair is glued back, swept away from her face in a red, congealed mass, sweet blood gone sour. The green eyes, open, blank, blinded. Black flies gorge on a pool of thickening blood. The room is closed and locked, clammy. The smell of sweat and fear clings to the walls. A shimmer, a memory, a presence of what once was human. And gone.

Naia Moré, for that is her name, is barely eighteen, a waitress in one of those tourist traps in Covent Garden. She serves anglicised French food to camera-heavy tourists and rowdy English bankers. She's away from home, in a different world. She likes it here, copes with the banter, the innuendoes, the difficult words, the work. And now she's dead, just that head on that sill, red smeared on white, a body sweating blood. The air thickens. The flies multiply. She's nothing now.

In the Garden, she's impressed by him, the tall, elegant man who lunches there day after day, fascinated by his gaunt look, his distracted manner, alone every

time she sees him. His solitude puzzles her, so she takes to watching him, makes sure she passes his table, even when she's not serving him, steals secret glances at him from behind the bar, tries not to make it obvious that she wants to be serving him, that she's desperate to hear his voice, to look into his eyes, to understand why he never has anyone with him.

Some days he lounges in his chair, faces the square, observes, without moving, no flicker of emotion, nothing, in his face, his eyes blank, hands still, mouth a straight line, no tangents. At other times he chooses a large table, pushes his plate to the far side to make room for his sketch pad, then sits there for even longer hours, and takes one espresso after the other, until the day grows too dark to see the lines on the paper.

When he draws, the veins etch ragged outlines into his forearms, the tension focuses from the elbow down into the sinews of his wrist, and his fingers curl intimately around the pencil. He grabs a face, any face, from the crowd, throws it down onto paper, captures it forever in pencil and white. None notice, none feel a shred of their soul being stolen, none feel him tearing at them, voracious, unrelenting.

They exchange names, finally, after all the usual empty politeness of hellos, good-byes, smiles, little waves. From then on, he insists only she serve him. Still distant, still reserved, still those vacant eyes, only a suspicion of a smile in the creases around them, all the unreadable she tries to read and cannot understand. Once, only once, does his reserve break, when some youth in a suit and too much wine in his throat shouts puerile filth at her, and he puts down his pencil, stands up suddenly, unpredictably, glides across to the boy's table, glares at him, hisses unheard words at him, and pins his hand to the table with one unseen thrust of a fork. She's flattered by his actions, excited by the blood.

He signs all his sketches with a solitary symbol; Alpha. When she asks why, he doesn't answer her at first, turns his head away, moves his pencil in a new direction. She asks him again, weeks later, when she hopes he's forgotten about the first time. It doesn't give too much away, he says. Leaves him anonymous, a bit of a mystery, he says. Because that's how he wants it. She shrugs, can't understand it, can't understand him. Because she wants to be famous, dreams of nothing else, wants nothing else, waits and wants, and wants and

waits, amidst the dreariness of waiting on tables and fat men and shrill women.

Three months after they meet, a week before she dies, before she becomes a sprite, a nothing, a shiver in the dark, he asks her to have dinner with him. She politely declines. She's going out, she says. With friends, she says. She's lying. She doesn't want him to think she needs company, doesn't want him to think she's desperate, doesn't want him to know she wants him.

'Aren't you lonely in this awful place?' he says.

'No.' A slight Spanish accent tints her voice.

'But it's easy to be lonely amongst all these people, isn't it?'

'That depends on the sort of person you are.'

'And what type of person are you?'

'I'm just a girl in a foreign country trying to learn everything about its people and its language. That's all.'

He smiles at her across the table. He's wedged himself into the corner nearest the square today, for the best view, the widest panorama, the most sheltered shred of this abused view, these ignored tiles and buildings, a quiet and hidden respite, casting a lure from the deepest dark, an invisible spider's thread. He

catches her with his eyes, deep set, so blue under his greying mop of black hair, captivates her with the correctness of his English, his rounded vowels, his extended vowels, his languid phrases, his unaffected affectation, his deep and sensuous voice.

‘Is that right, Naia?’

‘Sorry.’

‘Some other time then, maybe.’ He shrugs, carelessly.

‘Maybe.’

She swivels on her heels, and walks back into the café. He watches her hips move. When she’s out of sight, he scratches ragged lines into his pad, criss-crosses furious shapes onto the page he’s working on with his sharp pencil. He presses down on it so hard it shatters. The crack wakes him from his trance. He looks round, smiles, rises, and drops his money onto the table.

At home, in his empty house, three vacant bedrooms out of four, he goes straight to the kitchen, gorges for an hour on food microwaved from frozen, Mozart’s *Requiem Mass in D Minor* blasting from the speakers in all the rooms. He slams the dirty dishes into

the washer. Drapes himself over the toilet bowl, fingers down his throat, makes himself throw up, a yellow mess streaked with red flooding all over his hands, splashing into the clear water, bursting the still surface with venomous force. He wipes his face with a green towel, grins at the mirror, drinks water from the tap, his mouth overflowing. For him, every day is a feast.

He savours the retreating taste of vomit, revels in the funereal chords of the Mass. Repeats it again and again. Flops into the large chair in front of the TV and watches that film, from back then, about Mozart, *Amadeus*, not for the American voices, but for the faces and the music. Is he Salieri, Mozart's envious adversary or is he the genius composer himself? He's certain.

Down in the basement, he throws colours onto a blank canvas, flings his bloody visions onto the organic screen before him. There are speakers down here, too, everything linked wirelessly to his machines upstairs. The beginning of the Requiem captivates him, excites him, starts from silence into a crescendo of voices, and then one single female voice laments death, feels death, fades. The machine plays it to him over and over again while he loses himself in his creations.

The next week he sees Naia every day, is supremely sweet to her, compliments her on the different ways in which she wears her hair, on her make-up, the fragrances she bathes in. She tries to resist, shouts at herself for making it too easy, endeavours to escape the siren song. Then, one day, this summer, she sits down at his table. ‘Why do you want me to have dinner with you?’ she says.

‘I like you.’ He leaves the words hanging in the air around his creased eyes.

She can’t stop admiring his smile. It makes him a boy, not a man with greying hair. ‘I like you, too, but I’m too young for you.’ This is her attempt to resist.

‘Did I say I wanted anything in return?’ The question accuses her.

‘No, you didn’t.’

‘Well then. ... Actually, I was going to offer to sketch you.’ The bait is cast.

Her heart skips a beat. She adores his work, what she’s seen of it, over his shoulder, in what she thinks is secret. ‘Do you mean this?’

‘Absolutely.’ His voice is smooth, reassuring. She can trust him. She waits for him to go on. ‘I can cook,

you know,' he says. 'If you'd prefer, I'll come and make a meal for you, not take you out.'

'You would do this for me?'

'Of course.' He feels the rush of fire in his gut, the hunger renewed. He admonishes himself. Calm, calm. Almost there, almost there. He takes a deep breath, waits for her to take the bait.

'And you'll do two sketches so I can give one to my parents?'

Behind his straight face, he laughs at her vanity, sneers at her hungry conceit. Like all women, he thinks. She's been convinced of her own beauty for a long time, treated all the boys in her home town with the lofty disdain of someone born with beauty and talent. 'I'll do as many as you want, and each one different, so you can live forever,' he says.

'You mean it?'

'Oh, yes. Absolutely. Unreservedly.' He has no doubts she'll live forever.

She has to squint into the sun to see him clearly.

'And you do this because you like me?'

'Yes, Naia. Because I like you. I've been very lucky to meet you.'

Naia Moré believes Alpha, believes all men who sound so essentially English to be gentlemen. She throws back her head and shakes out her mane of red hair. It makes the fire inside scorch him, stokes his craving, his greed. And as she looks at him, falling into the abyss behind his eyes, she can tell he will be gentle.

And he is gentle in the beginning. He lovingly opens the bottle of champagne, carefully, deliberately, chooses to sit opposite her, lounging on the single armchair while she sits upright, a little stiffly, on the sofa that's the pride of her small flat. Plays the Requiem Mass quietly in the background on his phone while he speaks with her, while he entrances her. He tells her his stories, and she listens, intently, rapt. He recounts how he chased down some stolen paintings, discovered and retrieved them from a rubbish skip. How he was in Paris when the Mona Lisa was stolen by a bunch of students. How he surpasses the vision of the Old Masters with his own. How *she* will be *the* face everyone will recognise. How different he is from the men who pester her every day. She grows softer. And she tells him that Naia is the Basque for desire.

In the warm breeze filtering in through the open

window, he smiles across at her how appropriate her name is, sketches her slowly and caressingly in charcoal onto a white pad, only her face and rippling hair. He rattles a coloured pastel countenance of her onto the next piece of paper, rubs the nuances into the colours and hues with his gentle fingers. She senses him touching her face from the other side of the room as he moves his hands across the paper. And then he forces his pencil so deeply into the paper she thinks he'll rip it, drives it down to carve out the concaves of her cheeks, the convexes of her cheekbones. She's astounded by the finished sketches.

He cooks for her, a plain slab of red meat in a pan with butter and garlic, filling the flat with a warm aroma, serves alongside it a sharp green salad with onion, three times as much vinegar as oil, tossing a tang into the air, mixing with the freshness of the breeze drifting in from the garden. They eat, opposite each other, in the tiny kitchen. And outside it grows warmer, although night is almost here.

When she finally wants his hands on her, she undresses for him, surprised he's resisted for so long. The two last glassfuls of champagne remain on the

bedside table untouched while their flesh grows wet, and glistens in the last rays of the sun. She turns her thin back on him, briefly, when she wakes, to light a cigarette, and he drops the tablet into her champagne quickly, deftly, unseen. He learned, a long time ago, from his father's books, that the drug won't take effect until she drains her glass and finishes her cigarette. It will paralyse her soon enough. And so she falls, in slow motion, back onto the bed, unable to move her arms and legs, her lips incapable of mouthing her fear, the questions on her face suddenly motionless.

'It's only a game,' he murmurs, close to her ear. 'You'll enjoy it. I know what you like.'

His voice soothes her, and she grows calm inside. Only a game. The Spanish in her head slows from panic to gratitude. He turns up the music, struts to the other side of the room, sketches her anew, fallen, naked and spread-eagled on the bed. He works quickly. By now she's succumbed further to the drug, is scarcely awake. Again, he crosses the room, on soft soles now, his footsteps drowned out by the music. He can tell by her weight in his arms that she's no longer conscious. He moves swiftly through the flat, washing away all traces

of himself, so well-practiced.

All done, he draws from his bag several cold pieces of metal, glinting in the subdued lighting. He puts them together methodically, slow now, taking his time, ensures they're joined together into one solid being, one well-seasoned blade and handle. He sits down on the bed beside her, strokes her long hair, watches her breathe, waits for the first crimson of dawn to show itself. When it begins to colour the sky outside the window, he lifts her onto a footstool he's put under the pillows, to support her shoulders. Her back arches until it cracks. And then he draws himself up tall by the side of the bed, his naked abdomen clenched in triumph and power and excitement, lifts the blade high up above his head. There he pauses, glowering down at her. You're beautiful indeed, and now you're mine. With that he brings down the blade, back over from behind his shoulders, so fast, so hard, nothing can stop him. She opens her eyes, understands she'll die. And now she's dead. He sketches the dripping blood in pastels. He carries her bleeding head to the window sill, to face into the sun, to catch the reflection of the scarlet dawn in her open eyes. To watch the colours of death and

resurrection mingle. He washes again. Now he leaves.

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THE PREVIOUS NIGHT, Dick Tettig forgets himself, forgets who he is, and where he is. He walks along Fleet Street towards Trafalgar Square, his trance that of a man tired of the entertainment Fate offers him. He's no-one to himself, to those who watch him walk by, anonymous, a small man, middle-aged, in a small, ancient street.

Dark beckons the dreaming man, draws him into the embrace of threat and danger, spurs him on. Instinct. He quickens his pace, the echo of his footsteps drowned out by the never-slackening London traffic. The man in the coat, the old face under the Trilby, slides through the night. He skirts around the orange pools of light, past the sleeping lions, sidles across the tarmac, and comes to rest outside the brown stone building in Cockspur Street that was once, some time ago, then, a Norwegian travel agency. He lifts his eyes up to the still-fluttering, but long-forgotten, flag. A different red, white, and blue. He doesn't see it, sees nothing. There's nothing to see. This is where it always starts. And nothing he tries can stop it.

Inside, out of the clammy night, he spurns the lift for the stairs, relishes his shortness of breath, relishes the physical. It makes him feel alive. Nothing else matters. Not here. Not now. Not there. Not then. Like him, the night is without memory. It carries only regret, always only regret, but never remembrance. He senses as much as he trudges the final few steps to what must be his front door. Will she be here at last? The girl he always dreams of? The girl he can't find, no matter where he looks for her? The one he's sure he always knows, the one he knew, back then before his hair turned grey? Before he grew old and sad and slow? How will he recognise her? Perhaps she really is just a dream. He turns the key in the door. The lights hit him, bright and strident. Dazzled, he falters, starts to stammer an apology, recoils from the radiance inside. It's a mistake, he thinks.

'Don't go.' A soft voice from an unseen source. A woman's voice. 'Don't go now. Not this time. Please.'

Then he hears the music. It must have been there before, but only now does he feel it. It finds its way into him, a waterfall of notes from the beech piano at the centre of this room. A piano he's sure he doesn't own.

She stops playing, and looks up. Pierces his soul with her pale green eyes. 'Come on.' She beckons him with a slight movement.

Bemused, he steps across the threshold. The door closes behind him. The height of the room dwarves him, makes him appear to her even smaller than he is, burdened by the ages of searching. The silence envelopes him, takes, for one moment, the breath from his being.

'Do you recognise it?' she says, motionless, from the piano stool.

'I think so,' he lies. His hesitation irritates him. He can't stop staring at her. He doesn't recognise her. But she is the most beautiful woman he's ever seen.

'*Für Elise*. Beethoven,' she whispers and sighs. She turns to look back at the score in front of her. 'They never did find out who he wrote it for.'

'You?'

'Oh no.' She smiles, shakes her head. 'Not me. Not then.' She looks puzzled. 'Some other thing, somewhere else. Maybe.' She smiles again.

Tettig tries to tear his eyes away from her shape. There's something about her, he thinks. Something

untouchable.

‘Sit next to me,’ she says. There’s a rare essence in her voice, a lilt of the past. Dust rises.

‘Do I dare?’ He throws his coat onto the floor. ‘And do I dare?’

‘Why not?’ She shakes the dust lazily from her waves of red hair. ‘Live a little.’ The irony of what she says passes him by.

He watches her long fingers, slender, pass across the black and white keys, loses himself in the dreams that haunt him even when he’s awake. The music drags him deeper into the pictures, into the nightmares. Takes him back to the girl he’s so desperate to find. All he remembers are the headless corpses, and the sweat from loving that turns to blood. He paints the world onto her skin with every caress, only to find her dead, her head gone. Each time he closes his eyes, he thinks of nothing but the pictures in his mind. He shivers. A long time ago, at the beginning, he confronts a screaming shadow in a moonlit hall. A familiar shape, but he forgets the name. Forgets, forgets, forgets. Age.

The reel, the repeating reel, the moving image of blood seeping from skin into cloth plays in front of his

eyes. For him, love always ends in blood or pain. Loving someone perfect. Smooth. Soft. Idol. Touch each pore with a passion beyond reason. Absorb each feature of her skin, every freckle, every unevenness, every blemish. He caresses his way to the long, cool neck. And then the shock. She doesn't have a face. He's covered in a sweat which lingers until the light comes. And the sweat is red.

'Well?' Her voice hints across the sea to Ireland, startles him back into wakefulness.

'Very good.' He improvises. 'Wonderful.' He even puts his hands together. Why can't he be himself?

'That's what you always say.' She smirks.

'You're confusing me.' He almost shouts.

'Sorry.' Not demure. Teasing.

'No you're not.' His attempted smile doesn't come.

'I am. ... A bit.' Her eyes sparkle with the lie. She moves her hand to touch him. He feels nothing. Sees, a snapshot, her fingers pass through him. No warmth, no touch, no physical sensation. He pulls away. 'Please don't be afraid.' She moves towards him.

'I'm not afraid.' His voice sharper than he intends. 'Just confused.'

‘This is your flat. You’ve just come home, and I’m here. You’re late again. Nothing’s changed. Nothing ever changes.’ She shrugs.

‘Nothing’s changed? I’ve never seen you before.’ He’s really lost now, looks again into her eyes, burning bright green now from her pale face. She can’t be a day over eighteen. But she acts much older. He holds his breath. Attraction is difficult. She’s more confident than he is. So he asks. ‘Why aren’t you real?’

She plays one chord fiercely out into the room sheltered by the closed curtains, lifts herself slowly from the stool, tall and thin. She stretches, an exaggeration of her shape. He stands, too, and takes a step back. She’s distinct enough for him to see the white dress clinging to her, and the red stains on it, all the way down to her naked feet. He struggles to look away from the taut flesh that moves under the translucence of the gown. He’s puzzled and cold. He can’t decide if he’s real. ‘Are you a ghost?’ he says, troubled by his own words, because he’s already in love with her. Again. There’s little else to say.

‘You should know who I am.’

‘Where have you come from?’

She walks towards him, smiles at him, beckons him with her arms. He backs away. She doesn't answer. This is too weird.

'Where have you come from?' He hopes for an answer this time.

'That's what I want you to find out.' Her voice descends into a whisper.

'You're mocking me. You're haunting an old man with the youth he can't get back.' He feels the familiar ache in his joints.

'No, no. That's not it, not at all.' She shakes her head, her first sign of weakness.

'What then?'

'I can't explain.' Evasion.

'Why?' His words are stark into the hush.

She offers no answer, looks instead into his eyes for an instant too long, a touch too carefully.

He doesn't understand. He still can't see. He doesn't force the issue, and stares at the floor. He can't look at anything else. There is nothing else.

Outside, the city grows quiet, a silence as sharp as a broken knife. It tears the curtains to one side, reaches into the room, throws a hot, raging breath at the

mismatched pair. *Be gone, be gone. Die.* It echoes and fades away again.

Tettig looks up, his face flushed from the invasion. The vision has disappeared. She's gone. The room's a mess. Dusty. Books on the floor, papers scattered. The smell of stale food and wine. The walls static, their wood old and seasoned and afraid. And there's something else, something nesting, festering in the air, something malevolent, threatening to erase his memory before he reclaims it. He can almost touch what's there, feels its weight in his hands, on his shoulders, bearing down on him. He walks across to the dishevelled curtains, stares out at the night. He's nothing but a pale face surrounded by a halo. Insubstantial. It's how he feels.

His eyes won't pierce the darkness outside. Blackness, a cloud, obscures his vision, blinds him. Disquiet crawls along his back like a terminal pain. What he hears is real now. The city rages at him, a roar from the south side of the river, shapes forming words. *Be gone. Be gone. Die.* His skin crawls. He slams shut the window, needs a drink, wants a drink, moves, automatically, across to the slender cabinet, pulls it

open, finds the glass, the bottle half-full of red. He tracks back to the sofa, finds comfort in its hardness. It reminds him of something real. He sips and closes his eyes, savours the taste of the wine.

‘I’ll tell you what I can.’ Her voice is so soft he doesn’t want to open his eyes. It caresses him, its echo warm and giving, glides across the room, fills the void with mellow fruitfulness. The words hang in the air, suspended, somehow, somewhere, round and clear. He turns his head slowly, as if waking from a long sleep, and brings her face into focus, one feature after the other, a crescendo of beauty. Brows, slight and curved, under a torrent of red curls. Eyes, bright sparkling emeralds in a sea of cream skin. Down, past the cheek bones, freckled skin pulled taut. The full red mouth, lips reverberating with what she’s saying. A slight tremble. Across to the chin, strong. The lean, arching neck. The complete picture dazes, astounds, and touches him. ‘What can you tell me?’ He’s surprised she’s let him observe her in silence.

‘Seek, and you’ll find.’

‘Seek and find what? Bloody riddles.’ He brings his hand down onto the armrest. ‘What is there?’

‘Time has passed.’ Her face is impassive, as if covered in Plaster of Paris.

‘Why am I here? I need a real answer.’

‘Because you need to be.’ Her eyes don’t leave his.

‘Where am I?’

‘In this flat. In this city.’ Automaton.

‘What time is it?’ He has nothing but questions, and can’t find any answers.

‘The age of reckoning.’ Monotone, without a smile. Beauty grown fierce, desperate.

‘The real time, damn it.’ He only just stops himself from stamping his foot, realises how ridiculous that would be.

‘Look around and tell me what you see.’ Her eyes graze a path for him.

Tettig, released, tears his eyes away from the strictness of her features, lets his loose blue eyes roam and dance across the angular room, squeeze themselves safely and tightly into the far corner. Disconnected. His gaze meanders back along the walls filled with rows and rows of books, catches a letter here and there, sometimes a complete word, of an obscure title, flits up and down, around and about, finally alights on the old

clock on the mantelpiece. He hears her smile. The clock has no hands.

‘There’s your answer.’

He avoids her gaze, sure she’s laughing at him. He tries to look at his wrist without her noticing.

‘You’ll find the same there, I’m afraid.’ She’s right.

‘That’s ridiculous.’ He tries not to laugh. It is ridiculous. ‘This has to be a dream.’ He pinches himself. It hurts, leaves an angry red mark on the back of his hand.

‘Do you believe now that I know you?’ Her question is a song.

‘Yes, yes.’ He shakes his head, tries to rid himself of her, imagined as she is. ‘But where from?’

‘I can’t answer that.’

‘What sort of game is this you’re playing?’

‘Deadly serious, and I’m not playing it. I’m just a part of it.’

‘And the stakes?’

‘Your life and mine. The world.’ She says this so expressionlessly it can’t be a threat. She says it so lightly, without menace, it doesn’t shake him.

‘Is that all?’ He’s tired, he realises.