



Down the Road -- Part 20: The Cradle and the Casket

The cabin...

The desert cleared into scrub brush, in a few more steps the landscape turned into trees. The walking was easy going for Phyllo and Mr. Gardner. "Do you ever wonder about this world?" asked Mr. Gardner.

"How so?" asked Phyllo.

"I imagine this world to be something like a dream. Things here just don't quite fit," said Mr. Gardiner.

"I wish I could give you answers," said said Phyllo.

"You don't want play those dumb road guide games with me?" asked Mr. Gardner.

Phyllo turned and looked at Mr. Gardner. He tilted his head to one side and raised an eyebrow.

"I never realized. That must really torture you. Not being able to say things you want to," said Mr. Gardner.

"Some days," said Phyllo.

The trees made way for a clearing with a rustic wood cabin in the middle. Some of the windows were cracked and missing. The place didn't look abandoned, just neglected. The inviting aroma of a wood fire and the smell of meat cooking made Mr. Gardner's stomach lurch. "I'm sure they've got some knickknacks in there for you to break," said Mr. Gardner.

The glamour was draining from Phyllo. He was almost dead on his feet after taking Mr. Gardner out. The walk had been leisurely, but right now Phyllo could really use some magical energy. He had been thinking about clipping the tags off of retired beanie babies for hours. He could smell something inside the cabin. It was something magical but it wasn't glamour. It had a rotten smell and Phyllo was uneasy. The two of them stood there on the porch for a few minutes before knocking. The door slowly swung open on the first knock.

"Okay this is the point in the movie where the stupid people walk in and look around. The hot teenage girl takes a shower."

"That only happens in 1980s movies," interrupted Phyllo.

"Good point good point... ," said Mr. Gardner, "let's just skip this part of our adventure."

Mr. Gardner turned on his heels to leave. No sooner had he turned around than he was struck by a creature with black wings and the body of a naked woman. It came out of the sky, striking him in his chest, hurling him into the cabin. Before Phyllo had time to even jump backwards they had already vanished inside. He could hear the breaking of furniture as Mr. Gardiner's body was bounced off the home furnishings. The world was filled with the ever present sunless daylight. Inside the cabin shadows distorted objects. Streams of light poured into the cracks only making it harder to see around. Phyllo could hear Mr. Gardner's muffled shouts as he was thrown around inside.

Phyllo bit back a moment of indecision. This wasn't like Mr. Gardiner sinking beneath the sands of time. This was a fight against an avatar. It made fighting a cherub look like stepping on ant. As he stepped inside he remembered he was nothing more than a cherub himself. Phyllo looked around for a kitchen knife or a frying pan. Anything, he could use as a weapon. When he picked up a splintered piece of wood from broken chair leg the sounds from Mr. Gardiner's struggle with Angela stopped.

Morning specials...

The silver airstream diner felt roomier on the inside than it seemed by looking at it from the outside. Alice was returning from the bathroom with that weird smirk she had after seeing a flushing toilet. "I know they're funny," said Penelope.

"I'm sorry, it's just watching shit swirl down a bowl. I mean, think of all the time someone took to make such a contraption. Just so you can put an outhouse inside and not smell it," said Alice. She was in good spirits and it made Penelope nervous having a giggly pregnant teenager next to her when she was about ready to ask for a job.

An older waitress wearing a pink blouse pulled a pencil from her beehive hairdo. Her skin was the color and texture of a baked potato. She shuffled her feet as she walked. "What will you have, sweetheart?" asked the waitress.

"I'll have a chef's salad with a glass of water and a job application," said Penelope.

"Well, you're little young for a waitress job. You think you can handle being a dishwasher?" asked the waitress.

"I'm 19, and I've waitressed before. If you give me a shift, I can prove it," said Penelope. She was trying hard not to come off as obstinate. Alice just watched the two of them with a glassy eyed stare. As hard as Alice was, at times she could still be a spoiled little farm brat.

"Hey, Trammy!" shouted the waitress, "Looks like you got some fresh meat for the skillet."

The lumbering hulk behind the service window shrugged his shoulders. The huge man didn't turn around and look at them. He continued to shuffle something on the grill. He raised one meat hook and waved for them to come back behind the counter. They both got up from their stools but, the waitress stopped Alice. "Honey, you're about ready to pop any second. The only job I'd give you would be to walk around with a mop and bucket take care of the floor when your water breaks," said the waitress.

Alice sat down and tried not take offense. She did a great job of acting like a girl who was trying not to be upset. Penelope went behind the counter in into the kitchen where Trummy pointed one large muscled arm towards the far end of the diner. Alice couldn't see where Penelope was going. Her only view was through the small service window behind the counter. "Hey, they want me to try on the uniform," said Penelope.

"Just step inside this closet and and pick up the one that fits you," said the waitress. She returned a few minutes later setting down a premade salad and a glass of ice water in front of the stool where Penelope had been sitting. "Do you want anything, honey? As long as it's not steak, it's on the house."

At that Alice raised an eyebrow, "I'm sorry, I guess I should leave then," said Alice.

The waitress looked puzzled for a few seconds then stopped her. "Honey, that means it's free. You got a little one on the way and, hell, if you want steak, I'll cover the difference," said the waitress. She had a tight nervous smile.

"I'll have some griddle cakes, bacon, and a glass of orange juice, thanks," said Alice. The waitress scribbled something indecipherable on her green and white pad. She placed the pencil back in her beehive hairdo and shuffled back into the kitchen.

Alice's mobile...

Phyllo cautiously moved through the log cabin. The cabin was utterly quiet. Phyllo almost wanted to hear a mouse squeak or the wind rattle the shutters. Something so the house didn't feel so utterly dead. It was more than dead. Dead things still hummed and vibrated as bacteria ate them from the inside out. There were no creaks and no vibrations of any kind. Phyllo couldn't even hear his feet on the rickety floorboards. He fluttered his wings and they were completely silent. As he approached the stairs to the second floor, Phyllo could hear the faint sounds of a music box.

Cautiously, Phyllo walked up the stairs one step at a time. He used his wings and entered the upstairs hallway, almost crawling on the ceiling, hoping that the avatar would be looking for him standing on the ground. The hallway was empty but the sound of the music box was louder. Checking that no one was sneaking up behind him he headed towards the sound of the music box. It was coming from a room at the end of the hallway. The door was slightly ajar and he could see light filtering in through the windows inside. Phyllo wished he could hear the sounds

of Mr. Gardiner. He thought about calling out for him but decided against it. *She's going to be waiting inside this room*, he thought. But he didn't have any other choice. He could search the whole house over and over again but he would all come down to entering this room. He looked behind himself one last time before he pushed the door open. Inside was a cradle with the mobile clipped to the side. The little plastic mobile weights had faded stickers peeling off. As the mobiles rotated slowly around, Phyllo could hear the music box melody. The cradle was empty but the mobile was what fascinated Phyllo.

At the top of the mobile was a piece of plastic with the faded sticker of Bob, Alice, Toby, and himself. Beneath that was a branch. Balancing on one side of the branch showed them all at the carnival, the other side showed them all at the cemetery. In the cemetery, Toby was being pulled underneath the ground by zombies. The carnival branched off from there to Alice choosing to join the bordello or having the madame accuse her of being a thief and having the town chase after her. In another decision branch, Phyllo saw that Bob walking away would've resulted in Toby's early death as he attempted to rescue Alice himself. In another pathway, Alice escapes with Bob instead of climbing into the car with her father. In that scenario Bob makes love to Alice under the trees, later he is crippled when the Rider runs them down as they walk the road.

He sees the pathways that he wasn't even part of, the little plastic pieces coming to life before his eyes. He sees Alice and Penelope not follow her father's car and travel to a place they call Kansas. In another world Alex chooses not to smash the hourglass but instead adds shiny sand and travels to confront the dark master, only to be killed. He sees the other possibility of Alex adding the dark sand to his own hourglass and embracing the darkness, eventually killing his once faithful road guide, Phyllo.

The alternate realities were cascading and mixing for him. A mobile is a moving three-dimensional piece of art. Each time you look it's new. Always changing and recreating itself over again. The motion is the art. Phyllo is standing before three doors. But this time he doesn't step through the door marked the wanderer. He chooses the adventurer, a New York businessman dying of AIDS that has the ability to talk spots off a leopard. In another instance he steps through the door of the coward and meets the young man who could bend causality at will.

In another moment Alice is standing before a window watching the dark wind roll through the town. She focuses the dark wind to destroy the town around her. Penelope and Alice awake the next day to meet the town's sole survivor, a young woman named Angela who introduces them both to the dark master.

Phyllo's ears are bleeding but he doesn't realize it. The dark master is standing over his amphitheater looking at the figures, deciding who he wants to manipulate. In one reality, the dark master uses his control over Toby to make an attack on Alice. In the other, Bob sells his soul to the dark master completely.

His little cherub stomach is churning and his knees are beginning to feel like water, but the revelations continue. Phyllo is standing in the diner once again and a phone call tells him to lead

Mr. Gardiner forward, another one tells him travel to a town to battle the map makers. There he fights Toby and his friend Edgar as Alice and Penelope escape.

Phyllo's little tired body wasn't meant to see those things. He didn't notice Angela walking up behind him.

Dinnertime...

Alice sat on the stool for a little while enjoying the cool artificial breeze of the air conditioner unit. An unheard-of luxury in her hometown of Dust. It was commonplace in so many worlds. No world seem to be as wonderful as this place. A free meal and a decent job in a place with air-conditioning couldn't possibly be evil. Her delusion was shattered when the melting ice cubes in Penelope's drink shifted. Alice looked more closely at the chef's salad. She looked at the pink and brown lettuce that had been crushed into a small bowl and wrapped in plastic for days. A small white aphid crawled out from underneath a withered leaf. Alice wondered how long it was taking Penelope to put on a uniform. She looked up and saw the face of Chef.

His eyes were round and made of rubber. The pupils were chrome hubcaps. He slid his yellow tobacco stained fingers over the edge of the window. The nails were a dirty brown black. His mouth opened to reveal a set of shiny black asphalt teeth jagged as diamonds.

Alice got up from the stool, over balanced and almost fell sideways. She rounded the counter heading toward the kitchen as the waitress with the potato skin comes out the kitchen to stop her. Alice sees why she's shuffling her feet. The potato faced waitress is fused to the floor. Her body is pushing out of the linoleum like leaf pushes out of a tree branch. "Where is Pen?" shouted Alice.

"Please return to your seat. Your dinner will be right up," said the waitress. There wasn't any sign of distress on her face. It was just another day at the diner, but she still blocked Alice's way.

"Pen!"

Alice could hear the grill sizzle and Penelope screaming.

These broken wings...

Mr. Gardiner awoke from his concussion to hear a radio playing, "Take these broken wings and learn to fly again."

"Learn to live so free," the radio sang in the corner of the baby's room.

Mr. Gardiner pushed the accordion closet door open to see a cradle in the middle the room. The mobile was gone. The shutter had been torn off of one of the windows. Silhouetted by the light pouring through, the anti-angel Angela stood with her black wings fully extended. "I'm here

you, harpy. Finish the damn job," said Mr. Gardiner bitterly. His head still hurt and he wasn't sure how long he could remain standing. He was pretty he had a few broken ribs.

"Too easy, I'll come when you're not so eager to die," said Angela falling backwards though the window.

Mr. Gardiner was fairly sure she wasn't going to come back for a little while at least. He looked down into the crib to see the body of Phyllo. The avatar had pulled Phyllo's limbs through the bars of the crib and broken each major bone. Phyllo's dirty gossamer wings were snapped in half and oozing a yellowish insect blood. Black drool had dried at the corner of his mouth. Mr. Gardiner wanted to pick up his body and cradle it even though it was bloody, He didn't for fear of hurting him more. He was sure Phyllo was dead until the little boy turned his head to look at him.

"Please... please... ," spoke Phyllo softly.

"I'm here," said Mr. Gardiner.

"Please... shut the radio off... I don't wanna die listening to Mr. Mister," said Phyllo.

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