

...that I had never written a word...



*A short story by:
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The electric white doors of the swing gate opened in a lazy manner to embrace the shimmering Aston Martin with a motherly affection. The mature gentleman with the stylish sunglasses, immobilized the magnificent, graphite coloured, vehicle for a minute and afterwards lowered the window to inhale the familiar British breeze that so much he had been missing in USA, where he spend the last five weeks in order to promote his new book. Now, however, he had returned once again to his home, in a huge farm in the outskirts of Surrey, to enjoy once again the sixty acres of green areas and the beautiful Elizabethan farmhouse of 1868, which, with various additions and renovations, he managed to transform from an abandoned ruin into a small, neo-Gothic mansion.

He enjoyed the last rays of the pale December sun while they were dying with golden highlights the bronze, cock-shaped weather vane, which towered over the old barn of the farm. Now, the former stable had been modified into a huge garage, reinforced by heavy doors in order to guard his collectable pink Cadillac, and of course, the extravagant Aston Martin Vulcan, on which was on board that moment, the “Master of Horror” or otherwise, the “Maître of Dark Literature”, who was none other than the famous author Greg Masters.

He remained tireless and prolific even now, at the age of seventy-one. The genre reading audience adored him like no other “dark” writer, worshipping those talented fingers who had typed the Devil’s Shaman, the Afreet, the Demons of Hiroshima, the Fleshhouse, the Outcast of Light and many dozens of books. He was also a formidable collector of rare medieval manuscripts and various other –extremely odd– artefacts.

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The top of the tin cone, built by beer cans resembling a new Babel tower, was getting higher minute by minute, advancing to the spruce ceiling of the farm’s service cabin. The soccer match on the screen of the old, portable television set was a miniature Scottish civil war: Hibernian against Hearts for the Scottish Premier League.

Roger Burton, the owner of the livestock farm, watched the match with the interest of a typical soccer fan, but his employee, old McGregor, an alcoholic Scotsman, (with whom Burton spent many winter evenings in that wooden cabin), had sold his soul to the Hibs. He was getting drunk, almost every day, drinking and wrangling for his beloved team’s

sake. In fact, the only reason he was keeping himself employed was drinking and paying the stadium tickets.

“We shall win hands down! C’mon Greenies!” said MacGregor through his few left decayed teeth.

“It may happen, old-Mac... It’s possible to happen what you’ve just said, but... only in a parallel universe!” jeeringly said Burton, spitting out peanut shells onto the floor.

“Well, haven’t you read the forecast predictions in almost all the sport papers? But, alas, what I’m saying? I forgot that I’m talking to a man who does not know to write down even his own first name...”

MacGregor scowled contemptuously at his employer and opened immediately another can of beer, which he had it gulped with a single sip.

“I bet ya, twenty cans of blessed beer, we shall tear their rosy - cosy underpants up!” said the old farmhand with an alcoholic wave of breath that could kill every germ on his muddy Wellingtons.

“That’s a bet!” said Burton with a malicious smile.

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That frozen evening of 21 December, Greg Masters had no mood for writing. He was all alone in a huge, ice-cold manor house, because he returned from his trip to America two days earlier than he estimated, having forgot to inform his housekeeper in time to prepare the stay. All along the afternoon after his return, he felt a peculiar –and at the same time, very profound– concern. It was a premonition so unprecedented, as just the one that he had experienced at the office of the publishing house that worked forty-five years ago, one November morning. It happened just a few minutes before he met Karen –and that sensual, black dress– for the first time in his life. Although he was a seldom drinker, he felt a strong desire to warm up his guts –and even more his solitude–, because, for six years after that horrible car crash, he lacked unbearably his wife’s presence.

With a shaky hand he put one inch of whiskey in a crystal glass and brought it to his lips. Then, he did a walk through the huge living room where he had spent countless evenings writing, with the company of thousands of his books, his showcases with the priceless “banned” manuscripts and of course his rare “cursed” artifacts, for whose

“supernatural powers” he doubted a lot. When he approached the fireplace, he caressed gently –as he always used to– the wooden frame of the portrait depicting a smiling blond woman who was no other than the woman he loved more than anything else in his life. His wife and greatest fan: Karen, the ultimate!

And *that night*, Greg Masters felt as alone as he had never been in the last six years.

He took another sip, feeling it flush like liquefied velvet on his throat. His gaze pinned in the portrait: Karen smiled casually, revealing her shiny, pearl teeth, while her blond hair was blowing in the evening breeze. Seventeen years ago, at the bottom left of the frame, he had written with a gold marker some lyrics for their wedding anniversary:

*Just like two very leaves
Forced apart by
The autumn blows*

*We shall be joined forever
By a loving touch
And a white rose*

And then, as though he was afraid that Karen would be aware of his disappointment and anger, he turned his back on the portrait and glanced at the thousands of volumes that made the shelves of his oak bookcase to bend. Furious like a wild boar, he began to batter with his fists the library and to toss his precious books and notebooks on the floor. He refilled his glass and downed a big sip. He was totally upset and his heart was beating fast. Extremely fast.

He cursed Death; the one who had inspired him so many times to write his scary books and to become famous and rich; the one who stole Karen from him. He cursed and anathematized fate, rot, old age, illness and the absolute weakness of man in front of his destiny. He cursed and damned until he noticed that somewhere among the books a yellow card printed with faded typewriter characters, fell softly like a rocking feather between his shoes. He leaned to pick it up. It was something he had seen over twenty years; something he had almost erased from his memory:

ITEM #327
“THE WHITE ROSE OF PRAGUE”

STARTING PRICE: 8,000 French francs.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION: Dried rose sealed within a pyramid shape compact case of translucent glassy material.

DETAILS: It was discovered in 1859 in the underground warehouse of Vlasta Kralice, the famous Prague wholesale merchant. The X-rays revealed that the content of the translucent Roman glass case is a dried rose of indeterminate age.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION: Anthropology Professor Philip von Bombast says in his *Atrusca Disciplina*: “In accordance with the scanty papers of Etruria and of course the Liber Lintaeus of Zagreb, the White Rose of Life is a work of the famous necromancer Alsophocus from Erongill, who lived 2,800 years ago. It is said that the rose is capable of bringing any dead person to life, as long as he who uses it will pay Tvath, the goddess of resurrection, with what is most valuable to him. Unfortunately, there is no further information on how to use the rose. Probably, the artefact, before passing into the possession of Kralice, belonged to Dr. John Dee.

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The match ended. Hibernian won over Hearts. Burton lost the bet and walked away from the service cabin in a very bad mood. The old McGregor, totally drunk, had already fallen asleep sitting in his rickety rocking chair, snoring so loudly that he could wake up all the cows sleeping in the next byre.

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Greg Masters remembered the white rose, which, was certainly the most rare and controversial possession of his collection. It was the only acquisition that unlike the rest, he had hidden in the basement of the farmhouse because the milky pyramid –which he had bought for many thousands French francs at an auction held in a very suspicious underground apartment in Paris– had something on it which really scared him.

And, *that night*, he felt that the rose was summoning him.

He wore a heavy coat, grabbed a large flashlight and a ragged rusty key from the secretary of the entrance, and walked out of the house in the frozen night to enter the small metal door that led to the basement. In a few minutes he stood in front of the secret niche where he had hidden the White Rose of Prague.

The glass case had neither hinges nor locks, nor anything else that indicates that it can be opened in a different way beyond its breaking. The writer's gaze spotted instantly a fallen brick on the floor. For a moment he struggled, deeply troubled if it was right to break the crystal, but after a deep breath, he smashed one corner of the pyramid.

He had seen and touched dried flowers many times in his life, but that one was something completely different. It did not look like a common dehydrated yellowish or brown flower, but on the contrary, resembled with a whitish rose that only Praxiteles could have sculpted in Pentelic marble in every detail.

Masters picked the dried blossom up through the shards of the milky glass as carefully as he could. The rose appeared to be as durable as paper and this fact gave him the courage to caress the rose with his fingers without the fear that it will dissolve.

The feeling that the touch left on his fingers was something beyond strange. At first, it was so cold that it made him shudder. But after a while his fingers sank into the deep grooves between the petals, looking for something he did not even know. He instantly remembered Karen. It was like caressing her face, her cheeks and of course, the wrinkles that so much he had adore through the years.

A tear rolled over his cheek and ended up between the dried petals. And then, this miracle happened: he began to feel a sensible heat on his

fingers, as if the rose was draining his body temperature at a rapid pace. And after a few more moments he was given the impression that he was holding something alive, something that was breathing and pulsing like a small dormant animal.

He closed his eyelids in fear, for he did not dare to confirm whether that feeling was true or not. Inside his head he heard something that resembled the weeping of a female wailer who was on the other side of the universe and who, shortly after, acquired the status of his own thinking and repeated insistently the same question: *Whom? Whom? Whom?*

Masters understood immediately what he had to answer to that monotonous voice in his head. Continuing to have the eyelids safely shut, he whispered as slowly as he could: “My wife... Karen Masters...” and the voice replied almost instantly: *for thirty breaths... for thirty breaths ...*

The meaning was clear. Greg Masters realized at once that he could meet Karen only for as long as his thirty breaths would last, which he was determined to breath as slow as possible.

The weeping voice in his head continued: *what is the price... the price... the price...*

“The talent of the writer” he said, without even thinking about his response, “if the price of having my wife back for those thirty breaths was THAT I HAD NEVER WRITTEN A WORD in my life, then that would be a price I would gladly pay”.

It seemed to him that the answer was long to come for as long as a century, but in the end he heard the familiar whisper of that creepy voice: *Let it be ... Let it be ...*

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Old McGregor woke abruptly in the middle of the night for some inexplicable reason. On his dazed head roared an unusual, distant melody, like a song played on the radio many decades ago. The dim light of the yellow fluorescent lamp was still alight. He looked around the room in a strange way, as if the objects had acquired an unnatural glow of freshness; as if he was seeing them for the first time through the forty years he worked as labourer on the Burton farm.

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Greg Masters was being embraced by the utmost darkness. He assumed that the batteries of the flashlight would have been emptied, but he soon realized he was no longer in the basement of his home, as he could see everywhere around him, up and down, tiny stars pinned to a dark titanic dome. Among his hands he still held the strange flower, which emitted a soft, white aura. For a moment he feared he had fallen into a demonic trap that led him straight to death. And while he was absorbed in his trembling thoughts, gazing at that dome of unknown constellations, he heard a whisper coming forth from between his palms.

“Greg...”

The white rose had been replaced by Karen's face, which, in a gentle motion, stood upright, as if she had been kneeling before on a transparent floor. She was being bathed by a white breeze and just as she had seen her for the last time: in her sixties, with deep wrinkles around her eyes and lips, but with a look full of sweetness and devotion. Her short platinum hair blinked in the dark while she was smiling at him just as she did in the portrait. And although he could not believe that what he saw was true, he caressed her hair affectionately, and after a deep, slow breath his hands went down to touch her warm fingers.

Oh, my God, she's alive! He thought.

He hugged and squeezed her body tightly. He did not even find a suitable word to say to her but he only continued to tighten her back as if he wanted to merge her body with his in eternity. He noticed that she did the same.

After a few breaths he felt her body dissolving as if he were holding a window mannequin made of ash, which was shattering and getting lost in the black void that had been manifested by the mighty magic of the Alsophocus. Her form faded entirely as Masters exhaled for the thirtieth time.

“Karen—” he mumbled.

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McGregor went out to walk in the fresh air of the frozen December because he had been unusually dizzy since he woke up. He repeatedly tried to remember what had happened last night before he fell asleep, but the only thing he recalled was a blank frame. However, he felt great when the fresh air hit him in the face.

The brass weathercock on the stable roof was swinging with grace, singing with its familiar creak. McGregor stood for a moment and enjoyed the glimpses of the first sunbeams on the shuttered windows of the abandoned –for many decades so far– Elizabethan farmhouse mansion.

Suddenly, he remembered that Christmas is coming soon and that it would be a great idea if he picked up a few chestnuts from the farm and brought them to Mrs. Barlow; the elderly, lonely lady who dwelled a mile further on and who sympathized him a lot. He was so cheerful and eager that he intended to sing to Carine Barlow that unfamiliar song that had stuck in his mind since the very morning but he could not remember nor where he had heard it for the very first time, nor how long ago.

He moved further on, paddling vigorously his boots in the mud. Then he cheerfully began to sing:

*Just like two very leaves
Forced apart by
The autumn blows*

*We shall be joined forever
By a loving touch
And a white rose*

If he weren't illiterate and knew how to write, he would have made a beautiful Christmas card writing these verses for Carine. But, of course, this is another story

*To Graham Masterton,
the true knight,
who would gladly pay the price.*