

Jerome Charyn
Princess Hannah

*Ghosts. homeless men, dummy guns. real guns.□
Darkness which envelopes everything like an endless sea.□
And Harrington who in the midst of all this sights a mermaid□
with shining scales . . .*

HARRINGTON fell.

It wasn't cocaine. It wasn't alcohol. It was circumstance. His wife left him, took his kids away. Her name was Charlotte, and she had a college degree. Harrington had never gone to college. He could barely write a paragraph, and Charlotte was a great reader of hooks. That's what had attracted him to her: Charlotte was a witch with words. Harrington had his own silent poetry—the deep sadness in his face—but that wasn't enough. They were lovebirds for a little while. She bore Harrington two boys. But the boys soon turned against him. They must have recognized Charlotte's disenchantment with Harrington; they'd watched him beat her up. She ran to another city. He could have tracked her down, but he didn't have the resources. He always existed at the edge of things.

His job had been like that, and his marriage. He was a packer at a chocolate factory, earned decent money, but he was paid off the books. The factory loved to hire “ghosts” like Harrington. His wife had worked as a kindergarten teacher, covered the children and Harrington on her health plan, so he could drift, and now he had to drift alone.

He'd been sleeping with the boss's wife, Diane, who also worked at the factory. He would improvise, catch her in a closet. It was furtive and quick, but Diane must have squealed on him. Perhaps she was also sleeping with another man and used Harrington as

a scapegoat. The boss had a tribe of brothers and sisters, and this tribe slapped Harrington across the factory in front of all the employees.

He had welts on his face for weeks. He couldn't find a job. He had no references. He washed dishes for a while, but he would get into fights. Harrington lost his apartment. He moved in with an old high school buddy of his, Martin Hare, known as "the Scooter," because he was always scurrying around. Both of them were forty-one, and had dreams of making a fortune, but neither of them knew where to begin. They weren't gangsters or commercial pirates. Harrington was still handsome, in spite of the welts. Scooter was a gnome.

"We'll be rich," the Scooter would say. "You'll see."

They decided to rob the chocolate factory, so that Harrington could have his revenge on Stillwell, his boss. It was the Scooter's idea.

"It wouldn't work," Harrington said. "I've never used a gun."

"Come on," the Scooter said. "I know a toy shop. They have guns that look realer than the real thing."

"Like what?"

"The Colt Commander, Beretta Jetfire..."

Harrington couldn't understand a word, but he went to the toy shop, and Scooter was right. The guns in the window could frighten a hundred chocolate factories. Harrington bought plastic Colt Commanders for the Scooter and himself. Tuesday afternoon was the ripest time for a robbery. Stillwell would take out all the cash he collected from the factory's little retail shop and bring it to the bank. Harrington and the Scooter would wait for him in Halloween masks that Scooter had kept from childhood.

The masks were a little too tight. But they didn't really mind. They rehearsed the robbery, mapped out their positions as if they were preparing some kind of imbecilic ballet.

They stood at the side door in their masks, and when Stillwell appeared, both of them waved their tin guns and demanded Stillwell's cashbox. But they didn't see the pistol in the boss's pants. Stillwell shot the Scooter. Harrington struggled with him, managed to get the pistol away and bring the Scooter back home, but in his panic he'd forgotten all about the cashbox.

"Partner," the Scooter whispered, "we did good, didn't we?" And he died in Harrington's arms.

Harrington couldn't afford to bury him, and how could he circulate a dead man with a bullet in his side? He left the Scooter in his favorite chair, locked the door, and decided to live on the street.

Somebody grabbed Harrington's tin gun on his first night out, kicked him in the head while he was sleeping near a ventilation duct of a midtown office building. "Hey, motherfucker," a voice crooned at him in the dark, "that's my mattress." There was no mattress. There was a tiny heated space, in the wild of winter. His chin was bleeding, and he didn't even have the consolation of a toy gun. He wandered across the city. He had no more plans. He was like a blind laborer in a dream. Some cursed intuition must have guided him to the downtown processing center of the city's public shelters. It wasn't shut in the middle of the night, but he couldn't find one official to feed him, only a nurse with a Band-Aid.

Men with stranger eyes than his own began to collect around six a.m. A woman

with a slightly scarred face interviewed him. She was kind to Harrington. She let him have a doughnut and a cup of coffee. He couldn't tell her about the killing, talk about his job at the chocolate factory. He was like a stateless person. He'd lost his Social Security card, couldn't recall the number.

“How can I process you, Mr. Harrington?”

“My wife worked for the city. I was covered on her plan.”

“Where is your wife?”

“Disappeared.”

The woman must have pitied Harrington. She encouraged him to invent a Social Security number.

“Lie a little,” she said. He was processed in half an hour. A bus brought Harrington and fifty other homeless men to an old armory on a hill above a housing project. He entered an enormous barrack and couldn't believe the smell. It was like living in an ocean of unwashed feet. There were hundreds of beds in the barrack, which probably had housed the National Guard—weekend soldiers who would train at the armory with toy guns like Harrington had used in his botched heist. But there weren't any weekend soldiers now. The barrack was overheated, and Harrington should have rejoiced. He was out of the cold. But the heat only multiplied the stench that rose up off the walls and made his nostrils quiver and his eyes burn.

The guards wouldn't leave him alone. They touched Harrington's pockets, searching for loot, told him he couldn't sleep in his bed during the afternoon unless he paid them a toll.

“Sunlight money,” they said.

Harrington blinked. They tapped his knees with their billy clubs. People aren't supposed to occupy their beds until the sun goes down."

But the beds were packed with sleeping men, who blocked out the sunlight with their blankets, built their own tents with filthy sheets.

"Did they all pay their toll?" Harrington asked, pointing to the tents.

"Certainly," the guards said. And they tapped his knees a little harder. But they were helpless scavengers compared to the little band of men that ruled the shelter, calling themselves the "the Constables," because several of them were ex-cops who'd spent time in jail. They all had other residences, but they operated out of the armory, where they could rob, sell drugs, and ion their own prostitution ring. They bribed the guards, smuggled in women, and used transvestites at the shelter as their sexual slaves. The transvestites adored Jacob Faust, the Constables' chief. He was a one-eyed maniac who'd been with the military police. He had a Colt Commander tucked inside his pants, and it wasn't made of tin. He terrorized the whole shelter, demanded sexual favors, and when he first saw Harrington, he went insane.

"I'm in love," he announced to his gang. He walked up to Harrington, handed him a dress. "You'll wear this for me."

But Harrington was much too tired to be afraid; an anger had been building in him. He pulled the Colt Commander out of Jacob's pants, aimed it at an invisible sky, and pulled the trigger. A chandelier fell from the ceiling like some bald, prehistoric bird. All its crystal was already gone. No one even remembered that the armory had a chandelier. And Harrington could have been a magical hunter who'd come into the Constables' lives.

“You wear the dress,” he screamed at Jacob Faust.

“What?”

“Wear the dress.”

Jacob Faust put the dress on over his shirt and pants. The Constables started to laugh. Jacob walked out of the shelter and never returned. But Harrington couldn't take his place. The Constables wouldn't approach some crazy man who'd shot a chandelier. Harrington was outside whatever quilted community had formed at the shelter. He ate breakfast alone, and he couldn't afford to sleep. The Constables would have smothered him with pillows or stabbed him with their knives. He had to lie like a stone man in his bed at night, listen to every noise, clutch the Colt Commander in his fist. He would think of Charlotte and his children, of Scooter with blood leaking out the side of his belly, of that woman at the processing center with scars on her face. The scars had lent her a curious beauty . . . and a curious light. Why hadn't he asked the woman her name?

But he wouldn't have survived the shelter very long. He dozed once, dreamt of the woman—she was dancing at the center, taking off her clothes—and the Constables were upon him with their pillows. He had to shoot out one of the windows, or they wouldn't have gone back to bed.

Harrington had to laugh. He was always attracted to damaged goods. Crippled toads, women with scars on their face. He stole out of the armory in the middle of the night with his Colt Commander. He had no cash. He crossed two bridges and reached the processing center as the sun was rising. But the woman wasn't there . . . He asked the other officials about her.

“You know. The nice lady . . . with the scar.”

“Ah, Princess Hannah. She doesn’t work for Human Resources. She’s only a volunteer. She comes and goes.”

“But what’s her real name?”

“Hannah. We started calling her the princess, because she’s kind to all the crapheads...”

“Does she have a Social Security number?”

“Don’t start getting personal.”

“But where can I find her?”

“In the streets, looking for scumbags to save.”

Harrington searched the streets, but he couldn’t find Princess Hannah. He was only one more bum in an army of bums, and that army seemed to have expanded while Harrington had spent two nights in a public shelter. He belonged to a planet of homeless men. But Harrington stopped worrying. He had a Colt in his pants. He could sleep under a pile of newspapers, and if anybody disturbed him, he’d pull out his gun.

Harrington was always hungry. It didn’t matter how many bottles he stole off the milk trucks. Milk was never enough. He scavenged, like other homeless men, learned about the little depots where bakers dumped their spoiled goods, but how many loaves of bread could he eat with rotten blue marks in the middle? He began using his Colt. At first he robbed homeless men who had a little more plunder than he did, and then Harrington picked off people coming out of the subway on winter nights. They never seemed to have much cash on them, and he couldn’t get rich during those raids; when one of the women swooned with Harrington’s gun in her face, he felt guilty and fetched her a glass of water.

“Please, I won’t harm you. I’m a homeless man.”

The woman blinked at Harrington, who ran back into the winter haze without her wallet. He wasn’t really much of a robber. But he had to do something about his hunger pains. His clothes started to rot. He couldn’t enter a restaurant or sit on the library to keep out of the cold. He was too ashamed of his shabbiness. He smashed the window of a men’s clothing shop in the midst of his fury. He didn’t enter the shop. He reached into the window and plucked some clothes off the mannequins’ backs. It was the first bit of fun he’d had in weeks. The mannequins didn’t cry; none of them was burdened with a silly human heart.

He went around like a gigolo in spring colors and Italian shirts and shoes. The shoes didn’t fit, and Harrington limped along, had bunions to deal with. But now he could go into the library, examine a couple of the books that Charlotte adored. He couldn’t get beyond the first paragraph. His concentration was shot. He’d become a creature of the wilderness.

He ate lots of sandwiches and fat pizza pies. He continued with his holdups. But he wouldn’t prey on women. Soon his Italian clothes were ragged, and he was more of a wolfman than ever. He considered blowing his brains out.

And then he saw a figure in a snowstorm, a limping man dressed in the finest clothes, and the man was strangely familiar. Harrington might have trouble with sentences, but he wouldn’t forget a face. Ghosts were wandering around in that storm, and Scooter’s ghost was among them.

Harrington nudged the ghost with his gun. “Gimme all you got.” The ghost glared at him. “With a toy gun?”

Harrington shot a hole into the crown of the ghost's hat.

"You son of a bitch," the ghost said. "You left me there to die. Didn't even call an ambulance."

"But you were dead," Harrington muttered. "I listened to your heart."

"You a doctor all of a sudden? You a specialist? Where'd you get that gun?"

"I took it off a bad guy ... Scooter, is it me who's dead? Or did you dance out of the fucking snow?"

"Dance?" the ghost said. "I'm a cripple because of you ... the neighbors found me, ran me over to the hospital. It was touch and go. I had to drink that liquid shit, the slop that drips into your veins. I lost my appetite, and I'll never get it back."

"But why are you limping?"

"I had a blood clot," the ghost said. "It turned into phlebitis."

"Did the cops ask you questions, Scooter?"

"I didn't snitch. I told 'em a robber came in through the window. They had to believe me. Who would invent such a story? I gave up my apartment. Fuck all the landlords. I'm living in a convalescent home. A lady looks after us."

"What kind of lady?"

"A lady," the ghost said. "But she's different. She suffered."

And Harrington felt a tingle rush down his spine, as if he had a serpent inside clothes. "Does she wear a scar on her face?"

The ghost's eyes began to pop. "Harrington, how did you guess?"

"And her name is Princess Hannah."

"Ssh, it's a secret. She handpicks us . . . the guys who convalesce. People take

advantage of her. She has to raise her own money. The city don't give her shit."

"I'm going with you, Scooter . . . to Princess Hannah."

"That's impossible," the ghost said. "You're not a cripple. Hannah wouldn't let you in."

It was a battered little mansion at the edge of a park, and Harrington felt sorry for the princess, who ran a convalescent home that needed to convalesce. She greeted him at the door, and he was still troubled by the beauty of her scars.

"Told him not to come," the Scooter said, jumping up and down on the wooden stairs. "He's certifiable. He put a hole in my hat."

But Harrington wasn't listening to the Scooter. "Hannah," he asked, "do you remember me?"

She had pieces of hair over her pale blue eyes. "How could I forget the man without a Social Security number?"

She was Harrington's height, and she had blond hair streaked with silver. The scars seemed to camouflage her age. She could have been a year or two younger than Harrington, or a bit older. He could almost feel her ample body under the dress she wore.

"He can't stay," the Scooter said. "He aint crippled. He aint even sick. And he treats his friends like dirt."

Hannah smiled. "But he's standing at our door."

"He tricked me. I didn't mean to bring him."

"I could use a handyman," Hannah said. "But I can't pay you a . . . just room and board."

“That’s all I need.”

He couldn’t take his eyes off Princess Hannah. The wound of his marriage was already gone.

He didn’t have to sleep in the dormitory. He had a room of his own. It was barely bigger than a closet, but he could dream without hearing garbled groans. His room was next to Hannah’s, and he’d go to bed imagining her body. He had to hide his erection at the dinner table. He’d follow her around, do whatever chore she demanded of him.

Hannah wasn’t licensed. She didn’t even have a doctor in the house. She was nurse and cook and den mother to cripples she’d find in the street. The city could have closed her down. But it didn’t care enough about the drifters in Hannah’s domain. She was tolerated: Princess Hannah. And Harrington was crazy, crazy in love.

He’d stutter when he talked, but he wouldn’t spy on her, peek into her room. The princess slept alone at night. She was a hermit like Harrington and the other refugees in the dormitory. She’d wander out of the mansion, wearing white gloves, and badger different philanthropists to fund her home. But they always refused her. Hannah would mimic them. “ ‘It’s brave of you, dear. If only you had a license . . . and a genuine nurse.’ ”

Hannah’s refugees would come up to her while she sat over her soup. “We’ll sell raffle tickets, we’ll get you some cash.” They’d stroke her silver and blond hair, surround her soup plate. It was only Harrington who held back. He could imagine the relentless electricity if he ever touched her hair.

His door opened one night. He had a visitor. He tried to conjure up Hannah’s perfume, but Harrington’s visitor hardly had a scent. He still wished it was her. The

visitor moved close in the dark, and Harrington's heart pumped and pumped until he caught the unmistakable whiff of laundry soap. "Scooter, what the fuck do you want?"

"Keep quiet. You'll wake the princess."

Harrington snapped on the light. Scooter's ears were glowing. He looked like a lantern. Harrington could have shot his eyes out and wouldn't have felt a thing.

"We have to take up a collection," Scooter whispered. "Have our own Salvation Army."

"How?"

"With your gun."

Harrington groaned. "Would you like a bullet on the other side of your belly?"

"Won't happen again. We were amateurs, with toy store stuff. Partner, nobody's gonna stop us with that Colt."

"Stop us, Scooter? Are you a general? It's not so easy to stick up a man. You have to look him in the eye."

"We'll look . . . can't you tell? The princess is desperate."

"She could give up the mansion, let us make our own little winter. Why's she so good to us?"

"It aint goodness. It's stronger than that. Hannah was ruined."

"What are you talking about? She could win a beauty contest."

"With that face ... and that body?"

"What does a runt like you know about Hannah's body?"

"Nothing. But I know it was ruined . . . her husband scalded her."

"Hannah has a husband?"

“She’s entitled,” Scooter said. “She wasn’t born in a convent. And her husband threw a big pot of boiling water at her. She was in the hospital for months . . . and then she lived out on the street, sucked on a bottle. No one took care of Hannah, so she built a home for people like herself.”

“But why’d Hannah’s husband do such a crazy thing?”

“He was jealous.”

“Come on,” Harrington said. “Jealousy doesn’t get you to throw pot at your wife.”

“Sure it does . . . that’s the downside of love.”

“And what’s the upside?”

“Perfect passion.”

“Some philosopher,” Harrington said. “Did you ever have perfect passion?”

“Once or twice. What about you?”

“Never. I never had it

“Then I pity you,” the Scooter said and walked out of Harrington’s room.

He couldn’t eat, couldn’t sleep. He had to deliver himself from his own acute ache. He didn’t have the nerve or the talent to confront Hannah, declare his love. He tried his wife’s way. With a note. It took him a week to scribble a few stinking lines.

Dear Hannah,

Your handyman loves you. Don’t be alarmed.

He wouldn’t do something uninvited. But if my message

bothers you, I will go.

Harrington

He left the note in Hannah's mailbox. He'd return to the mailboxes every hour to see if Hannah had retrieved the note. Finally, on his sixth trip, he saw that she'd emptied her mailbox. He still couldn't sleep. And all the while he did his chores, Hannah never mentioned the note.

She kept searching for patrons. She wore her white gloves. She wasn't unkind to Harrington, didn't punish him for his scribbles. But he couldn't leave the slightest dent in Hannah's life.

He would pace in his room all night, and for one instant he saw outside his own agony: Hannah's door was open. And Harrington followed the path of his own dreamless dream. He entered the Princess's room. She was lying under the covers, with Harrington's note in her fist. She didn't object when he crawled under her blanket. And she didn't attempt to hide her scars. They were like crooked silver lines. Hannah's scorched skin. She could have been made of phosphorous or beaten bits of silver and gold. And while he lay next to her, her heart cupped in his hand, he thought of the Scooter. Perfect passion. What's perfect passion compared to Princess Hannah?

She wasn't tender with Harrington outside the borders of her bed. He was the princess's handyman. He never sat with her at supper or tried to fondle Hannah while she was giving him instructions about his various chores. The refugees seemed to know about Harrington's nighttime excursions into the princess's room, but when they smiled at her, she wouldn't smile back. The princess was occupied with money matters. She couldn't pay the electric bill. Harrington disappeared for two hours and returned with a hundred

dollars. He'd taken the Scooter's advice and had become a highwayman. He'd cover his face with a handkerchief and rob whoever he could: motorcyclists, truck drivers, delivery boys . . . he even held up an entire bus, though he wouldn't interfere with grandpas and grandmas.

She didn't ask him where he got the money, didn't comment on the Colt inside his pants. But he couldn't seem to have a conversation with her. The words wouldn't come. And then he gathered up his courage, shut his eyes, and said, "Tell me about your husband, Hannah, please."

"There's nothing to tell. He was a son of a bitch."

"But if he hadn't scalded you, we might never have met."

"That's wonderful. Why don't you thank him, get in touch?"

"I didn't mean that. But Scooter said he was jealous, and—"

"Jealous of what? He stole from me. And when I caught him at it, he figured he would burn me alive."

"Hannah . . ."

"Stop talking, Harrington. Write me another letter."

"I can't. I'm poor with sentences."

"Not so poor," she said.

She brought him into her room. It wasn't even midnight. She undressed Harrington and then undressed herself. She was like a mermaid with silver on one side of her body. He kissed every silver wound.

Dear Hannah,

I dream in rainbows.

I trace all our scars in my sleep.

I'm a selfish man, in love with loving you.

I . . .

Harrington couldn't finish his letter. He had to play the highwayman. His princess couldn't settle with the butcher and her laundry service without his particular skills. But he was absentminded, thinking of words, when he should have concentrated on his next victim, his next mark. He put on his handkerchief mask a bit sloppily, half his mouth showing, and attacked a Chevrolet parked at the corner. If he hadn't been dreaming, he might have sniffed the plainclothesman inside the car.

"Friend," he said, like a pragmatic highwayman, "gimme your money, nice and slow."

The plainclothesman shot Harrington in the groin. Harrington slapped him on the head with his Colt. Then he limped away. It took him an hour to walk the ten blocks to Hannah's mansion. He was crying. She wouldn't be able to greet the butcher with cash in her hand.

. . . in love with loving you.

He got to the dormitory. He couldn't see a thing. Blood was in his eyes. The Scooter found him, screamed "Mother of God." And Hannah rushed over from her desk, where she was wishing away all her liabilities, all her debts. She reached out, and

Harrington tumbled into her arms. Ah, he felt secure against her damaged skin. He wasn't dreaming now. "Darling," she said, just before he died.