

White Dog

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Beauty and the Beast was the first story Mother ever read to me. I have read it myself a myriad times in a variety of forms and seen countless dramatic renditions of it. At each telling or showing or reading, I have felt, for a moment, a sense of contentment. That is, until I fathomed that this was a fairy tale and had nothing whatever to do with me. Oh, it's not just that it's a fairy tale--everything is a fairy tale from my vantage point--it's that the Beast is a man and I am a woman.

What difference? Merely this: An ugly man may be saved by character; even the most hideous of men, as the fairy tale illustrates, can be loved for kindness and humor and a host of other qualities that fall neatly into a package labeled 'inner beauty.' But an ugly woman ... well, I quickly learned that by no combination of graces or talents or virtues can she be considered lovely.

Humorists make a tired point of it:

"I've fixed you up with a date," says the sit-comedian.

"Oh?" responds the object of his largesse. "What's she like?"

"She has a great personality," he is assured.

Whereupon the charm-challenged moron moans tragically, "Oh, God! She's a bow-wow!"

The media assure us that the corollary is also true--a man will tolerate any amount of inanity and selfishness to adorn himself with Beauty; all stupidity can be forgiven it. In the female of the species, beauty can redeem a lack of character, but no amount of character can redeem a lack of good looks.

This is not to say that Gorgons don't have friends, for there is a certain type of male who will befriend the charmless female for no other reason that, early in life, she seems almost 'guy-like' in her gracelessness. Later, of course, he will abandon her, lest someone get the idea that they are an 'item,' but by this time, she will be much sought after by other, more attractive young women for the simple reason that they look good in comparison.

I've always thought the jealous Aphrodite was a fool not to have made Medusa her bosom buddy. How much simpler to have given the feckless Paris the choice between herself and the Gorgon--she'd have had the apple and the guy. Anyone stupid enough to even notice Medusa would have ended up as an ornamental coat rack in the goddess's front hall.

Am I comparing myself to Medusa? Yes, though I flatter myself that the comparison is favorable. After all, she turned men to stone for all eternity. My personal best is only five seconds.

Let me make it clear that I am not homely. (Now, there's a word! So old-world,

so comfortable-sounding--as if the woman in question were a favored but dilapidated love seat.) Nor am I unattractive, nor ugly. I am nothing short of grotesque. Hideous. I enter a room and conversations cease, heads turn and quickly return. Men turn to stone.

I was four, I think, when I became aware of this. My mother's and father's eyes had that myopia that is peculiar to parents, but in the eyes of strangers, teachers and family friends, I saw distress, veiled revulsion, and pity. In the eyes of other little girls lurked something like horror, while boys peeked at me with speculative amusement. I was slow to understand this, until I came to realize how different my mirror image was from theirs. They had glossy, colorful hair, and eyes of brown or blue or gray. Their cheeks were rosy, their lips pink, their faces a balance of normal human features.

I am shrunken, and colorless, as if water runs in my veins instead of blood. My flesh is like rice paper, its fine mesh of veins clearly visible, and my hair--if that really is the word for such an anarchistic mop--has all the vibrancy of cellophane. One of my young faux-friends referred to me once as the 'visible girl.' It stuck.

Oh, and my eyes--how can I possibly describe them? They are not gray or hazel or even albino white, but are as devoid of color as a glass of water. "Jesus Lord!" exclaimed my friend of the 'visible girl' epithet, "you've got puries!" "Oooo-ee-ee-oooh," school mates intoned when they passed me in the hall. "Spooky," the girls called me, and, "Ghost." The boys were worse: "Pasty-face" and "Slug" were two of their less innovative offerings. When I was about nine I realized that I looked, more or less, like the archetypal Whitley Streiber alien. I had by then lost count of how many Roswell jokes I'd been the butt of.

Fortunately, parents' eyes are calibrated differently than the rest of mankind's. I was my mother and father's little Moonbeam. Mother could gaze at my alien features and tell me I was beautiful. I swear to this day, she meant it.

I believe that's where I first got the idea that I could affect the way people saw me. Yes, my parents perceived me through a filter of love and pity, but I also provided a filter--the desperation with which I needed and desired their love and approval. Desperation demanded that I perform for them, that I be their happy little Moonbeam, an ethereal will-o-the-wisp. Not quite understanding the nature of parental love, I believed that I won it by being as engaging as I was grotesque. That belief instilled in me the confidence I needed to win the regard of others who were not so impossibly blinded. Pity, sympathy--call it what you will--I learned, over the years, to milk human kindness for all it was worth.

I'm not bitter about that. Far from it. While I undoubtedly brought out the worst in those disposed toward cruelty, I brought out the best in anyone with even an ounce of compassion. I suppose in an abstract way, you could say I helped make them better human beings.

Of course, there are always those disinclined to kindness. They were harder to deal with. Their regard could wound; their words could draw blood. Such a one was Bobby Bane (an ironic and appropriate name, if ever there was one). If there was one bona fide bully in our tiny neighborhood, it was Bobby, and he established himself as such from the moment his family moved in.

I heard rumor of him before we met. He had beaten up my friend Robin--who was twice my size--and taken away her bike and the popsicle her mother had given her as an afternoon snack. I was impressed. Robin was my own personal bully. So often did she terrorize me--leveling me with a push and taking whatever toy I happened to be playing with--that I now lay down on the sidewalk the moment I saw her coming. I considered Robin my friend solely by virtue of the fact that she did not call me names.

Robin was not the only child Bobby Bane flattened. Soon, neighborhood Moms were in turmoil. They confronted Bobby's mother without satisfaction.

"Why," I asked my own mother, "is Bobby so mean?"

"Well," she said thoughtfully, "I suspect he's very lonely. His family's moved twice in the last year. He doesn't have any friends."

That, I thought, was perfectly understandable, and unlikely to change any time soon.

I met Bobby for the first time at the bottom of my driveway where I, in the floppy hat my mother tied to my head to shield my translucent skin from the Sun, was taking a group of Teddy Bears and dolls for a drive in my Radio Flyer. One moment I was alone, the next, I was facing a brush-cut, glaring terror at least twice my bulk and three years my senior.

His eyes widened when I looked into them, but the words he had prepared for me came out steady and strong. "Gimme the wagon, Spook," he said, and I was delighted that he had chosen such a gentle epithet. Still, his fists clenched and unclenched as if it were all he could do to refrain from tearing me limb from bloodless limb.

I did not lie down. Nor did I attempt to flee. Instead, I drew very close to Bobby Bane--close enough that he could count the tiny blue veins beneath my skin. Close enough that he could imagine that my transparent eyes afforded him a view of the inside of my alien skull. I tilted my head, looked up into his face and said, "I know you don't really want to hurt me. You're a nice little boy. You just need a friend. Can I be your friend?"

Bobby Bane turned and left without uttering another word. The next time I saw him, he invaded a small group of neighborhood children just as Robin's mom was passing out homemade cherry popsicles speared on little plastic forks. From that moment, he was just another neighborhood kid. The Moms figured his parents must have 'had a little talk' with him, but I knew, as our eyes met over our bright cherry ice cubes, that his transformation had not arisen from anything his parents had said.

Mother also knew this, having witnessed my confrontation with him from our kitchen window. "Meg," she said when I told her how Bobby had joined our play group, "you have a way about you."

A way about me. In my young mind, Way translated to 'power' or 'magic.' The fairy tales I read were full of such things, and they inspired hope. An ugly princess might possess such goodness as would grant her the gift of Beauty. I was certain my powers, such as they were, did not run to literally making myself beautiful, but I now knew that they would allow me to wring compassion out of the kind, and tolerance out of the surly. Perhaps, in some sense, my Way was a veil behind which I could hide my repulsiveness, and if I could not transform myself, perhaps I could transform the way others saw me.

As I grew older, I discarded the idea of magical powers, of course, but I still recognized that what Mother had said was true--I did have a way about me. By the time I was in junior high school, I had concocted the theory that what I had exercised on Bobby Bane and countless others since, was a shrewd understanding of the human psyche. Everyone needed acceptance, even the seemingly needless.

The history of my religion provided me with a totem for my ability to parry the mindless, visceral hostility toward the alien: The White Dog.

It is recorded of the Son of the Founder of my faith that when He, in His twilight years, journeyed through the United States, He would travel the neighborhoods of New York in a carriage accompanied by a handful of believers. In one of the affluent neighborhoods on His accustomed route lived an elderly woman who had shown such hostility for the Master, as He was called, that the believers avoided her at all costs, finding other paths for Him to take to His appointments.

The Master, on the other hand, would seek her out, making certain that His carriage passed her house every morning where she could be seen taking the Sun on her front porch. While the believers cringed and prayed, the Master would smile and wave at the dowager, who would only glare at this Persian 'mystic,' then avert her gaze, her hands stroking and smoothing the silky fur of the small, white dog in her lap.

One morning, after He had been rebuffed repeatedly by the hostile old woman, the Master bid the driver stop before her home. Over the protests of His companions, He debarked and strolled up the path to the front porch. Seating himself across from His enemy, He noted how very beautiful was the little white dog and inquired as to what kind of dog it was. Well, the woman loved that dog above all things, as the Master obviously knew. His praise of the animal unleashed such a flood of delight from her that she regaled her unwelcome guest with tales of the little animal's cleverness.

The Master was late for His appointments that day, but He had made a great friend. When the believers begged to know how He had transformed the forbidding harpy into a welcoming angel, He told them about her beloved pet. "Everyone,"

He said, and I imagined a twinkle in the deep azure eyes, "has a White Dog."

They did. And I learned to find those favored pets unerringly and parlay them into, if not friendship, at least acceptance. When a first meeting threatened to be hurtful to me, I invoked the White Dog and diffused the potential for injury. Sometimes with a smile, sometimes with a word, sometimes with (I swear) a mere thought. 'Spook' became an endearment or, at least, a good-natured tease on the tongues of my agreeable conquests. I fit safely in.

When I reached high school, things changed. Fitting safely in was no longer enough. My male 'buddies' had become single-minded automatons powered by testosterone and failure fear, and my girlfriends were beginning to disappear into the nether realm of dating and hushed, giggle-punctuated conversations about the relative merits of this or that hormone-flushed, peach-faced 'stud.'

For a while it seemed as if my only role in all of this would be as a shill when my merely plain companions toured the local mall. (As I said, Doraverage, it pays to take Dorugly with you when shopping for potential princes.) I was alone so often, so suddenly, cloistered with my books, my parents were alarmed.

"What's the matter, Moonbeam?" Daddy asked me one solitary Saturday night. "Did you and Cora have a falling out? You're usually inseparable."

"Cora," I said, pretending not to care, "has a date."

"Cora?" Daddy repeated, and the corner of his mouth curled.

Cora, it should be noted, was overly plump, horribly myopic and tended to bray like a mule when surprised into laughter. Her round face was shiny with adolescence and her eyes behind her thick lenses had the naked, strained look of a perpetual squinter. She was my best friend and I adored her. Until now, we had done everything together.

"Cora," I affirmed, and felt a swift stab of betrayal. I had as good as gotten her that date. I'd been with her when she met him in the yogurt shop at the mall. I got Frozen Raspberry Truffle all over my best sweater and she got the klutz who put it there. Maybe, I thought, I could rent myself to other dateless high school girls. I could just see my billboard ad: Getting late--no prom date? Call 1-800-OGRE. We guarantee speedy results. I could call the business Rent-a-Wretch.

Daddy patted one knobby knee, then ruffled my lately close-cropped thatch of cellophane which Mother (bless her heart) had attempted to dye strawberry blonde. I so resembled a peach-colored dandelion that I expected to see the fuzz float and scatter to the four corners of my room.

"Don't let it get you down, Megan," Daddy told me. "I expect you'll be dating any day now--and way too soon for your old man. You have a way about you," he reminded me with a smile, and left me alone with Charlotte Brontë.

I did have a way about me, and up till now, I had employed it only in the interest of survival. But might it do more? Just how powerful, I wondered, as

my mind returned to the gothic, was the White Dog? While I no longer believed in magic, I had also discarded the idea that I was a natural psychologist. I now was leaning toward the belief that I had psychic powers for which the White Dog was a focus. Then too, I had read much of tribal cultures, totems and animal guides. There was certainly a healthy dose of that in my adolescent philosophy.

I lay awake that night in a moral stew. I had invoked my totem purely in self-defense, never for self-aggrandizement. I had used it to dissuade attack, to promote tolerance and never to inveigle or seduce. I had never used it selfishly--had I?

When I went to sleep the situation was black and white--self-defense was acceptable, coercion was not. When I awoke, black and white had merged into a pleasant shade of gray. Self-defense and coercion were all but indistinguishable. And equally innocent, I assured myself. After all, I intended no harm to anyone. I only wanted a date. My manipulation would be guiltless because my motive was pure--salvation through right motivation.

I set to my task shyly at first--prodding, probing, the way I have seen chimps poke at a log full of ants. There was no one boy I doted on--quite frankly, I had considered forming such attachments ridiculous and futile. So, I issued a general appeal, replacing my habitual mental suggestion (I'm average, just average, ignore me) with a new one (I'm pretty, I'm charming, please notice me.)

You expect to hear that it didn't work, don't you? That I discovered it was mere winsomeness and warm-heartedness that made people befriend me. You're wrong. It did work. I got, not just one offer of a date, but two.

By the time my senior prom rolled around, I was dating even more steadily than Cora, who had lost weight and gotten contact lenses. But after the senior prom, I put this more powerful manifestation of my totem aside. I no longer suggested to all and sundry that I was anything more than someone they should feel amiably disposed toward.

You may wonder why. Hadn't I virtually assured myself a normal life? No. That was a chimera. Certainly, I could suggest to someone that I was a princess, win their regard, perhaps even enter into a relationship with them. But the thought of creating such a fairy tale and then having to live in it terrified me utterly. What if I should attract someone so much he should ask me to marry him? And what if I were to fall in love with him and that love were to make me so stupid as to say 'yes?' Would there not come a time when I would let the veil fall in the desperate hope that my husband would play Roxanne to my Cyrano and love me for me and not because of the White Dog? How would he feel when he realized that his princess was really a frog? How would you feel?

That prospect numbed me so much that I spent my entire post high school summer sequestered with the first fruits of the Sarpy County library system.

I left home in the fall to attend a college in upstate New York, where a fine

arts program allowed me to surround myself with beauty both natural and man made. I had a few friends, mostly female. To men I was more than transparent; I was invisible.

This was fine for most of my first semester. For another half semester I hung on in diligent self-denial, feeling noble and self-sacrificing, the power of the White Dog lying untapped. It was a lonely existence, the life of a perpetual witness--observer of everything, participant in nothing.

Finally, I succumbed. I gave in to the lure of being at least a fringe participant. I'd be fine, I reasoned, as long as I understood that this was a fairy tale and that at intervals I would be obliged to awaken myself, whisk a wrist across my brow and exclaim, "It was only a dream! Only a dream!"

I was content to haunt the fringes, at first, but of course that didn't last. Life is addictive. I could not resist the temptation to imbibe. I started my fall by merely suggesting that I was not only vivacious and winsome, but cute. That garnered me friends of both sexes and a role in one of those lighthearted groupings of young people that are the perpetual stuff of sitcoms. It was a happy association, a cozy rabble of art students who did nearly everything together, who saw each other through thick and thin, and who did not begin to pair off in earnest until the middle of their senior year.

The first pairing was within the group and hardly changed the dynamic at all, but the second brought a new face into the crowd, left only three singles and sounded the death knell of our carefree band.

I was saddened by it all, but also profoundly and painfully relieved. It meant I would never face the post-graduation good-byes, the empty promises to write, to call, to reunite once a year at that special place. When I graduated, I shared tearful good-byes with no one. My parents were all smiles as they watched me accept my diploma and helped me move my belongings to an apartment in Queens. I had already gotten a job at a respected art gallery in Manhattan, which was where I met Simon Bruce and fell irretrievably in love.

He was one of the gallery's clients, a talented, prolific artist with a broad range that somehow still managed to embody unique style. You could not see one of Simon's paintings and mistake it for anyone else's work. He used primaries as well as pastels, he rendered the dark and atmospheric as convincingly as he did the light and airy. His paintings were sharply realistic or they were whimsically surreal. He painted landscapes with as much conviction as he did portraits, but he did not consider them landscapes. All his work, he pointed out to me, was about people. And it was, I realized. Even in the most overwhelming work of natural or sur-natural beauty, there was a person. And that person, in Simon's eyes, was the focus of the painting, no matter what position they occupied on the canvas.

He was as vivid as his work, with hair the color of old gold and sea green eyes that could melt me at thirty paces. I was smitten, both with Simon and with his art. And, in that fragile and exalted state, I considered the

unthinkable--pursuing the chimera. Then, I did more than consider it; I did it.

I no longer had any beliefs about my 'powers,' other than that they existed. I exploited the White Dog shamelessly--no, untrue, there was shame and I felt every morsel of it. But not enough--not nearly enough--to make me hesitate or halt. As we spoke of painting, I impressed upon him that I was, myself, a work of art--not merely pretty, but ravishingly, heart-breakingly beautiful. I knew I could attract him, of course, but could I make him fall in love with me?

Mornings: He dropped by the gallery with coffee and muffins. Afternoons: He happened by more and more often just in time for my lunch break. Finally, one night, he came by and asked me out to dinner.

Three months after our first official date, he took me on a carriage ride through Central Park. It was a crisp autumn evening and the moon hung over the Chrysler building like an errant balloon whose string had tangled with the spire. It occurred to me as we drove through the silky night that I must be nearly invisible beneath the moon--colorless light on colorless hair and skin. If he painted it, the work would be called 'The Courting of the Ghost Maiden.' The thought nearly made me giggle and then it made me pause and wonder how he saw me this night--how he saw me any night. I had no idea how I looked to the people I used my Way with. I never held in my mind an exact image when I 'broadcast' my suggestions. They were amorphous, never specific.

As we drew to the end of our ride, to a place near the restaurant where he had made dinner reservations, I suddenly felt the evening groan under the weight of moment.

"Megan," he said, and took my hand and turned his face to me.

My heart stopped in my breast. Oh, dear God. Here it was--the moment of truth. I was suddenly terrified and practiced the word 'no' mentally over and over.

"Megan, marry me?"

I opened my mouth and the word 'yes' fell out into his hands. I tried to make myself take it back, but I could not, so I cried what he took for tears of joy and cursed my own weakness.

I lived out the night in a state of siege, held hostage by my love for him and horror at what I had allowed to happen. It was no use saying that only I would be hurt by my deception. If he ever discovered the truth about me, he would be hurt. I considered dropping my fa-ade. Several times that evening and all the evenings that followed, I came close to doing it, but I couldn't bear the thought of how he might react.

Finally, one morning, I awoke with a suitable plan. I would let the veils drop gradually. That way there would be, for Simon, no sudden shock of revulsion, but merely a gradual cooling of ardor and the puzzled sensation of having just arrived someplace without knowing how he had gotten there. It would be no less painful for me, perhaps, and would only prolong the inevitable, but he would be spared me breaking off the engagement while he yet thought himself in love with

me.

Having made this sensible decision, I did not pursue it as sanguinely as I daydreamed. Did you imagine I would? Any number of things stood between me and the detachment I aspired to. First and foremost, I loved Simon. And I wanted to believe that he loved me--me, not the phantasm. Sometimes, I would tell myself that, of course he really loved me because he was, after all, a man of great spiritual insight and maturity. And then I would find myself raging at him, for naturally, being a man, his physical attraction to me was the cornerstone of the relationship and the originating impulse for anything else he might feel. And that being the case, the removal of that cornerstone would cause the immediate collapse of everything.

The war waged daily in my heart: Simon, Good and True versus Simon, Frail and Male. That was the \$64,000 question which, thanks to inflation, had increased tenfold in value: Confronted with my grotesque reality, Roxanne, will you yet love me? Really, after being so betrayed, would he even like me?

In the weeks leading up to our wedding--a legendary thing I believed in with the same certainty that I believed in Avalon--I began to wish I had never called upon the White Dog to win Simon. And I waffled. Oh, how I waffled. Every time we met, I was going to begin dropping the veils. And every time we met I thought of a reason I should wait until the next time we met.

Ultimately, it was Simon who provided what was at once the most perfect and painful reason to put off the inevitable. He asked to paint my portrait.

Well, you can imagine (or perhaps you can't) the gamut of emotions that stampeded through me then. Terror--of what, I have no idea. Pleasure--it was, after all, a loving gesture. Curiosity--my ultimate undoing.

As I said, I had no idea how others saw me. I knew only that I could make myself attractive to them. I'd heard my hair compared to moonlight, my skin to milk, my eyes to a misty pool. (Yes, even I had the occasional male friend who considered himself a poet. I have the hastily scribbled napkin-verse to prove it.) I knew my physical self only from mirrors and rare photographs. Both of these are unrelentingly cruel in their honesty.

I wanted to see the portrait and I did not want to see it. Want won. I would not withdraw my veils until after it was complete, I told myself, so I could know just how strong were my powers of suggestion.

I sat for him in the evenings in his studio where he could manage the waning light so that it did not cover me with carnival colors. The light was gold and it was silver and it lasted for perhaps twenty minutes in the state he required. He would not let me see the painting, I knew, until it was finished. Simon never showed unfinished work to anyone.

After about two weeks of nightly sitting, my patience began to wane as my curiosity waxed. "Isn't it nearly done?" I asked.

"Nearly," he said. "Just a few more evenings."

But a few more evenings stretched into a week of evenings, then a week and a half. I have some self-control. In this case, it was abetted by my knowledge that my unveiling must begin the very moment the portrait's did. As much as I thirsted to see myself through Simon's eyes, I dreaded it. Not only would it end us (unless Simon were, indeed, the saintly Simon of my fairy tale), but it would, once and for all, establish the exact width of the gulf between Megan the Real and Megan the Imagined.

I have some self-control, I say, but not nearly enough to counterbalance either my curiosity or my penchant for flirting with pain. I still had not decided, as I surreptitiously entered Simon's darkened studio one night after a sitting, whether I would drop my veils one by one or all at once.

Do it gently, bid one voice. Let it fade naturally.

Get it over with, prodded another. Cut the cord and get on with life and don't ever do anything this idiotic again. (There's a promise I could never make in good conscience.)

I slipped into the studio as silently as a shaft of moonlight and took care to close the door behind me before touching the dimmer on the wall. The lights rose, revealing the easel with its draped canvas. I was resolute, and made my steps to it certain. I stood facing it for only a moment before reaching up and flipping aside the linen drape.

I have no words to describe the sight or the feelings it evoked. Thunderstruck. Overwhelmed. Numbed. None of these things come close to that paralyzed, chaotic, silent shriek of emotion. Cold and heat struck me in turns--my cheeks burned and were bloodlessly icy. I raised my hands to them, but my numb flesh felt nothing.

Caught on the canvas in a wash of silver-gold, was the same pathetic creature that inhabited my mirror. And yes, I reminded myself, the real world. Simon had painted me as I was--a Spielbergian alien with stick arms, huge bottomless eyes, fright-pale shock wig and see-through flesh.

In my struggle for meaning, I didn't hear the studio door open. "Do you like it?" he asked from behind me.

I half turned, then stopped myself. "I'm ... overwhelmed," I said, honestly. My voice shook.

"You didn't answer my question." He moved to stand beside me. "I think it's a very good likeness. Do you?"

"Too good," I quipped, then, "Is that really the way you see me?"

"I suppose it must be."

I let go of the White Dog, let it escape--lick, bark and howl.

"It's the way my eyes see you, at any rate. But it has to be filtered through the heart, doesn't it? That," he added, stepping around to face me, "was what I

wanted to get on canvas. I tried, but I think I failed."

I have never wanted to cover my face so badly in my entire life. I started to raise my hands to do it, but he stopped me.

"What's wrong, Meg?"

Did I try to explain the White Dog? Did I try to make him believe I had these powers that had worked on everyone but him? "I had no idea," I finally managed to say, "that I was so grotesque to you."

"Grotesque?" His eyes went past me to the painting. "No, Megan. Unusual. Exotic. Other-worldly. Never grotesque. Look again."

I did. And I saw that I--the painted I--was part of a landscape that was not, Simon would have reminded me, really a landscape at all. The eyes were not just eyes, they were mirrors, and the image that repeated in them was a cloud-draped moon. The pale hair faded into snow-covered hills. The mouth had a Mona Lisa tilt to it and lips that seemed poised to speak or laugh. The only real color in the picture, which was almost stark in its Sun, Moon and midnight palette, was in a rose held breast high, cradled in the bloodless hands as if being offered to the viewer. It was a red rose and at its center was a tiny, semi-circular hearth in which a fire blazed welcome.

I realized something about Simon in that moment. Simon did not paint people into landscapes, he painted the landscapes within people--landscapes in which they moved and lived as surely as they moved and lived in the world outside.

I realized something about my own internal landscape too, of course, but such things are best left unsaid. What I will say is that I was forced to abandon my cynicism. What the Prophets have said is true after all, that what is in a person's heart--their inner landscape--is more important in life and love and loyalty than the outer one, at least among those who are aware of such things.

With Simon's arms around me I leaned to look more closely at the hearth-side scene. At the foot of the chair--a splash of white.

"Is that a dog?"

He chuckled. "I don't know why I put that there. Pure whimsy, I guess. It just seemed ... homey. Welcoming. Is it silly?"

"No, not silly. Not silly at all," I said, and began to wonder about the existence of Avalon.