

Anna come back

Fiction by George Jamieson

In Dreams

BY ALLISON McLAREN

In my dreams I see
lunfs
Little leering lunfs
in my dreams
Do you ever see lunfs?
or yellow yorbs?
Or don't you dream?

oooooooooooo

Everything in the forest was covered with the green slime. It hung from the lifeless trees and bushes, dripping freely to the marshy ground, where it collected into fetid, stagnant pools. Wherever it touched her it clung, viscous, stinging and leaving harsh red welts after she scraped it off and flung it away. Slimy tendrils and low-hanging branches fluttered out of the pallid semi-darkness to lash at her body and clothes and spatter her with searing droplets. Her forearms were slashed raw from being thrown up to protect her face, and still her face was scarred with welts, smeared with dried slime and tears. Her feet made ugly sounds as she stumbled through the sticky pools. She knew that blisters had risen on her ankles, but, wincing, refusing to think what her feet must look like, driven by terror and disgust, she thrashed deeper into the heart of the forest.

Forcing her thoughts away from the pain of motion, she tried to establish where she was, how she had arrived. What sickly sun makes this half-light? Is it because of these trees? No, not trees; ghosts of trees. But what sort of trees? And what sort of ghost is he, who chases me, and if he catches me he's going to...

Her mind raced, but would yield only two memories. One was her first sight of him — his ponderous green body dwarfing a clump of bushes. He was scooping masses of slime-jelly into his mouth, drooling, letting it run over his lips until his scaly throat and chest glistened. Paralyzed with revulsion, she listened to the grunting, droning noises — watched his body quiver. The sounds (but not the quivering) stopped only when he swallowed more slime. She shuddered, but could not move away, even when he turned and saw her. His leer broadened; ooze gleamed on his yellowed fangs. He moved toward where she stood rooted, snatching at her with his hands, gnarled fingers and claws, rendered shapeless by the clots of slime. His throat bobbed and a guttural hiss rattled between his slack jaws. The hissing stopped; mesmerized, she watched the jaws knot and the tongue begin to uncurl from somewhere behind

those teeth. It snaked lazily toward her face until she felt its heat, gagged on the smell. When she heard the hissing begin again, something snapped.

The second memory was of screaming. Screaming and running blindly away, smashing through the trees and slime, sobbing the pain and fear, listening to the drone and wheeze and crash of his pursuit. Finally, when the rasping in her throat and the pounding in her ears were all she could hear, she stopped. Although she still couldn't look she felt her feet bleeding. He would catch her, and when he did... she shuddered, doubling over with nausea, gasping for breath. The snapping of branches and sucking noises of his feet grew louder. His voice (voice-ghost? Then whose? Whose voice is this haunting me, coming to catch me, hold me down and...) rumbled in her ears. She rolled off the path, crept under a tree, and felt herself sink into a puddle of slime. She choked back a scream, swallowed the bile that rose into her mouth and, trembling, waited for him to pass.

Doctor Frederick Martin, the Institute's founder and president, sat alone in his office, staring out the window, watching the sun soften and the long shadows of morning as it inched over the walls of the quadrangle. He watched until his eyes began to ache from the glare; then, sighing, he turned wearily to the pile of papers on his desk. He ignored them, reached for a file folder, and idly scanned the sheet stapled to its inside cover:

CARTER, Anna

AGE: 5

APTITUDE: linguistics,
semantics, logic

PERFORMANCE: excellent

ADJUSTMENT: very good

PROJECTION: well above
average

The sheet went on for two columns, a brief evaluation of the academic and psychological performance of Martin's prize pupil, condensed from the sheaf of detailed reports, interviews and examinations that littered the desk top. Martin had pored over the papers until he could have recited them. As he had done several times through the night, he dragged his hands through his hair and tried to grapple with the fact that his knowledge, albeit extensive, was useless.

She had spent the night in the Institute's intensive care unit, surrounded by expert medical sentinels, wracked with convulsions that threatened to tear her five-year-old body apart. No amount of expertise had relieved

her torment or discovered its cause. Still, thought Martin, if knowledge is of any use at all, the answer is here before me. The records charted Anna's progress with flawless accuracy. Her initial interview and examination, within which Martin had seen her potential for linguistics; the painstaking training which had refined and polished that potential until her mind gleamed like a gem through her eyes, able to assimilate and analyze words the same way a diamond refracts rays of light — breaking down, internally reflecting, refocusing, infusing them with its own multifaceted brilliance and precision. All the information stared at him dumbly; all he had to do was sift out the right facts, in the right order.

The corners of Martin's mouth wrinkled with irony. That she should need that sort of help, when no one in the country could perform that calculation as well as she... Martin glanced out the window. It was fully daylight.

... Stiffened, the ache in her knotted muscles turning to numbness, she fought to stifle a scream. Less than twenty feet away, he groped through the underbrush, drooling slime, wheezing and grumbling. She bit her lips and squeezed her eyes shut, but his droning filled her ears, reverberating, pressing everything else from her mind. In spite of herself she began to process the noises, first sorting out his hoarse breathing and the slopping of his feet, then scanning the rest for semantic continuity, some trace of syntax. Her thoughts snagged a phrase that recurred often; behind clenched teeth she tried to form the sounds with her tongue as they rolled from his leering mouth.

Against her will she felt the ragged tatter of speech expand, assume an order. She sensed the warp and woof of grammar, watched the linguistic tensions fall into the interstices. Click! A sickening flash of pattern recognition shook her — she gasped, struggled to repress it, then whimpered and cringed as the sounds became words:

Fuggy Anna Carter Anna
(gibberish) Fuggy Anna
Carter Anna...

Something snapped again. Her mind, seared by the guttural obscenity of his voice as much as the words, tore loose from its moorings and flapped wildly between utter terror and derangement. A thin wail rose in her throat and was choked off by the liquid that accompanied it. Doubled over, she began to cough. His sounds masked hers, and he made his way back to the path. Anna forced herself to remain motionless until the sounds

of his passage faded, then she began to retch, heaving and sobbing uncontrollably, fresh tears washing dried slime from her cheeks. When she could vomit no more she dragged herself into a clearing and stood. Her head ached, and her vision clouded. Vertigo gave life to the trees; they swayed and danced before her eyes. Her knees buckled. She flailed her arms loosely and fell to the turf.

Lester Melnyk looked down at her yellow hair, twisted and dulled with perspiration, a matted halo around her taut face. He watched the face soften, then grow slack as she seemed to shrink and settle into the rumpled bedding. A glance told him her respiration, pulse, and blood pressure were dropping to near normal. Breathing freely for the first time in hours, he reached for the phone and dialed Martin's number. It rang once and was snapped up.

"Yes!" The voice was harsh rather than crisp; the words pinched rather than clipped. It's been a long night, thought Melnyk.

"She's resting now, sir." Melnyk could almost feel the tension drop at the other end. At the same time he realized how weary he was, now that the adrenalin had stopped. The muscles at the back of his neck began to cramp, the ones between his brows to relax.

"Good, that's good." Martin replied. "I guess now would be a good time to call her parents."

"I'll do that right away. Shall I give her another sedative?"

"No, don't bother. As long as she's resting on her own we'll let her be. After you make that call would you come down to my office please? I've got a couple of things to talk over."

Melnyk started, and another surge of adrenalin shocked his spine. "Have you figured out what's wrong with her?"

"Nothing definite," Martin said, "But I have some guesses. I'll explain when you get here." He rang off.

Curious and agitated, Melnyk turned to look at Anna. Almost nine months had passed since, noticing her absence from the quadrangle playground, he had gone to her room and found her withdrawn, sullenly watching a trio of girls skipping rope outside her window. When he sat, scraping his chair on the tile floor for attention, she turned, face swollen and stained by tears.

"What's wrong?" He had tried to sound casual, careful not to disrupt the balance and turn discomfort to catastrophe.

"I can't skip." At that time he didn't know many complex, contradictory emotions had been distilled in her mind to produce those words. He had laughed,