

The Gallery

Rog Phillips

The image features a vibrant green background with several blue geometric shapes. On the left side, there are two vertical bars of different heights. In the center, there is a shorter vertical bar. On the right side, there are two horizontal bars, one above the other. A large blue triangle is positioned in the lower right quadrant, with its base resting on the lower horizontal bar. The text 'Project Gutenberg' is located at the bottom right of the image, overlaid on the green background.

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE GALLERY ***

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Aunt Matilda needed him desperately, but when he arrived she did not want him and neither did anyone else in his home town.

THE GALLERY

By ROG PHILLIPS

ILLUSTRATOR LLEWELLYN

I WAS in the midst of the fourth draft of my doctorate thesis when Aunt Matilda's telegram came. It could not have come at a worse time. The deadline for my thesis was four days away and there was a minimum of five days of hard work to do on it yet. I was working around the clock.

If it had been a telegram informing me of her death I could not have taken time out to attend the funeral. If it had been a telegram saying she was at death's door I'm very much afraid I would have had to call the hospital and order them to keep her alive a few days longer.

Instead, it was a tersely worded appeal. ARTHUR STOP COME AT ONCE STOP AM IN TERRIBLE TROUBLE STOP DO NOT PHONE STOP AUNT MATILDA.

So there was nothing else for me to do. I laid the telegram aside and kept on working on my thesis. That is not as heartless as it might seem. I simply could not imagine Aunt Matilda in terrible trouble. The end of the world I could imagine, but not Aunt Matilda in trouble.

Wherever he went Arthur felt the power behind the lens.

She was the classic flat-chested ageless spinster living alone in the midst of her dustless bric-a-brac and Spode in a frame house of the same vintage as herself at the edge of the classic small town of Sumac, near the southwest corner of Wisconsin. I had visited her for two days over a year ago, and she had looked exactly the same as she had when I stayed with her when I was six all summer, and there was no question but what she would some day attend my funeral when I died of old age, and she would still look the same as always.

There was no conceivable trouble of terrestrial origin that could touch her—or

would want to. And, as it turned out, I was right in that respect.

I was right in another respect too. By finishing my thesis I became a Ph.D. on schedule, and if I had abandoned all that and rushed to Sumac the moment I received the telegram it could not have materially altered the outcome of things. And Aunt Matilda, hanging on the wall of my study, knitting things for the Red Cross, will attest to that.

You, of course, might argue about her being there. You might even insist that I am hanging on her wall instead. And I would have to agree with you, since it all depends on the point of view and as I sit here typing I can look up and see myself hanging on her wall.

But perhaps I had better begin at the beginning when, with my thesis behind me, I arrived on the 4:15 milk run, as they call the train that stops on its way past Sumac.

I was in a very disturbed state of mind, as anyone who has ever turned in a doctorate thesis can well imagine. For the life of me I couldn't be sure whether I had used *symbol* or *token* on line 7, sheet 23, of my thesis, and it was a bad habit of mine to unconsciously interchange them unpredictably, and I knew that Dr. Walters could very well vote against acceptance of my thesis on that ground alone. Also, I had thought of a much better opening sentence to my thesis, and was having to use will power to keep from rushing back to the university to ask permission to change it.

I had practically no sleep during the fourteen-hour run, and what sleep I did have had been interrupted by violent starts of awaking with a conviction that this or that error in the initial draft of my thesis had not been corrected by the final draft. And then, of course, I would have to think the thing through and recall when I had made the correction, before I could go back to sleep.

So I was a wreck, mentally, if not physically, when I stepped off the train onto the wooden depot platform that had certainly been built in the Pleistocene Era, with my oxblood two-suiter firmly clutched in my left hand.

With snorts of steam and the loud clanking of loose drives, the train got under way again, its whistle wailing mournfully as the last empty coach car sped past me and retreated into the distance.

As I stood there, my brain tingling with weariness, and listened to the absolute

silence of the town triumph over the last distant wail of the train whistle, I became aware that something about Sumac was different.

What it was, I didn't know. I stood where I was a moment longer, trying to analyze it. In some indefinable way everything looked unreal. That was as close as I could come to it, and of course having pinned it down that far I at once dismissed it as a trick of the mind produced by tiredness.

I began walking. The planks of the platform were certainly real enough. I circled the depot without going in, and started walking in the direction of Aunt Matilda's, which was only a short eight blocks from the depot, as I had known since I was six.

The feeling of the unreality of my surroundings persisted, and with it came another feeling, of an invisible pressure against me. Almost a resentment. Not only from the people, but from the houses and even the trees.

Slowly I began to realize that it couldn't be entirely my imagination. Most of the dozen or so people I passed knew me, and I remembered suddenly that every other time I had come to Aunt Matilda's they had stopped to talk with me and I had had to make some excuse to escape them. Now they were behaving differently. They would look at me absently as they might at any stranger walking from the direction of the depot, then their eyes would light up with recognition and they would open their lips to greet me with hearty welcome.

Then, as though they just thought of something, they would change, and just say, "Hello, Arthur," and continue on past me.

It didn't take me long to conclude that this strange behavior was probably caused by something in connection with Aunt Matilda. Had she perhaps been named as correspondent in the divorce of the local minister? Had she, of all people, had a child out of wedlock?

Things in a small town can be deadly serious, so by the time her familiar frame house came into view down the street I was ready to keep a straight face, no matter what, and reserve my chuckles for the privacy of her guest room. It would be a new experience, to find Aunt Matilda guilty of any human frailty. It was slightly impossible, but I had prepared myself for it.

And that first day her behavior convinced me I was right in my conclusion.

She appeared in the doorway as I came up the front walk. She was breathing hard, as though she had been running, and there was a dust streak on the side of her thin face.

"Hello, Arthur," she said when I came up on the porch. She shook my hand as limply as always, and gave me a reluctant duty peck on the cheek, then backed into the house to give me room to enter.

I glanced around the familiar surroundings, waiting for her to blurt out the cause of her telegram, and feeling a little guilty about not having come at once.

I felt the loneliness inside her more than I ever had before. There was a terror way back in her eyes.

"You look tired, Arthur," she said.

"Yes," I said, glad of the opportunity she had given me to explain. "I had to finish my thesis and get it in by last night. Two solid years of hard work and it had to be done or the whole thing was for nothing. That's why I couldn't come four days ago. And you seemed quite insistent that I shouldn't call." I smiled to let her know that I remembered about party lines in a small town.

"It's just as well," she said. And while I was trying to decide what the antecedent of her remark was she said, "You can go back on the morning train."

"You mean the trouble is over?" I said, relieved.

"Yes," she said. But she had hesitated.

It was the first time I had ever seen her tell a lie.

"You must be hungry," she rushed on. "Put your suitcase in the room and wash up." She turned her back to me and hurried into the kitchen.

I was hungry. The memory of her homey cooking did it. I glanced around the front room. Nothing had changed, I thought. Then I noticed the framed portrait of my father and his three brothers was hanging where the large print of a basket of fruit used to hang. The basket of fruit picture was where the portrait should have been, and it was entirely too big a picture for that spot. I would never have thought Aunt Matilda could tolerate anything out of proportion. And the darker area of wallpaper where the fruit picture had prevented fading stood out like a sore thumb.

I looked around the room for other changes. The boat picture that had hung to the right of the front door was not there. On the floor under where it should have been I caught the flash of light from a shard of glass. Next to it, the drape framing the window was not hanging right.

On impulse I went over and peeked behind the drape. There, leaning against the wall, was the boat picture with fragments of splintered glass still in it.

From the evidence it appeared that Aunt Matilda had either been trying to hang the picture where it belonged, or taking it down, and it had slipped out of her hands and fallen, and she had hidden it behind the drape and hastily swept up the broken glass.

But why? Even granting that Aunt Matilda might behave in such an erratic fashion (which was obvious from the evidence), I couldn't imagine a sensible reason.

It occurred to me, facetiously, that she might have gone in for pictures of musclemen, and, seeing me coming up the street, she had rushed them into hiding and brought out the old pictures.

That could account for the evidence—except for one thing. I hadn't dallied. She could not possibly have seen me earlier than sixty seconds before I came up the front walk.

Still, the telegrapher at the depot could have called her and told her I was here when he saw me get off the train.

I shrugged the matter off and went to the guest room. It too was the same as always, except for one thing. A picture.

It was a color photograph of the church, taken from the street. The picture was in a frame, but without glass over it, and was about eighteen inches wide and thirty high.

It was a very good picture. Very lifelike. There was a car parked at the curb in front of the church, and someone inside the car smoking a cigarette, and it was so real I would have sworn I could see the streamer of smoke rising from the cigarette moving.

The odor of good food came from the kitchen, reminding me to get busy. I

opened my two-suiter and took out my toilet kit and went to the bathroom.

I shaved, brushed my teeth, and combed my hair. Afterward I popped into my room just for a second to put my toilet kit on the dresser, and hurried to the dining room.

Something nagged at the back of my mind all the time I was eating. After dinner Aunt Matilda suggested I'd better get some sleep. I couldn't argue. I was already asleep on my feet. Her fried chicken and creamed gravy and mashed potatoes had been an opiate.

I didn't even bother to hang up my clothes. I slipped into the heaven of comfort of the bed and closed my eyes. And the next minute it was morning.

Getting out of bed, I stopped in mid motion. The picture of the church was no longer on the wall. And as I stared at the blank spot where it had been, the thing that had nagged me during dinner last night finally leaped into consciousness.

When I had dashed into the room and out again last night on the way to the dining room I had glanced briefly at the picture and something had been different about it. Now I knew what had been different.

The car had no longer been in front of the church.

I lit a cigarette and sat on the edge of the bed. I thought about that picture, and simply could not bring myself to believe the accuracy of that fleeting impression.

Aunt Matilda had slipped into my room and removed the picture while I slept. That was obvious. Why had she done that? The fleeting impression that I couldn't be positive about would give her a sensible reason.

I studied my memory of that picture as I had closely studied it. It had been a remarkable picture. The more I recalled its details the more remarkable it became. I couldn't remember any surface gloss or graining to it, but of course I had not been looking for such things. Only an expert photographer would notice or recognize such technical details.

My thoughts turned in the direction of Aunt Matilda—and her telegram. Her source of income, I knew, was her part of the estate of my grandfather, and amounted to something like thirty thousand dollars. I knew that she was terrified

of touching one cent of the capital, and lived well within the income from good sound stocks.

I took her telegram out of the pocket of my coat which was hanging over the back of a chair. COME AT ONCE STOP AM IN TERRIBLE TROUBLE ... The only kind of terrible trouble Matilda could be in was if some swindler talked her out of some of her capital! And that definitely would not be easy to do. I grinned to myself at the recollection of her worrying herself sick once over what would happen to her if there was a revolution and the new government refused to honor the old government bonds.

Things began to make sense. Her telegram, then those pictures moved around in the front room, and the one she had forgotten to hide, in the guest room. If the other pictures were anything like it, I could see how Aunt Matilda might cash in on part of her securities to invest in what she thought was a sure thing.

But sure things are only as good as the people in control of them. Many a sure thing has been lost to the original investors by stupid decisions leading to bankruptcy, and many a seemingly sure thing has fleeced a lot of innocent victims.

Slowly, as I thought it out, I became sure that that was what had happened.

Then why Aunt Matilda's about-face, hiding the pictures and telling me to go back to Chicago? Had she threatened whoever was behind this, and gotten her money back? Or had she again become convinced that her financial venture was sound?

In either case, why was she trying to keep me from knowing about the pictures?

I made up my mind. Whether Aunt Matilda liked it or not, I was going to stay until I got to the bottom of things. What Aunt Matilda evidently didn't realize was that no inventor who really had something would waste time trying to find backing in a place like Sumac.

Getting dressed, I decided that first on the agenda would be to find where Matilda had hidden those pictures, and get a good look at them.

That was simpler than I expected it to be. When I came out of my room I stuck my head in the kitchen doorway and said good morning to her, and she leaped to her feet to get some breakfast ready for me. It was obvious that she was anxious

to get me fed and out of the house.

Then I simply took the two steps past the bathroom door to the door to her bedroom and went in. The pictures were stacked against the side of her dresser. The one of the church was the first one. It was on its side.

With a silent whistle of amazement I bent down to watch it. The car was not parked at the curb in it, but there were several children walking along, obviously on their way to school. And they were walking. Moving.

I picked up the picture. It was as heavy as it should be, but not more. A faint whisper of sound seemed to come from it. I put my ear closer and heard children's voices. I explored with my ear close to the surface, and found that the voices were loudest when my ear was closest to the one talking, as though the voices came out of the picture directly from the images!

All it needed to be perfect was a volume control somewhere. I searched, and found it behind the upper right corner of the picture. I twisted it very slowly, and the voices became louder. I turned it back to the position it had been in.

The next picture was of the railroad depot. The telegrapher and baggage clerk were going around the side of the depot towards the tracks. A freight train was rushing through the picture.

Even as I watched it in the picture, I heard the wail of a train whistle in the distance, and it was coming from outside, across town. That freight train was going through town *right now*.

I put the pictures back the way they had been, and stole softly from Aunt Matilda's bedroom to the bathroom, and closed the door.

"No wonder Aunt Matilda invested in this thing!" I said to my image in the mirror as I shaved.

Picture TV would make all other TV receivers obsolete! Full color TV at that! And with some new principle in stereophonic sound!

What about the fact that neither picture had been plugged into an outlet? Probably run by batteries.

What about the lack of weight? Obviously a new TV principle was involved.

Maybe it required fewer circuits and less power.

What about the broadcasting end, the cameras? Permanently set up? What about the broadcast channels?

There had been ten or twelve pictures. I'd only looked at two. Was each a different scene? Twelve different broadcasting stations in Sumac?

It had me dizzy. Probably the new TV principle was so simple that all that could be taken care of without millions of dollars worth of equipment.

A new respect for Aunt Matilda grew in me. She had latched on to a money maker! It didn't hurt to know that I was her favorite nephew, either. With my Ph.D. in physics, and my aunt as one of the stockholders, I could probably land a good job with the company. What a deal!

By the time I finished shaving I was whistling. I was still whistling when I went into the kitchen for breakfast.

"You'll have to hurry, Arthur," Aunt Matilda said. "Your train leaves in forty-five minutes."

"I'm not leaving," I said cheerfully.

I went over to the bright breakfast nook and sat down, and took a cautious sip of coffee. I grunted my approval of it and looked around toward Aunt Matilda, smiling.

She was staring at me with wide eyes. She looked as haggard as though she had just heard she had a week to live.

"But you must go!" she croaked as though my not going were unthinkable.

"Nonsense, you old fox," I said. "I know a good thing as well as you do. I want to get a job with that outfit."

She came toward me with a wild expression on her face.

"Get out!" she screamed. "Get out of my house! I won't have it! You catch that train and get out of town. Do you hear?"

"But, Aunt Matilda!" I protested.

In the end I had to get out or she would have had a stroke. She was shaking like a leaf, her skin mottled and her eyes wild, as I went down the front steps with my bag.

"You get that train, do you hear?" was the last thing she screamed at me as I hurried toward Main Street.

However, I had no intention of leaving town with Aunt Matilda upset that way. I'd let her have time to cool off, then come back. Meanwhile I'd try to get to the bottom of things. A thing as big as wall TV in full color and stereophonic sound must be the talk of the town. I'd find out where they had their office and go talk with them. A career with something like that would be the best thing I could ever hope to find. And getting in on the ground floor!

It surprised me that Aunt Matilda could be so insanely greedy. I shook my head in wonder. It didn't figure.

I had breakfast at the hotel cafe and made a point of telling the waitress, who knew me, that it was my second breakfast, and that I had intended to catch the morning train back to Chicago, but maybe I wouldn't.

After I finished eating I asked if it would be okay to leave my suitcase behind the counter while I looked around a bit. She showed me where to put it so it would be out of the way.

When I paid for my breakfast I half turned away, then turned back casually.

"Oh, by the way," I said. "Where's this wall TV place?"

"This what?" she said.

"You know," I said. "Color TV like a picture you hang on a wall."

All the color faded from her face. Her eyes went past me, staring. I turned in the direction she was staring, and on the wall above the plateglass front of the cafe was a picture.

That is, there was a picture frame and a pair of dark glasses that took up most of the picture, with the lower part of a forehead and the upper part of a nose. I had noticed it once while I was eating and had assumed it was a display ad for sun glasses. Now I looked at it more closely, but could detect no movement in it. It still looked like an ad for sun glasses.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I heard the waitress say, her voice edged with fear.

"Huh?" I said, turning my head back to look at her. "Oh. Well, never mind."

I left the cafe with every outward appearance of casual innocence; but inside I was beginning to realize for the first time the possibilities and the danger that could lie in the use of this new TV development.

That had been a Big-Brother-is-Watching-you setup back there in the cafe, except that it had been a girl instead of a man, judging from the style of sun glasses and the smoothness of the nose and forehead.

I had wondered about the broadcasting end of things. Now I knew. That had been the TV "eye," and somewhere there was a framed picture hanging on the wall, bringing in everything that took place in the cafe, including everything that was said. Everything *I* had said, too. It was an ominous feeling.

Aunt Matilda had almost had a stroke trying to get me out of town. Now I knew why. She was caught in this thing and wanted to save me. Four days ago she had probably not fully realized the potentiality for evil of the invention, but by the time I showed up she knew it.

Well, she was right. This was not something for me to tackle. I would keep up my appearance of not suspecting anything, and catch that train Aunt Matilda wanted me to catch.

From way out in the country came the whistle of the approaching milk run, the train that would take me back to Chicago. In Chicago I would go to the F.B.I, and tell them the whole thing. They wouldn't believe me, of course, but they would investigate. If the thing hadn't spread any farther than Sumac it would be a simple matter to stop it.

I'd hurry back to the cafe and get my suitcase and tell the waitress I'd decided to catch the train after all.

I turned around.

Only I didn't turn around.

That's as nearly as I can describe it. I did turn around. I know I did. But the town

turned around with me, and the sun and the clouds and the countryside. So maybe I only thought I turned around.

When I tried to stop walking it was different. I simply could not stop walking. Nothing was in control of my mind. It was more like stepping on the brakes and the brakes not responding.

I gave up trying, more curious about what was happening than alarmed. I walked two blocks along Main Street. Ahead of me I saw a sign. It was the only new sign I had seen in Sumac. In ornate Neon script it said, "PORTRAITS by Lana."

I don't know whether my feet took me inside independently of my mind or not, because I was sure that this was the place and I wanted to go in anyway.

Not much had been done to modernize the interior of the shop. I remembered that the last time I had been here it had been a stamp collector headquarters run by Mr. Mason and his wife. The counter was still there, but instead of stamp displays it held a variety of standard portraits such as you can see in any portrait studio. None of the TV portraits were on display here.

The same bell that used to tinkle when I came into the stamp store tinkled in back of the partition when I came in. A moment later the curtain in the doorway of the partition parted, and a girl came out.

How can I describe her? In appearance she was anyone of a thousand smartly dressed brunettes that wait on you in quality photograph studios, and yet she wasn't. She was as much above that in cut as the average smartly dressed girl is above a female alcoholic after a ten-day drunk. She was perfect. Too perfect. She was the type of girl a man would dream of meeting some day, but if he ever did he would run like hell because he could never hope to live up to such perfection.

"You have come to have your portrait taken?" she asked. "I am Lana."

"I thought you already had my portrait," I said. "Didn't you get it from that eye in the hotel cafe?"

"It's not the same thing," Lana said. "Through an eye you remain a variable in the Mantram complex. It takes the camera to fix you, so that you are an iconic invariant in the Mantram." She smiled and half turned toward the curtain she had come through. "Would you step this way, please?" she invited.

"How much will it cost?" I said, not moving.

"Nothing, of course!" Lana said. "Terrestrial money is of no use to me since you have nothing I would care to buy. And don't be alarmed. No harm will come to you, or anyone else." A fleeting expression of concern came over her. "I realize that many of the people of Sumac are quite alarmed, but that is to be expected of a people uneducated enough to still be superstitious."

I went past her through the curtain. Behind the partition I expected to see out-of-this-world scientific equipment stacked to the ceiling. Instead, there was only a portrait camera on a tripod. It had a long bellows and would take a plate the same size as that picture of the church I had seen.

"You see?" Lana said. "It's just a camera." She smiled disarmingly.

I went toward it casually, and suddenly I stopped as though another mind controlled my actions. When I gave up the idea I had had of smashing the camera, the control vanished.

There was no lens in the lens frame. "Where's the lens?" I said.

"It doesn't use a glass lens," Lana said. "When I take the picture a lens forms just long enough to focus the elements of your body into a Mantram fix." She touched my shoulder. "Would you sit down over there, please?"

"What do you mean by a Mantram fix?" I asked her.

She paused by the camera and smiled at me. "I use your language," she said. "In some of your legends you have the notion of a Mantram, or what you consider magical spell. In one aspect the notion is of magical words that can manipulate natural forces directly. The notion of a devil doll is a little closer. Only instead of actual substance from the subject—hair, fingernail parings, and so on—the Mantram matrix takes the detailed force pattern of the subject, through the lens when it forms. So, in your concepts, what results is an iconic Mantram. But it operates both ways. You'll see what I mean by that."

With another placating smile she stepped behind the camera and without warning light seemed to explode from the very air around me, without any source. For a brief second I seemed to see—not a glittering lens—but a black bottomless hole form in the metal circle at the front of the camera. And—an experience I am familiar with now—I seemed to rush into the bottomless

darkness of that hole and back again, at the rate of thousands of times a second, arriving at some formless destination and each time feeling it take on more of form.

"There. That wasn't so bad, was it?" Lana said.

I felt strangely detached, as though I were in two places at the same time. I told her so.

"You'll get used to it," she assured me. "In fact, you will get to enjoy it. *I* do. Especially when I've made several prints."

"Why are you doing this?" I asked. "Who are you? *What* are you?"

"I'm a photographer!" Lana said. "I'm connected with the natural history museum of the planet I live on. I go to various places and take pictures, and they go into exhibits for the people to watch."

She pulled the curtain aside for me to leave.

"You're going to let me leave? Just like that?" I said.

"Of course." She smiled again. "You're free to go wherever you wish, to your aunt's or back to Chicago. I was glad to get your portrait. In return, I'll send you one of the prints. And would you like one of your aunt's? Actually, when she came in to have her picture taken it was for the purpose of sending it to you. She was my first customer. I've taken a special liking to her and given her several pictures."

"Yes," I said. "I would like one of Aunt Matilda."

When I emerged from the shop I discovered to my surprise that the train was just pulling into the depot. An urge to get far away from Sumac possessed me. I trotted to the cafe to get my bag, and when the train pulled out I was on it.

There's little more to tell. In Chicago once again, I spent a most exasperating two days trying to inform the F.B.I., the police, or anyone who would listen to me. My fingers couldn't dial the correct phone number, and at the crucial moment each time I grew tongue-tied. My last attempt was a letter to the F.B.I., which I couldn't remember to mail, and when I finally did remember I couldn't find it.

Then the express package from Sumac came. With fingers that visibly trembled I

took out the two framed pictures, one of Aunt Matilda in the process of dusting the front room. All of her pictures that she had hidden from me were back in their places on the walls. While I watched her move about, she went into the sewing room, and there I saw a picture on the wall that looked familiar.

It was of me, an opened express package at my feet, a framed picture held in my hands, and I was staring at it intently.

In the picture I was holding, Aunt Matilda looked in my direction and waved, smiling in the prim way she smiles when she is contented. I understood. She had me with her now.

I laid the picture down carefully, and took the second one out of the box.

It was not a picture at all, it was a mirror!

It couldn't be anything except a mirror. And yet, suddenly, I realized it wasn't. The uncanny feeling came over me that I had transposed into the mirror and was looking out at myself. Even as I got that feeling I shifted and was outside the mirror looking at my image.

I found that I could be in either place by a sort of mental shift, something like staring at one of the geometrical optical illusions you can find in any psychology textbook in the chapter on illusions, and seeing it become something else.

It was strange at first, then it became fun, and now, as I write this, it is a normal thing. My portrait is where it should be—on the medicine cabinet in the bathroom, where the mirror used to be.

But I can transpose to any of the copies of my portrait, anywhere. To Aunt Matilda's sewing room, or to the museum, or to Lana's private collection. The only thing is, it's almost impossible to tell when I shift, or where I shift to. It just seems to happen.

The reason for that is that my surroundings, no matter in what direction I look, are exactly identical with my real surroundings. My physical surroundings are duplicated exactly in all my portraits, just as Aunt Matilda's are in the portrait of her that hangs on my study wall. She is the invariant of each of her iconic Mantrams and her surroundings are the variables that enter and leave the screen. I am the invariant in my own portraits, wherever they are. So, except for the slight *twist* in my mind that takes place when I *shift*, that I have learned to recognize from practice in front of my "mirror" each morning when I shave, and

except for the portrait of Aunt Matilda, I would never be able to suspect what happens.

If Lana had taken my picture without my knowing it and I had never seen one of her collection of portraits, nor ever heard of an iconic Mantram, I would have absolutely nothing to go on to suspect the truth that I know. Except for one thing.

I don't quite know how to explain it, except that I must actually transfer to one of my portraits, and, transferring, I am more real than—what shall I call it?—the photographic reproduction of my real surroundings. Then, sometimes, the photographic reproduction, the iconic illusion, that is my environment when I am *in* one of the portraits of me, fades just enough so that I can look "out" into the reality where my portrait hangs, and see, and even hear the *watchers*, as ghosts in my solid "reality."

Quite often I can only hear them, and then they are voices out of nowhere, sometimes addressing me directly, just as often talking to one another and ignoring my *presence*. But when I can see them too, they appear as ghostly but sharply clear visions that seem to be present in my solid-looking environment. There, but somewhat transparent.

I have often seen and talked to Lana in this manner, in her far-off world, where I am part of her private collection. In fact, I can almost always tell when I *shift* to my portrait in her gallery, because I am suddenly exhilarated and remain so until I shift back, or to some other portrait. That is so even when she is not there but out on one of her many photographic expeditions.

When she is there, and is watching me, and my thoughts are quiet and my mind receptive, she becomes visible. A ghost in my study, or the lab where I work, or—if I am asleep—in my dreams. Like an angel, or a goddess. And we talk.

Back in the physical reality, of course, no one else can hear her voice. My real body is going through its routine work almost automatically but my mind, my consciousness, is focused into my portrait in Lana's gallery, and we are talking. And of course in the real world I am talking too, but my associates can't see who I'm talking to, and it would be useless to try to explain to them.

So I'm getting quite a reputation as a nut! Can you imagine that?

But why should I mind? My reality has a much broader and more complex scope than the limited reality of my associates. I might be fired, or even sent to a state hospital, except for the fact that Lana foresees such problems and teaches me enough things in my field that are unknown to Earth, so that my employers consider me too valuable to lose.

If this story were fiction the ending would have to be that I am in love with Lana and she with me, and there would be a nice conclusive ending where she comes back to Earth to marry me and carry me back to her world, where we would live happily ever after. But the truth of the matter is that I'm not in love with Lana, nor she with me. Sometimes I think I am her favorite portrait, but nothing more.

But really, everything is so interesting. Lana's gallery where I hang, the museum where there are new faces each time I look out, and new voices when I can't see out, Aunt Matilda's sewing room where she is at the moment, and all Sumac as she goes about her normal pattern of living.

It is a rich, full life that I live, shifting here and there in consciousness while my physical body goes about its necessary tasks, as often unguided as not. (What a reputation I'm getting for absent-mindedness, too!)

And out of it all has come a perspective that, when I feel it strongly, makes me feel almost like a god. In that perspective all my portraits (and there are many now, on many worlds and in many places on this world!) blend into one. That one is the stage of my life. But not a stage, really. A show window. Yes, that is it. A show window, where the *watchers* pass.

I live in a show window that opens out in many worlds and many places that are hidden from me by a veil that sometimes grows thin, so I can see through it. And from the other side of that veil, even when I cannot see through it, come the voices of the watchers, as they pass by, or pause to look at me.

And I am not the only one! There are others. More and more of them, as Lana comes back on her photographic expeditions for the museum.

None that I have met understand what it is about as fully as I do. Some have an insight into the true state of things, but very very few.

But that is understandable. Lana can't give the same time to them that she gives to me. There aren't that many hours in a day! And, you see, I am her favorite.

If I were not, she would never have permitted me to tell you all this, so I must be

her favorite!

Doesn't that make sense?

I AM her favorite!

THE END

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