

Flow, My Tears, The Policeman Said

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Extract

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Part One

Flow my tears, fall from your springs!
Exiled forever let me mourn;
Where night's black bird her sad infamy sings,
There let me live forlorn.

One

On Tuesday, October 11, 1988, the *Jason Taverner Show* ran thirty seconds short. A technician, watching through the plastic bubble of the control dome, froze the final credit on the video section, then pointed to Jason Taverner, who had started to leave the stage. The technician tapped his wrist, pointed to his mouth.

Into the boom mike Jason said smoothly, 'Keep all those cards and V-letters coming in, folks. And stay tuned now for *The Adventures of Scotty, Dog Extraordinary*.'

The technician smiled; Jason smiled back, and then both the audio and the video clicked off. Their hour-long music and variety program, which held the second highest rating among the year's best TV shows, had come to an end. And it had all gone well.

'Where'd we lose half a minute?' Jason said to his special guest star of the evening, Heather Hart. It puzzled him. He liked to time his own shows.

Heather Hart said, 'Baby bunting, it's all right.' She put her cool hand across his slightly moist forehead, rubbed the perimeter of his sand-colored hair affectionately.

'Do you realize what power you have?' Al Bliss, their business agent, said to Jason, coming up close – too close as always – to him. 'Thirty million people saw you zip up your fly tonight. That's a record of sorts.'

'I zip up my fly every week,' Jason said. 'It's my trademark. Or don't you catch the show?'

'But thirty million,' Bliss said, his round, florid face spotted with drops of perspiration, 'Think of it. And then there's the residuals.'

Jason said crisply, 'I'll be dead before the residuals on this show pay off. Thank God.'

'You'll probably be dead tonight,' Heather said, 'with all those fans of yours packed in outside there. Just waiting to rip you into little tiny squares like so many postage stamps.'

'Some of them are your fans, Miss Hart,' Al Bliss said, in his doglike panting voice.

'God damn them,' Heather said harshly. 'Why don't they go away? Aren't they breaking some law, loitering or something?'

Jason took hold of her hand and squeezed it forcefully, attracting her frowning attention. He had never understood her dislike for fans; to him they were the lifeblood of his public existence. And to him his public existence, his role as worldwide entertainer, was existence itself, period. 'You shouldn't be an entertainer,' he said to Heather, 'feeling the way you do. Get out of the business. Become a social worker in a forced-labor camp.'

'There're people there, too,' Heather said grimly.

Two special police guards shouldered their way up to Jason Taverner and Heather. 'We've got the corridor as clear as we're going to get it,' the fatter of the two cops wheezed. 'Let's go now, Mr Taverner. Before the studio audience can trickle around to the side exits.' He signaled to three other special police guards, who at once advanced toward the hot, packed passageway that led, eventually, to the nocturnal street. And out there the parked Rolls flyship in all its costly splendor, its tail rocket idling throbbingly. Like, Jason thought, a mechanical heart A heart that beat for him alone, for him the star. Well, by extension, it throbbed in response to the needs of Heather, too.

She deserved it: she had sung well, tonight. Almost as well as— Jason grinned inwardly, to himself. Hell, let's face it, he thought. They don't turn on all those 3-D color TV sets to see the special guest star. There are a thousand special guest stars scattered over the surface of earth, and a few in the Martian colonies.

They turn on, he thought, to see *me*. And I am always there. Jason Taverner has never and will never disappoint his fans. However Heather may feel about hers.

'You don't like them,' Jason said as they squirmed and pushed and ducked their way down the steaming, sweat-smelling corridor, 'because you don't like yourself. You secretly think they have bad taste.'

'They're dumb,' Heather grunted, and cursed quietly as her flat, large hat flopped from her head and disappeared forever within the whale's belly of close-pressing fans.

'They're ordinaries,' Jason said, his lips at her ear, partly lost as it was in her great tangle of shiny red hair. The famous cascade of hair so widely and expertly copied in beauty salons throughout Terra.

Heather grated, 'Don't say that word.'

'They're ordinaries,' Jason said, 'and they're morons. Because' — he nipped the lobe of her ear — 'because that's what it means to be an ordinary. Right?'

She sighed. 'Oh, God, to be in the flyship cruising through the void. That's what I long for: an infinite void. With no human voices, no human smells, no human jaws masticating plastic chewing gum in nine iridescent colors.'

'You really do hate them,' he said.

'Yes.' She nodded briskly. 'And so do you.' She halted briefly, turning her head to confront him. 'You know your goddamn voice is gone; you know you're coasting on your glory days, which you'll never see again.' She smiled at him,

then. Warmly. 'Are we growing old?' she said, above the mumbles and squeaks of the fans. 'Together? Like man and wife?'

Jason said, 'Sixes don't grow old.'

'Oh yes,' Heather said. 'Oh yes they do.' Reaching upward, she touched his wavy brown hair. 'How long have you been tinting it, dearheart? A year? Three?'

'Get in the flyship,' he said brusquely, maneuvering her ahead of him, out of the building and onto the pavement of Hollywood Boulevard.

'I'll get in,' Heather said, 'if you'll sing me a high B natural. Remember when you—'

He thrust her bodily into the flyship, squeezed in after her, turned to help Al Bliss close the door, and then they were up and into the rain-clouded nighttime sky. The great gleaming sky of Los Angeles, as bright as if it were high noon. And that's what it is for you and for me, he thought. For the two of us, in all times to come. It will always be as it is now, because we are sixes. Both of us. Whether *they* know it or not.

And it's not, he thought grimly, enjoying the bleak humor of it. The knowledge which they together had, the knowledge unshared. Because that was the way it was meant to be. And always had . . . even now after it had all turned out so badly. Badly, at least, in the designers' eyes. The great pundits who had guessed and guessed wrong. Forty-five beautiful years ago, when the world was young and droplets of rain still clung to the now-gone Japanese cherry trees in Washington, DC. And the smell of spring that had hovered over the noble experiment. For a short while, anyhow.

'Let's go to Zürich,' he said aloud.

'I'm too tired,' Heather said. 'Anyhow, that place bores me.'

'The house?' He was incredulous. Heather had picked it

out for the two of them, and for years there they had gotten away – away especially from the fans that Heather hated so much.

Heather sighed and said, 'The house. The Swiss watches. The bread. The cobblestones. The snow on the hills.'

'Mountains,' he said, feeling aggrieved still. 'Well, hell,' he said. 'I'll go without you.'

'And pick up someone else?'

He simply could not understand. 'Do you *want* me to take someone else with me?' he demanded.

'You and your magnetism. Your charm. You could get any girl in the world into that big brass bed with you. Not that you're so much once you get there.'

'God,' he said with disgust. 'That again. Always the same old gripes. And the ones that're fantasy – they're the ones you really hang on to.'

Turning to face him, Heather said earnestly, 'You know how you look, even now at the age you are. You're beautiful. Thirty million people ogle you an hour a week. It's not your singing they're interested in . . . it's your incurable physical beauty.'

'The same can be said for you,' he said caustically. He felt tired and he yearned for the privacy and seclusion that lay there on the outskirts of Zürich, silently waiting for the two of them to come back once more. And it was as if the house wanted them to stay, not for a night or a week of nights, but forever.

'I don't show my age,' Heather said.

He glanced at her, then studied her. Volumes of red hair, pale skin with a few freckles, a strong roman nose. Deep-set huge violet eyes. She was right; she didn't show her age. Of course she never tapped into the phone-grid transex network, as he did. But in point of fact he did so very little. So he was

not hooked, and there had not been, in his case, brain damage or premature aging.

'You're a goddamn beautiful-looking person,' he said grudgingly.

'And you?' Heather said.

He could not be shaken by this. He knew that he still had his charisma, the force they had inscribed on the chromosomes forty-two years ago. True, his hair had become mostly gray and he did tint it. And a few wrinkles had appeared here and there. But—

'As long as I have my voice,' he said, 'I'll be okay. I'll have what I want. You're wrong about me — it's your six aloofness, your cherished so-called individuality. Okay, if you don't want to fly over to the house in Zürich, where *do* you want to go? Your place? My place?'

'I want to be married to you,' Heather said. 'So then it won't be my place versus your place but it'll be our place. And I'll give up singing and have three children, all of them looking like you.'

'Even the girls?'

Heather said, 'They'll all be boys.'

Leaning over he kissed her on the nose. She smiled, took his hand, patted it warmly. 'We can go anywhere tonight,' he said to her in a low, firm, controlled, and highly projected voice, almost a father voice; it generally worked well with Heather, whereas nothing else did. Unless, he thought, I walk off.

She feared that. Sometimes in their quarrels, especially at the house in Zürich, where no one could hear them or interfere, he had seen the fear on her face. The idea of being alone appalled her; he knew it; she knew it; the fear was part of the reality of their joint life. Not their public life; for them, as genuinely professional entertainers, there they had complete, rational control: however angry and estranged they became

they would function together in the big worshipping world of viewers, letter writers, noisy fans. Even outright hatred could not change that.

But there could be no hate between them anyhow. They had too much in common. They got so damn much from each other. Even mere physical contact, such as this, sitting together in the Rolls skyfly, made them happy. For as long, anyhow, as it lasted.

Reaching into the inner pocket of his custom-tailored genuine silk suit – one of perhaps ten in the whole world – he brought out a wad of government-certified bills. A great number of them, compressed into a fat little bundle.

‘You shouldn’t carry so much cash on you,’ Heather said naggingly, in the tone he disliked so much: the opinionated-mother tone.

Jason said, ‘With this’ – he displayed the package of bills – ‘we can buy our way into any—’

‘If some unregistered student who has sneaked across from a campus burrow just last night doesn’t chop your hand off at the wrist and run away with it, both your hand and your flashy money. You always have been flashy. Flashy and loud. Look at your tie. Look at it!’ She had risen her voice, now; she seemed genuinely angry.

‘Life is short,’ Jason said. ‘And prosperity even shorter.’ But he placed the package of bills back in his inside coat pocket, smoothed away at the lump it created in his otherwise perfect suit. ‘I wanted to buy you something with it,’ he said. Actually the idea had just come to him now; what he had planned to do with the money was something a little different: he intended to take it to Las Vegas, to the blackjack tables. As a six he could – and did – always win at blackjack; he had the edge over everyone, even the dealer. Even, he thought sleekly, the pit boss.

‘You’re lying,’ Heather said. ‘You didn’t intend to get me

anything; you never do, you're so selfish and always thinking about yourself. That's screwing money; you're going to buy some big-chested blonde and go to bed together with her. Probably at our place in Zürich, which, you realize, I haven't seen for four months now. I might as well be pregnant.'

It struck him as odd that she would say that, out of all the possible retorts that might flow up into her conscious, talking mind. But there was a good deal about Heather that he did not understand; with him, as with her fans, she kept many things about her private.

But, over the years, he had learned a lot about her. He knew, for example, that in 1982 she had had an abortion, a well-kept secret, too. He knew that at one time she had been illegally married to a student commune leader, and that for one year she had lived in the rabbit warrens of Columbia University, along with all the smelly, bearded students kept sub-surface lifelong by the pils and the nats. The police and the national guard, who ringed every campus, keeping the students from creeping across to society like so many black rats swarming out of a leaky ship.

And he knew that one year ago she had been busted for possession of drugs. Only her wealthy and powerful family had been able to buy her out of *that* one: her money and her charisma and fame hadn't worked when confrontation time with the police came.

Heather had been scarred a little by all that had overtaken her, but, he knew, she was all right now. Like all sixes she had enormous recuperative ability. It had been carefully built into each of them. Among much, much else. Things which even he, at forty-two years, didn't know them all. And a lot had happened to him, too. Mostly in the form of dead bodies, the remains of other entertainers he had trampled on his long climb to the top.

‘These “flashy” ties—’ he began, but then the skyfly’s phone rang. He took it, said hello. Probably it was Al Bliss with the ratings on tonight’s show.

But it was not. A girl’s voice came to him, penetrating sharply, stridently into his ear. ‘Jason?’ the girl said loudly.

‘Yeah,’ he said. Cupping the mouthpiece of the phone he said to Heather, ‘It’s Marilyn Mason. Why the hell did I give her my skyfly number?’

‘Who the hell is Marilyn Mason?’ Heather asked.

‘I’ll tell you later.’ He uncupped the phone. ‘Yes, dear; this is Jason for real, in the true reincarnated flesh. What is it? You sound terrible. Are they evicting you again?’ He winked at Heather and grinned wryly.

‘Get rid of her,’ Heather said.

Again cupping the mouthpiece of the phone he said to her, ‘I will; I’m trying to; can’t you see?’ Into the phone he said, ‘Okay, Marilyn. Spill your guts out to me; that’s what I’m for.’

For two years Marilyn Mason had been his protégée, so to speak. Anyhow, she wanted to be a singer – be famous, rich, loved – like him. One day she had come wandering into the studio, during rehearsal, and he had taken notice of her. Tight little worried face, short legs, skirt far too short – he had, as was his practice, taken it all in at first glance. And, a week later, he had arranged for an audition for her with Columbia Records, their artists and repertoire chief.

A lot had gone on in that week, but it hadn’t had anything to do with singing.

Marilyn said shrilly into his ear, ‘I have to see you. Otherwise I’ll kill myself and the guilt will be on you. For the rest of your life. And I’ll tell that Heather Hart woman about us sleeping together all the time.’

Inwardly he sighed. Hell, he was tired already, worn out by his hour-long show during which it was smile, smile, smile.

'I'm on my way to Switzerland for the rest of tonight,' he said firmly, as if speaking to a hysterical child. Usually, when Marilyn was in one of her accusatory, quasi-paranoid moods it worked. But not this time, naturally.

'It'll take you five minutes to get over here in that million-dollar Rolls skyfly of yours,' Marilyn dinned in his ear. 'I just want to talk to you for five seconds. I have something very important to tell you.'

She's probably pregnant, Jason said to himself. Somewhere along the line she intentionally – or maybe unintentionally – forgot to take her pill.

'What can you tell me in five seconds that I don't already know?' he said sharply. 'Tell me now.'

'I want you here with me,' Marilyn said, with her customary total lack of consideration, 'You must come. I haven't see you in six months and during that time I've done a lot of thinking about us. And in particular about that last audition.'

'Okay,' he said, feeling bitter and resentful. This was what he got for trying to manufacture for her – a no-talent – a career. He hung up the phone noisily, turned to Heather and said, 'I'm glad you never ran into her; she's really a—'

'Bullshit,' Heather said. 'I didn't "run into her" because you made damn sure you saw to that.'

'Anyhow,' he said, as he made a right turn for the skyfly, 'I got her not one but two auditions, and she snurfled them both. And to keep her self-respect she's got to blame it on me. I somehow herded her into failing. You see the picture.'

'Does she have nice boobs?' Heather said.

'Actually, yes.' He grinned and Heather laughed. 'You know my weakness. But I did my part of the bargain; I got her an audition – *two* auditions. The last one was six months ago and I know goddamn well she's still smoldering and brooding over it. I wonder what she wants to tell me.'

He punched the control module to set up an automatic course for Marilyn's apartment building with its small but adequate roof field.

'She's probably in love with you,' Heather said, as he parked the skyfly on its tail, releasing then the descent stairs.

'Like forty million others,' Jason said genially.

Heather, making herself comfortable in the bucket seat of the skyfly, said, 'Don't be gone very long or so help me I'm taking off without you.'

'Leaving me stuck with Marilyn?' he said. They both laughed. 'I'll be right back.' He crossed the field to the elevator, pressed the button.

When he entered Marilyn's apartment he saw, at once, that she was out of her mind. Her entire face had pinched and constricted; her body so retracted that it looked as if she were trying to ingest herself. And her eyes. Very few things around or about women made him uneasy, but this did. Her eyes, completely round, with huge pupils, bored at him as she stood silently facing him, her arms folded, everything about her unyielding and iron rigid.

'Start talking,' Jason said, feeling around for the handle of the advantage. Usually - in fact virtually always - he could control a situation that involved a woman; it was, in point of fact, his specialty. But this . . . he felt uncomfortable. And still she said nothing. Her face, under layers of makeup, had become completely bloodless, as if she were an animated corpse. 'You want another audition?' Jason asked. 'Is that it?'

Marilyn shook her head no.

'Okay; tell me what it is,' he said wearily but uneasily. He kept the unease out of his voice, however; he was far too shrewd, far too experienced, to let her hear his uncertainty. In a confrontation with a woman it ran nearly ninety per cent bluff, on both sides. It all lay in *how* you did it, not what you did.

'I have something for you.' Marilyn turned, walked off out of sight into the kitchen. He strolled after her.

'You still blame me for the lack of success of both—' he began.

'Here you are,' Marilyn said. She lifted up a plastic bag from the drainboard, stood holding it a moment, her face still bloodless and stark, her eyes jutting and unblinking, and then she yanked the bag open, swung it, moved swiftly up to him.

It happened too fast. He backed away out of instinct, but too slowly and too late. The gelatinlike Callisto cuddle sponge with its fifty feeding tubes clung to him, anchored itself to his chest. Already he felt the feeding tubes dig into him, into his chest.

He leaped to the overhead kitchen cabinets, grabbed out a half-filled bottle of scotch, unscrewed the lid with flying fingers, and poured the scotch onto the gelatinlike creature. His thoughts had become lucid, even brilliant; he did not panic, but stood there pouring the scotch onto the thing.

For a moment nothing happened. He still managed to hold himself together and not flee into panic. And then the thing bubbled, shriveled, fell from his chest onto the floor. It had died.

Feeling weak, he seated himself at the kitchen table. Now he found himself fighting off unconsciousness; some of the feeding tubes remained inside him, and they were still alive. 'Not bad,' he managed to say. 'You almost got me, you fucking little tramp.'

'Not almost,' Marilyn Mason said flatly, emotionlessly. 'Some of the feeding tubes are still in you and you know it; I can see it on your face. And a bottle of scotch isn't going to get them out. *Nothing* is going to get them out.'

At that point he fainted. Dimly, he saw the green-and-gray floor rise to take him and then there was emptiness. A void without even himself in it.

★

Pain. He opened his eyes, reflexively touched his chest. His hand-tailored silk suit had vanished; he wore a cotton hospital robe and he was lying flat on a gurney. 'God,' he said thickly as the two staff men wheeled the gurney rapidly up the hospital corridor.

Heather Hart, hovering over him, anxious and in shock, but, like him, she retained full possession of her senses. 'I knew something was wrong,' she said rapidly as the staff men wheeled him into a room. 'I didn't wait for you in the skyfly; I came down after you.'

'You probably thought we were in bed together,' he said weakly.

'The doctor said,' Heather said, 'that in another fifteen seconds you would have succumbed to the somatic violation, as he calls it. The entrance of that *thing* into you.'

'I got the thing,' he said. 'But I didn't get all the feeding tubes. It was too late.'

'I know,' Heather said. 'The doctor told me. They're planning surgery for as soon as possible; they may be able to do something if the tubes haven't penetrated too far.'

'I was good in the crisis,' Jason grated; he shut his eyes and endured the pain. 'But not quite good enough. Just not quite.' Opening his eyes, he saw that Heather was crying. 'Is it that bad?' he asked her; reaching up he took hold of her hand. He felt the pressure of her love as she squeezed his fingers, and then there was nothing. Except the pain. But nothing else, no Heather, no hospital, no staff men, no light. And no sound. It was an eternal moment and it absorbed him completely.