

First chapter:

UPUAUT

by **Brendan Connell**

I.

I have always been afraid—I must have been born so—afraid of storms and heights, hands and destitution—afraid of going hungry or of going to seed, of having my limbs become crooked and my hair tangled and lengthy—yes, what fears! that make me awake in the murkiest part of night, in thickest darkness, when the only sounds to be heard are the wheezing of my nose and the drumming of my own heart, my eyes drizzling strange liquid; and words of supplication would then come crawling from my lips—begging words, words of despair, poetic words, and words of hell.

But what I fear most...

The bats are flying about the window panes, the cold stars are gazing at me from a well—oh, undoubtedly the things that are feared most, in this world, are Death and God—GOD! who came strutting out of the desert, commanding his angels to keep an eye on the transgressing of the tribes...

And how could a person not be afraid of the one who is both the creator and destroyer, one who has the omnipotence, one who is responsible for earthquakes and disasters, wars and catastrophes?—who causes, every day, men to be shot and stabbed, babies to burn up in buildings and wailing ladies to be butchered by bandits?—God, the throne-bearer in the storm, the very creator of all humiliations and all tortures, of all demons, phantoms, evil eyes, horrible gnomes, evil tongues and ghosts... the one who created formless earth and deepest void... and who moved upon the face of the waters...

And Death, what is that?

The underworld... sin in the sky... white leprosy... angry faces, angry curses, ghoulish sounds...

Death, that is something of which I dare not speak, but—but, neither that, nor the other, are the things that make me quiver most terribly, and make my voice squeak like a hinge.

II.

I awoke with the birds and swallowed some coffee and puffed on some hashish, that invoker of soft clouds, hoping to calm my nerves, which felt uprooted—were quivering like the strings of some broken mandolin.

It was nine and my client was not due to not arrive until a quarter to eleven.

I nibbled on a piece of fruit and then put my body beneath the cleansing jets of the shower, rubbing it down with various products, hoping to reinvigorate it a bit with my hands of an artist.

By the time I had filed my nails and dressed I had no time to spare and it was fortunate that the fellow, a furniture designer from Cossato, a customer of long standing, arrived twenty minutes late.

“Relax,” I told him as he lay upon my table.

At the lowest of volumes I allowed the sound of flutes to play, to help set the mood, and then rubbed a little oil of the Nile lotus flower on my palms and went to work.

His body was layered with fat and his skin was soft, like that of well-kept woman. As I touched him, I could well tell that his energy points were in dire need of stimulation. I applied friction to his back, from above downward, and to his legs, from the hips downward, and as I did so I heard him let out a little moan, and then I gave him the firm pressure of my thumbs.

I kneaded an unguent of chamomile buds into his shoulders, pounded his back until I saw him shudder.

There are few indeed in this land of Piedmont who know the secrets of pharaonic massage—those hieroglyphic secrets which sweep away all muscular tension—let alone the Greek and Chinese systems...

When he arose from the table, he seemed like a holy man.

“Ah, thank you. I feel regenerated!”

He slipped a hundred euros into my hand and, with a step as light as that of a child of five, skipped down the three flights of stairs, the patter of his feet ringing out like a little drum.