

Lulea and Other Tales

by

Robert G. Brown

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Books by Robert G. Brown

- *The Book of Lilith*

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Lilith is the *first* person to be given a soul by God, and is given the job of giving all the things in the world souls by loving them, beginning with Adam. Adam is given the job of making up rules and the definitions of sin so that humans may one day live in an ethical society. Unfortunately Adam is weak, jealous, and greedy, and insists on being on *top* during sex to “be closer to God”.

Lilith, however, refuses to be second to Adam or anyone else. *The Book of Lilith* is a funny, sad, satirical, uplifting tale of her spiritual journey through the ancient world soulgiving and judging to find at the end of that journey – herself.

- *Who Shall Sing, When Man is Gone*

Original poetry (including the epic-length poem that gives the collection its name). Serious poetry on love and life, pain and death.

- *Hot Tea!*

More original poetry with a distinctly Zen cast to it. Works range from funny and satirical to inspiring and uplifting, with a few erotic poems thrown in.

- *Classical Electrodynamics*

A set of lecture notes intended to support the second semester of a two semester course based on J. D. Jackson’s book of the same name, although it can also stand alone as a textbook. These notes are under development (and are actively being used to teach) and are not guaranteed to be either complete or correct, but most students will nevertheless find them *useful*.

- *How to Engineer a Beowulf Cluster*

An online classic for years, this is the print version of the famous free online book on cluster engineering. It too is being actively rewritten and developed, no guarantees, but it is probably still useful in its current incarnation.

- *World Walker*

A straight-up science fiction novel about an adventurer, Sam Foster, who learns to walk between the walls of the Multiverse and finds himself immediately embroiled in a power struggle between its gods and their agents. Only Sam's swords and his native wit and character stand between Sam and many a bloody death!

All of these books can be found on the online Lulu store here:

<http://stores.lulu.com/store.php?fAcctID=877977>

The Book of Lilith is also available on Amazon, Barnes and Noble and other online booksellers, and one day from a bookstore near you!

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Lulea

(The Magic Cloak: Epilogue)

Queen Zixi of Ix (The Magic Cloak) was one of Frank L. Baum's most interesting stories. In it, a Fairy named Lulea constructs a magic cloak and gives it to mortals. The cloak was a standard one-wish device, no fair wishing for more wishes, with the usual ability to ruin the lives of its users who never manage to wish for the "right thing". A Moral Tale.

However, the *real* moral of the tale was, I think, missed. The following short story can be thought of a "missing chapter", or epilogue, that takes the story to an interesting but darker conclusion.

Lulea was still more than a bit peeved when she returned to her own special grove, deep in the enchanted woods. Making the magic cloak had been something of a lark, but deep inside she had thought that her cloak would bring happiness to those who wore it and made the one wish that its golden, magical thread would grant. Instead, the fools who had worn it had, more often than not, wished for something completely frivolous and been surprised when their ill-framed desires suddenly confronted them in the flesh, so to speak.

There had been the foolish counselors of the new boy-king. One had wished for a long reach (granted, as an accordian arm that had been instrumental in saving the kingdom from invasion). A second (by birth a short man) had wished to be ten feet tall and lived in constant pain thereafter as he struggled to find clothing, furniture, and food to fit his suddenly huge frame. A third (a servant) had wished for servants of his own, but didn't know what to do with the six he was granted, who would wait on him night and day but not lift a finger to help him with his own duties.

The worst, of course, was the Witch Zixi of Ix, who had used her own magical arts to live to six hundred and eighty three years of age (if

the records could be believed). Her form, to all eyes that beheld her, was that of a buxom maid of perhaps nineteen, and she was, for the most part, as good and wise as she was old. However, her magical arts could only alter her appearance, not the underlying reality of her age, and whenever she walked before a mirror it reflected her true self, a decrepit, wizened crone who looked more like the mummified remains of some ancient queen dug up by an ill-advised archeologist than a living human being. This, this *witch* had tried several times to steal the cloak from its rightful owner Fluff (who had unknowingly squandered her wish by desiring to become “happy” for a while). Finally, she succeeded, and immediately set about trying to wish her physical form to match the form that others saw.

It was almost a shame that the cloak had been built to grant no wishes to anyone who stole it (although it certainly worked just fine for those who came upon it unawares like the silly counselors). It would have been pleasant to see the look on the Witch’s face when she discovered that her youth granting spells no longer worked and indeed, her physical form and appearance once again coincided. Lulea had no real sympathy for mortals, especially mortal women, who had the temerity to seek the powers and prerogatives reserved exclusively for the immortals like herself. So finally she had taken the cloak back, put back the worst of the wishes (as she was not particularly cruel, for a Fairy) and left the rest to sort themselves out for better or worse until the magic wore off, as it always did.

She flew around the last tree, spinning and floating like a gossamer scarf, revelling in the sheer joy of being alive and beautiful. As her feet sank to the earth, she was shocked to find a human, smoking a curiously carved pipe, leaning back against the bole of the hollow tree that was her home (larger by far on the inside than on the out, as befits a Queen of the Fairies).

Although she was hard for mortal eyes to properly see even when she wished to be seen – light always seeming to find a way through the purity of a Fairy form – and was currently no more substantial in her dance than a puff of sparkly air, she quickly willed herself to a state of what should have been total invisibility.

Should have been seemed to be the way of it, for the man, who had thinning salt-and-pepper hair (what there was of it) on his shiny scalp and a grizzly three-day growth of unshaven beard adorning his not unattractive jaw, responded to her arrival and invisibility by lifting a

jaded eyebrow, puffing his pipe up a bit, and blowing smoke rings that hung in the still air of the glade, drifting up slowly into the overhanging branches above. Curious as well as irritated at finding a man in her private domain where he had no right to be, Lulea quietly drifted nearer.

The man's cool, blue eyes tracked her, piercing her disguise without effort, as she moved towards him. She stopped a few paces away, suddenly unsure of herself.

After a moment the man removed the pipe from his mouth and tapped it out against his earth-colored boot, which appeared to be made from soft leather. The rest of his outfit was unremarkable in its drab colors and the ease with which it was worn but remarkable in that it was a style and fit unknown in those times and places.

"Greetings," said the man to the startled Fairy Queen. "Have a seat. Pull up a toadstool or something...". He looked around distractedly for a moment, and finally gestured with his pipe to a smooth stone that grew out of the nearby hillside like a lichen-covered throne. It was, in fact, Lulea's throne when she held court in the shadowed glade.

Lulea allowed her obviously useless spell of invisibility to slip from her like a veil, pouring herself into the afternoon sun with a sigh. Her pride, though, remained wrapped around her as she held herself guardedly aloof from the presumptuous man who thus addressed her.

She moved easily across the glade and seated herself gracefully (as Fairies always do) on the very spot he indicated; far enough from the intruder to preserve her dignity (and her safety, which was even more important, should it come to that) and yet near enough to permit easy conversation.

Only when she was settled and comfortable did she deign to respond, although when she spoke it was with a guarded but still regal warmth.

"Who are you, oh mortal man, that you await the Fairy Queen near her bower? And pray, how is it that you can penetrate the wards that protected this glade and see me when I wish it not?" Fairy Queens, as one can see, were clearly given to flowery speech in that time.

"Oh, just a friend, just a friend. You can call me Max if you like, and I'll just call you Lu, all right?" He made the last more a statement

than a question, and even as Lulea was opening her mouth to protest (still gently, although anger at the impertinence of this stranger was slowly starting to boil up) he plowed on before she could speak. “As for how I got here – I walked. Right up that path over there. This seemed like a sunny spot to sit and wait for you. Finally, lots of folks end up being seen when they’d rather not be, so it should come as no really big surprise when it finally happens to you.”

This last was so close to a real insult (although it was gently said) that Lulea could no longer contain her anger. Now, it is never safe to anger a Fairy. They have powers, great powers, that go far beyond the simple powers to hide and dance and live forever (or nearly so).

Witches, for example, can be mighty powerful, but the power of witches, they say, is made up of only the *leftover* magic spilled from various Fairy charms. This is one reason that the Fairies dislike witches in general – they are jealous of their magic and dislike seeing even its dregs usurped by mortal humans.

The cloak that was even now draped across Lulea’s shoulders was strong magic, even more powerful than the strongest witch (which is why Zixi wanted so desperately to steal it). Its magical golden thread twisted through the very fabric of the Universe itself, or at least the part of the Universe in its immediate vicinity.

Oh, it wasn’t as powerful as it *could* have been, as Lulea (truth be told) wasn’t powerful enough to unmake the Universe itself, or bring the dead back to life, if one of the souls who wore the cloak had been so despondent or wicked as to wish for that sort of thing. It didn’t really have to be, as the words of mortals are slippery things. There was nearly always a way of twisting the words of a wish to lie within the strength of the cloak, a sort of natural economy of wishery (and magic itself), as it were. Besides, the cloak obviously wasn’t too intelligently built – it failed to distinguish between “real” wishes (as in I wish with all my heart) and the kind of petty, whining, easily fulfilled wishes that humans make ten (or even a hundred) of to one of the other kind.

But Lulea was far more powerful than the cloak, which vanished out of existence as she shrugged it off in her momentary rage and loosened up her sleeves while gathering her strength about her like a storm. Lulea was, of course, one of the most powerful of Fairies; she was a *Fairy Queen*, and if it is dangerous to anger a Fairy it is openly suicidal to even momentarily irritate a Fairy Queen.

In fact, suicide would probably be preferable to what a really *angry* Fairy Queen would do. Sleeping Beauty, for example, was put to sleep for a hundred years just because a Fairy Queen didn't like her dinner plate at a boring state function. Imagine what might have happened if she were served an eggplant-and-liver casserole on that same dinner place, accompanied by a cracked mug of white wine with an ice cube in it!

Fairy Queens do not do well in trailer parks. However, they are forced to pass through them from time to time as they wander through their domains, as trailer parks always seem to be built up, in often-messy confusion, right in the middle of the woods that are their home. No one can tell for sure, but this may explain why tornados seem inordinately fond of blasting trailer parks to smithereens.

For the moment the storm was still pent up – she had lived too long to be given to impulsive actions – but it was there all the same and crackled in her hair and glowed redly through her eyes and caused her flowing robes to billow away from the delicate body beneath. In an icy voice she said, “No, ‘Max’, you will not call me ‘Lu’. At least, you will not call me that twice. And mortals cannot just walk right through Fairy wards as if they aren't there. My name is indeed Lulea, but I am a Queen and you are in my domain. You may call me ‘your Highness’.”

Max paused for a moment while he tucked his pipe into his shirt pocket. He might have been watching the ghostly blue sparks arcing off of her perfect white teeth, or perhaps the Saint Elmo's Fire flickering like a shining nimbus off of the tips of her wild and beautiful hair. “Well, Lu, really you should think about the exact words of what you just said before you go blasting away with all that raw energy. Besides, I'm leaning against your very own Home Tree – you really don't want to turn it into a pile of toothpicks, now, do you?”

Lulea's eyes narrowed even further (if such a thing were possible) and the ruddy glow emanating from them was enough to light up the darker shade beneath the trees. However, she hesitated yet again, and not just because she actually *was* fond of her home and even though she could (naturally) put it back together again afterwards with a wave of her hand, it wouldn't really be the same. Either emotionally or physically, as she doubted that even her magic could completely disentangle the component atoms of this “Max” from those of her house if she unleashed the forces whose tiniest leakages were even now

ripping her gauzy garments completely off of her spatially distorting body.

Her exact words?

“You’re not a mortal,” she suddenly said with a pleased expression on her face. “Otherwise you couldn’t have made it through the wards.” Riddles and puzzles, especially *new* puzzles that hadn’t been heard a thousand times ten thousand years ago were *fun* to a Fairy. One at a time, and with no little effort, she boxed up the energies that were straining for self-expression within her and stored them back in her Fairy Wand, keeping them near and weaving an elaborate containment and direction spell that she might trigger in an instant if she should need to rip the second moon from the sky or boil an ocean.

Then she sat down, lovely but strange in her near nudity. Fairies, of course, are not human (or even mammals). Their bodies are a simulacrum of the human body, but the details of the form deviate where they are not strictly necessary to preserve the outer illusion. Consequently Lulea’s breasts were large and round, but lacked nipples, while between her legs she was totally smooth. She looked remarkably like a young girl’s Barbie doll with all its clothes removed, topped off with rather frizzy and disheveled hair. As she noticed his interested gaze she blushed prettily (a human affectation as physiologically unnecessary as the missing nipples) and with a gesture of her hand she was once again clad in flowing, silken raiments and her hair was perfectly coiffed.

“Preee-cisely,” said Max.

“How, then, may I serve you,” said Lulea quite demurely, her good humor quite restored by her pleasure in solving one simple puzzle, shortly before bottling up enough magical energy to flatten everything within a thousand miles of where they sat. “We surely haven’t met, as I’m certain I’d remember anyone as,” she paused, “‘unique’ as you.”

“Oh, I don’t need any service, in particular,” said Max. “I just happened to be in the neighborhood, sightseeing as it were, and I watched with great interest your social experiment. I thought I’d stop by just to chat a bit about it, as it has really intrigued me.”

Confused, Lulea bowed her head slightly and caught her lip in her teeth. “Forgive me, I pray,” she said, “but I fail to understand what you mean by ‘social experiment’.”

“Why, the cloak, of course!” said Max. “It was a brilliant idea! Whether your goal was to torment or instruct, few devices more fiendishly ideal than the cloak can even be imagined. I must confess, though,” he said, “that I don’t fully understand why you broke off the experiment and took the cloak back or why you designed it for only one wish apiece.”

Indignantly Lulea reared up her head and sat back on her throne, her eyes flashing with distant heat lightning once again. “This was no experiment, rogue!” she replied. “This was a well-intentioned gift. I wished nothing more than the good of mankind with my gift. I did not see then how they could twist the power of the cloak to evil, greedy or just plain foolish ends. Once I realized that mankind was not ready for the gift, I took it back to protect them from their own desires.”

Thoughtfully, Max pulled a different pipe from another pocket and began to load it with some sort of spongy brown leaf from an oilskin pouch. He moved with the practiced grace of age, his shrewd blue eyes never leaving Lulea’s. “Strange,” he said after a moment. “I fail to see how *anyone* could benefit from such a ‘gift’. It is so obviously a deadly trap that I felt sure that it was intentionally so. Are you seriously trying to tell me that you weren’t trying to punish those humans or at best teach them a painful lesson?”

“Never,” replied Lulea (while a medium sized lightning bolt darted from one of her fingertips as she momentarily lost control of the bottled up spell and blew apart the lower trunk of a hundred-year oak tree on the opposite side of the glade). “Would. I. Do. This.” Neither of them broke their locked gazes to glance at the falling tree. The tree, being a sensible bit of cellulose-supported vegetable, decided that falling away from the pair was wiser than falling upon them. “It would be *wrong*.”

Pulling a match from some inner pocket in his strange clothing that somehow lit on its own as he lifted it, Max applied the flame to the bowl of his pipe and drew for a moment to start it burning. A sweet, aromatic smoke once again drifted about the glade in strange shapes and colors, giving form to sunbeams as they fell to the mossy ground.

“If it is ‘wrong’ to punish them or teach them painful lessons, why did you give them the cloak, then. What did you expect to happen?”

“I expected them to use the cloak *wisely*. There is so much unhappiness, so much suffering in the mortal world. I wanted them to

have, at last, a chance at true happiness. The cloak could have done so much good.” She said at the last quite mournfully.

“Surely you are joking,” said Max. “If you really believed that, why didn’t you make the cloak grant its wearer more than just *one* wish, so they would have a chance to get the foolish wishes out of their system or at least repair the damage they caused on their own? Or, better yet, make the cloak so it would grant only serious wishes and not mere whines – wrap up the wishes in a little ritual or something so one couldn’t make an accidental wish if you tried. The way the cloak was designed, poor hapless humans didn’t stand a chance. I was *sure* it was deliberate.”

“Not at all,” steamed Lulea. “I made the cloak grant but a single wish because I feared that they would get greedy and spoil all that I was hoping that they’d accomplish. I might,” she conceded graciously enough, “have been a bit more careful on the accidental wish issue, but I and the girls didn’t think of that, as we Fairies always act with dignity and gravity and consider every action and forget that mortals are ephemeral and prone to impulsive behavior.”

“Nonsense!” scoffed Max. “If you wanted to make them happy, and thought that one wish might increase their happiness, then ten was bound to increase it still more. I claim that you knew perfectly well, from your own direct experience, that even a single wish would make them (for the most part) miserable and didn’t grant them ten because you’re not *that* cruel.”

“I beg to protest,” Lulea said (with a sniff that blew all the leaves off several nearby trees). “It was nothing of the sort. Several of the cloak’s wearers made wise use of the gift and are happier today. I fully expected them *all* to use it well and was sorely disappointed when it failed to work out that way.”

“Come come now, don’t try to fool me,” said Max with something of a sneer. “Why didn’t you permit poor Zixi to make a wish that would almost certainly have made her *happier* than she was before by removing one of the worst disfigurements that any creature could have – extreme old age? *There* was a clear case where a single wish could have gone a long way. Of course,” he mused, “she *did* phrase the wish particularly poorly, but that’s always the problem, isn’t it?”

“What do you mean,” said Lulea, suddenly wary.

“Well, who made both the wisest and the silliest wish with the cloak?”

“The wisest wish was probably made by Fluff, or perhaps her brother. Fluff wished for happiness and it was for this that the cloak was made. Her brother Bud wished to become a good King, and a good King brings happiness to himself and to his subjects. The most foolish was probably the wish of the General or the Lord High Executioner. I don’t know,” she said, “how any of these could be both wise and silly.”

“Hmmm, the truly insightful might think that the best thing a ‘good king’ could do for his subjects’ welfare would be to *abdicate*, since most of them would be happier serving themselves than serving another. But fine, let’s consider the wish by Fluff, since it illustrates the point most clearly.”

“After all, what better or more straightforward thing *could* one wish for? If one wished for food, it would be in the expectation that eating the food would provide comfort and happiness. If one wished for a bottomless purse of gold it would be in the expectation of the happiness that the gold could buy. If one wished to be a good King or to be taller or to be able to reach any unattainable goal, it would always, always be in the expectation that the granting of the wish would increase one’s happiness. A wish by *definition* is an expression of the future that one expects to increase one’s happiness (or to minimize one’s unhappiness, which amounts to the same thing). Fluff, as you note, cut out the middleman, as any *wise* person would do, would they not? She wished directly for happiness itself, without specifying the *means* by which she be made happy. Do you agree?”

“Yes, of course, the dear thing was both wise in her wish and generous with the cloak to others. Where lies the foolishness?”

“Don’t you see? Suppose that I owned your cloak, and wished to be happy for the rest of my life. There are three ways that I can see offhand that such a wish might be granted. First, I could become instantly happy in the full knowledge that my wish was being granted, and, before that burst of happiness faded, I could *die suddenly*. No one could then deny that I was happy for the rest of my life, could they? Alternatively, I could have some sort of cranial accident, the infarct of some part of the brain, the damaging of some critical endocrine system. The damage could be exactly what is required to provide a

lifelong feeling of wellbeing, hard-wired, as it were, into my brain so that regardless of what happened in my life – the death of my wife and children, starvation and cold, having my hands and feet cut off and fed to me in small bites – I would remain *happy*. An imbecilic sort of happiness, to be sure, but happiness nonetheless, regardless of whether it were accomplished by damage to the brain or some other alteration that left me so that not even the total mutilation of my physical self and all that I love in the world around me could budge me from my state of perfect bliss.”

“Only the third way, where the *entire Universe*, for the *rest of my long life*, conspires to make me *totally happy* while leaving me just as I am, is what I *meant* by the wish. Is it too much to ask for to be well fed, well clothed, interested in my work (so that it is play), interested in my play (so that it prepares me for my work), to be surrounded by a loving family and a world-wide community of people just as well-off and contented as I am so that not even the rumor of other people’s misery interrupts my own happiness? In the real world very likely *is* too much to ask for, but either way it is *obviously* the *real* intended outcome of this one, simple wish. Now,” he paused and pointed the stem of his pipe right between her eyes. “Is your cloak powerful enough to grant such a wish? Can it remake the entire Universe in such a way that it unwinds, like a little clock, only for the *good* for some *one human* for an entire, long – quite possibly infinitely long, if dying might make them unhappy – lifetime?”

“No” said Lulea in a tiny voice, appalled at her own naivety so ruthlessly revealed.

“What, therefore, is the expected outcome of such a ‘wise’ wish? Some combination of the first two at least, perhaps (to be charitable) mixed with as much of the third as is feasible, given the sphere of influence of a common magic cloak, even one made by a,” he gave a bow in her direction, “Fairy Queen Herself. The poor girl wasn’t named ‘Fluff’ for nothing. Her brain is undoubtedly damaged even now, and the minute that anything comes up that is beyond the ability of the cloak to control and that could seriously affect her happiness I fully expect her to drop dead.”

“She must have actually enjoyed the conquest of the Roly-Rough’s – I half expected her to die on the spot when it was announced – but clearly the notion of violence leading to her people being captured and pressed into abject slavery wasn’t enough to break the veneer of

magically induced happiness that holds *her* in thrall.”

“So you can see why I was interested in your experiment in torture and mayhem. Even the best, purest, wisest wish, to be interpreted and granted by a blind device with a limited ability to reorder All Things, is an open invitation to disaster. To be granted the power to have all our wishes instantly granted *even in the third way* is to be condemned to Hell. Something you might well consider, my dear ‘immortal’, next time you are looking for something stimulating to do after the leventy-zillionth Fairy Dance in the same old glade with the same old crowd of other immortals. What do you talk about, anyway? Hasn’t everything been said long, long ago? When any whim you might have, however small, is fulfilled in the twinkling of an eye at no personal cost, why bother to have whims? Life can be lived on a high plateau and still be flat as far as the eye can see. . . .”

A look of terror had gradually crept across Lulea’s eyes as she listened with growing horror to the words Max tossed so casually in her direction, swirling in and out of the roils and rolls of pipe smoke that now filled the glade with quite a magic display of their own. She fumbled to contain the spell she had carefully boxed up, but failed as she listened to everything she and the other Fairies had ever tried to do with their magic laid bare and barren before her. The dazzling light and heat of a magical blast that made the biggest nuclear bomb ever invented look like a wet firecracker erupted from all around the grove but failed, somehow to penetrate its wards. Their locked gazes remained unbroken even for a moment as half a continent outside the wards was subjected to the awful power of Lulea’s Wand. When the light faded the woods outside the glade were on fire (where any trees were still standing). There would be a lot to clean up.

“Who are you,” she almost croaked, if a Fairy Queen can ever croak. “Where did you come from and who are you, O creature of power?”

But now Max, if that was his name, was rising, knocking the pipe out against the still undamaged wall of her home tree. Its ashes and sparks swirled away into the raging firestorm outside, a firestorm that probably was even now consuming Bud, and Fluff, and Queen Zixi with her ancient heart surrounded by achingly beautiful facade. She would have much *indeed* to put right, later. If she survived.

Even an immortal can, if the circumstances are right, be made to

feel that moment of doubt that is the defining element of mortality, of the soul. No matter how powerful one may be, there are others (perhaps at other times, other places, but others nonetheless) who are more powerful still, until the sequence converges (if it converges) to the One who stands above and outside it all.

Max grinned and hummed a little tune that she didn't recognize, singing under his breath in a language that was unfamiliar to her. He broke off suddenly, grinning and translated. "...I'm a man of wealth and taste... Never mind, you can't get the joke. Anyway, who I 'am' is unimportant. Really. Because I have been cursed just the way that you inadvertently cursed those poor sots back in that stinking excuse for a town. Noland, indeed!"

He continued, "They say (quite correctly) that witch magic is left-over Fairy magic, waste energy as it were. Did you ever stop to consider where Fairy magic (with all its selfish, wish-fulfilling power) *itself* comes from? I'll tell you. It too is leftovers. *My* leftovers. I once wanted something very, very badly and tried, foolishly, to take it. As a punishment, the very thing that I wanted, *exactly* what I wanted, was *granted* to me. *I have infinite power!*"

He seemed to swell, momentarily, and for a moment his eyes were swirling holes, yawning open and ready to swallow her entire Universe. Stars, no, entire Galaxies were born, fell endlessly through the night only to crash back into oblivion *in his mouth*. Strength and magic careened around the glade, flooding Lulea with more power than ever she had experienced or thought possible, flashing the surrounding, ruined countryside through all the myriad possibilities of state until it collapsed, like the beads in a kaleidoscope, back into the form it had when the encounter in the glade began, with a lazy afternoon sun penetrating the leafy bowers and birds singing in the distance. The man, too, collapsed back into himself, and he began to paw at his pockets, searching, as it were, for another pipe and his pouch.

"Only to find, now that I've got it, that I want *nothing*. In every sense that one can mean it. I've spent eternities in a state of near catatonia, but I am not permitted to unmake my Self, only to furnish the room, so to speak, in which I must live all alone. In recent eternities it has been a bit better. I've learned a bit of the trick of imagining creatures, like yourself, with free will and all its attendant paradoxes, amongst all the things animate and inanimate that accompany me here – *in Hell*."

“On good days, for a while, I can simulate pleasure and desire. Like today – it has been, well, almost a pleasure talking to you. But,” he wagged his pipe stem at her, “no more magic cloaks. Not good for the countryside, flawed and imperfect as it is. And I wouldn’t be so snooty about being an ‘immortal’ if I were you. Infinity is a long, long time to be trapped in a private reality. I should know...”

He patted at his pockets, looking for something. “Where are those matches, darn it! I know they’re here somewhere. I *want* those matches.” Suddenly, out of nowhere, a book of matches appeared and fell gently into his hand. He fumbled them straight through his fingers as if they didn’t exist (and then, they didn’t, somehow fading from view as they fell to disappear without a trace before they reached the ground) and continued to pat his pockets. “I want the *real* matches, they have to be *real*.”

Finally, as he pawed around inside his shirt pocket a beatific smile crossed his face. His trembling fingers pulled out a solitary, unburned kitchen match that flashed into fire as he gazed upon it and put it lovingly to his pipe. Wreathes of strange-smelling smoke once again began to surround his head with clouds, and as he walked out of the glade the clouds followed him, and seemed to thicken, to whiten, to look like *real* clouds. He was at the same time stepping into the trees on a sunny afternoon and wandering off into the clouds themselves, decended to the earth. At the very edge of sight he paused, looked back, and said, very distinctly, the words that burned in Lulea’s brain long, long afterward.

“Sometimes, you see, if I leave things absolutely free and alone I can fool myself into believing that everything is *real* once again. It’s the only mercy I was granted, these brief respites in the company of a being, even a being that I probably somehow created, that is a pale and weak shadow of my Self that can still make *choices* in a world that they *don’t control*. And hope, of course. Even *I* am permitted to *hope*.” He made a sound that was half laugh and half sob, and turned away into the mists.