

Hypnagogue

by M. I. Burton

Marcus rolled over to hear Leigh crashing around in the bathroom. She was swearing under her breath as she hastily applied makeup.

“What now?” he yawned.

“I’m going to be late for Hypnagogue,” she explained. Her mouth formed the O of eyeliner. “I’m going to miss Communion and if I miss that I might as well not go.”

Marcus stretched and rearranged the sheets to better cover his long legs. Okay, so he had a religious live-in girl friend. At least she wasn’t thumping bibles on a street corner or giving away flowers at the airport.

Something in the bathroom broke: something glass. “Damn!” and the sounds of Leigh picking pieces off the floor.

There’s a piece of glass my foot will find later tonight Marcus thought. He let his feet slide out of the bed and into his sandals. The sheet made an excellent toga and he started posing around the room. “We come bury Caesar, not to praise him....”

Leigh’s head poked out of the bathroom. “You look like Pontius Pilate.”

“Yeah,” he answered. “But you need to get out of my bathroom so I can wash my hands.”

“You should come with me...” she chirped. “You’d feel better.”

Maybe. When Marcus had met Leigh she was living on the streets and eating like a stray cat. He bought her some coffee and they got to talking. It turned out she cleaned up into a rather attractive young lady. Add to that, she was more than happy to cook and clean for rent.

But then she got religious and started going to Hypnagogue. And then she started doodling on napkins at bars and receipts at the store and on the artist’s paper Marcus bought her. Soon she was having openings at galleries and doing work that made Marcus’ award winning ads look like they belonged on a refrigerator.

It was depressing; her hobby was outdoing his career.

Leigh slipped past him and out the door. “See you later.”

Marcus shuffled into the kitchen to see what was in the fridge. Not much--leftovers from the Indian restaurant last night. Curried chicken was unpleasant cold; it was worse re-heated. He washed off an apple and went out on the balcony.

The city stretched its great glass back. *No, that was the glass cat ad--something about flea spray.* But looking at it now, it was a cat: its tail wrapped around the bay and its claws ripped at the suburban carpet. The cat’s eyes glittered and winked.

And now that Marcus looked closely at the eyes, he could make out the beacon of Hypnagogue. Great light whiskers of spotlights shot up from the base of the dome. *How many will find their god tonight?*

There may be time, get there on time—Of course, why not? If it could raise a street urchin like Leigh out of the gutter than what could it do for an award winning graphics designer? He dropped what was left of the apple and rushed inside to dress.

It was so simple. She was maybe cheating on him at this place, yes? Why did she get so dressed up? It wasn’t to just be seen—she could do that at the gallery. He’d go down there and find out who this guy was that inspired his little moppet to do great things.

Or maybe it was just some wild drug craze. That was it. He’d go down and bust the whole

operation and be a hero. Just like the raves from the late nineteen-eighties. That's what it was. That's what communion was. He'd have to hurry to catch what was going on...

A death cult! Maybe... He'd find out.

The street in front of the temple was full of kids—most of them no older than twenty-five. They dressed in bright, garish colors (some wearing flashing badges, some in multi-colored twinklers). Marcus noticed most of the boys wore velvet or other high-texture clothing. The girls wore short skirts; their legs alone would be tactile invitation.

Halfway up the stairs Marcus felt the music deep in his chest. His left arm started to tingle and he pressed his shirt over his heart.

That's why they're so young, they can take this abuse... Inside his heart fought against the pounding beat. *We all march to a different drummer, he thought. Viva le differance...* But, no—his heart had started to match the beat—pounding in his ears and chest.

Marcus caught his breath and bounded up the stairs. Looking back, he saw the kids behind him clutch their chests and stop. Their bodies have to get used to it too.

There were no guards at the front--no one to sell tickets, no one to check for ID's, no one to check for weapons. The music was deafening. Inside, there was cheering and laughter.

The place was huge! Everyone was moving and singing with the music. It had no real lyrics; kids were making it up as they went along.

Dance, dance, sing, sing. Everyone, the joy of being!

Such an array of colors! Images from around the world flashed on the walls, on the ceiling, on the hundreds of teeming people. There were no individuals—only the bumpy canvas of human heads.

Someone brushed against him, then another, then another. The smell of sweat was nauseating; Marcus wrinkled his nose at the acrid scent. He wanted to push back and keep them out of his personal space; that had no meaning here. Everyone touched everyone else. They touched hands; they touched hips.

He was being swept up by the crowd.

Bowls were being passed around—large plastic containers filled with wafers no bigger than a credit coin.

Someone would take a handful and pass it as far as their arms could reach. Someone pressed a wafer into Marcus' hand and he flipped it in his fingers.

It is a drug cult. I'll bet they're taking LSD or MDMA or speed. That's why they can dance all night. What a crock. They just trip and listen to music and look at the flashy lights.

He slipped the wafer into his pocket and started to push towards the door.

“Don't waste it,” yelled a young man behind him. “Stop trying to be outside and join the rest of us.”

“Join in what? A stupid trip?”

“You are too far gone,” the boy said and turned his back.

Hands reached out to him. Everyone was pressing against each other.

Someone behind Marcus pushed their way to the young man: a girl in red shorts and black top. Her blonde hair whisked against Marcus' arm. Her face beaming with so much pleasure just looking at the boy...

Someone else pushed elsewhere. Slowly, people were teaming up: boys and girls, boys and boys, girls and girls, groups of two, three, four.

Dance, sing, enjoy being!
Everyone is here together,
We're all part of human being!
Everyone is happy here.

Marcus rolled his eyes. *Collective soul, blah, blah, blah. I guess you have to be young to enjoy that kind of shit.*

The music pounded harder and the dance sped up. Everyone was starting to dance the same dance. Marcus' heart beat faster with the sound but was afraid to join in. *The exertion will kill me...* They hopped up and down and stopped singing lyrics, just one long chant.

Enjoy, be, try, exceed, live, respect, create, together.

Over and over again. There were no screens showing the words and the chant wasn't part of the music; it was just an understood thing. Everyone knew the words; those who didn't soon caught on. Some boys had climbed on top of each other's shoulders. Arms swinging with the chant, they resembled giant insects. Hive mentality.

Marcus now fought for the door; he had seen and heard enough. It was a waste of time and the only thing he was going to get out of staying was more sweating and shoving.

They're all so happy and stupid; I wish...what? No, I don't want to be like them. They're just caught up in the moment and tomorrow they'll regret spending so much energy. They're just young and don't understand anything about responsibility.

The tempo was increasing. The chant had stopped and was becoming a long, drawn out note. People started to harmonize and the note got stronger. They were just doing it. No one was in charge; it was just a bunch of kids jumping around.

If something were to go wrong...

Behind him a girl collapsed. The others cleared a path and three girls carried her out. Again. Another. A young boy now. Each time, the others would clear a path and someone would carry them outside.

This kind of thing must happen all the time. Do they have any idea how much danger they're putting themselves in? It's amazing no one's been stepped on. I bet it used to happen all the time. This is crazy. I've got to get out and warn someone about this place.

One girl came out of the crowd, walking straight for him. Her long, supple limbs moving with the rhythm, just walking, not dancing. She touched his shoulder. He had been touched and jostled all night, but there was something more deliberate about her actions. Marcus reached up to remove his hand and a spark shot through him.

How soft her skin is...

She gestured softly to her breasts. "I'm Beatrice."

He jabbed at his chest with his thumb. "I'm leaving."

"You're beautiful," she ran her fingers through his hair. "You have so many pictures in your head. Why don't you share them?"

Marcus looked towards the door. It seemed so far away with so many dancing bodies in the way.

"What do you do for a living?" Beatrice asked.

"I'm an artist."

"We all are—in our own way," she smiled.

"I'm a professional."

"So am I."

There was something soothing about her. Marcus was immediately calmed by her presence. He rested a hand on her hip. "Professional what? Artist?"

"Yes," she moved his hand from her hip to her breast. "I'm a dancer."

"Oh..." Ordinarily he'd roll his eyes and mutter "whore" under his breath; but now, it didn't seem so silly. Maybe she was a ballerina. Not all dancers were strippers. Perhaps a swing instructor for one of the retro clubs. "What kind of dancer?"

She kissed him. "Horizontal."

Marcus laughed and cupped his ear. "What?"

She leaned in, her breath brushing the tiny hairs on his ear lobe. "I'm a prostitute."

"Really?" She was playing with him. Maybe she was vice-squad or something. It helped Marcus get his mind off the chaos around him. "How much do you charge?"

"Tonight I'm free," she swung her hands behind his head and tingles went up and down his spine. "It's my night off and I want to make an offering to the human race."

"I've never heard anything so..." *stupid* "...wonderful before. Do you always make an offering like this?"

She dropped her hands to his shoulders and gave him a hard stare. "You're new. You've never done this before, have you?"

"This is my first time."

"For Hypnagogue, you mean."

The pulse in the background was rising again and Marcus felt his heart jump; he was starting to lose his breath. Beatrice rested the back of her hand against his cheek. "You okay? I don't think you can take much more of this..."

"Let's go," Marcus gasped. "Let's get out of here and go to your place."

"Alrighty," she grinned and took his hand.

He allowed himself to be led.

Beatrice's apartment was less than a hasty minute's walk from Hypnagogue. Her faithful couch sat waiting under the window. The bookcase was crowded with poetry books and note-pads. Papers strewn across the floor crinkled as Marcus walked to the bedroom.

"Do you bring all your 'tricks' here?" he asked.

Beatrice laughed and started unbuttoning his shirt. "No, this is my little home-away-from-home. Our madam likes us to have places of our own where we don't do business. It arouses...less... suspicion." She licked his right nipple.

"You have a madam?" She was a whore; she wasn't kidding.

"Of course," Beatrice was undoing her bra. "It's safer, the pay's better, and it gives us a clean place to do our thing. The guys are willing to shell out the big bucks and that makes up for the percentage. I wouldn't do it any other way."

Marcus stopped her from undoing his belt buckle. "You do it as a job and for fun? I would think you'd get sick of it. The last thing I would want to do would be..."

"I do it to pay bills and eat--when I do it for the client," Beatrice moved his hands. "Tonight I'm doing it because I want to. Not just for you, but myself as well. You understand?"

Leigh...

"I can't," Marcus nervously buckled his pants and started searching for his shirt. "I have a girlfriend who lives with me and this is effectively cheating on her. I can't do this."

She handed him his shirt. "Am I going to see you tomorrow?"

“We haven't exchanged numbers, so...no.”

“Then what harm is it doing?”

Marcus turned his sleeves right side in. “The harm is...”

“There is no harm,” she sat on the bed and undid her shoes. “We might never see each other again, there's no emotional involvement, and you're not going to give your girl-friend any less love. If it makes you feel better, you don't have to tell her. If you do, you can always send her over to me to talk it out. You're not spending any money. I've made sure I'm not going to get pregnant. I get tested on a regular basis, so you're not going to catch anything from me and I have plenty of condoms if you like. You're a lot like my usual clientèle, so I know what we can and can't do. If things get out of hand, we can always stop. You can leave any time you like. If you don't want to fuck, I can make some coffee and we can just sit and talk or listen to music. Like I said, I am a professional and that takes a lot more than screwing. So...what's the harm?”

Marcus had finished buttoning his shirt. “It's just wrong.”

“But you want to. I could see that at Hypnagogue.”

“That's not the point.”

Beatrice was laying nude on the bed now; the sheet cupped her hip. “You got in late and missed Communion. That's a damn shame. Now you won't understand how we're all the same.”

Marcus pulled the tiny wafer out of his pocket. “I didn't miss it.”

“Why didn't you take it with everyone else?”

He flipped the tiny thing on his fingers. “I didn't know what it was.”

She grabbed a pillow from behind and placed it in front of herself. “You let your fear ruin what could have been the best night of your life?”

“With you?”

She snorted. “With anyone. With the entire human race. What a waste of time you turned out to be.”

Outside it had started to rain. Great sheets of water fell past the faithful couch. Lightning flashes picked up on every curve of Beatrice's body—what she would let him see, at least.

Marcus slipped the wafer into his mouth. The taste was citric and it dissolved rapidly on his tongue. “There.”

But her eyes were tearing up already. “It's too late. We're not together at all and it would just be a waste of time. If you had taken it when everyone else did, you'd be at the same level. Or if you hadn't taken it at all... No wonder you couldn't dance. I wanted to make an offering and now it's too late. Goddamn your stupid, fearful selfishness! Get out!”

Marcus was fumbling with his shoes. “But...but, Beatrice...”

“No! You hate me and everyone else. You wanted to roll your eyes when I said I was a dancer. You're disgusted by my apartment. I picked you because you were afraid and I wanted you to be happy; but then I find out you think shared joy is wrong just because someone told you it was. How can you be an artist?”

Marcus' throat was getting tight. “I...I am. I'm a graphic artist. I do ads in magazines. I...I design things. I market things.”

She threw the other pillow at him. “All you do is observe people. How can you talk to them without being one? You hate people and you won't be one. You're such a worthless shit; you just want to ruin things you can't have. Your girlfriend knows how to talk to people and you never will because you're stuck in a box and you want to pull everyone in with you.”

“What are you, psychic?” Marcus scoffed. *Great, a full-time whore and part-time mind reader is telling me I'm a worthless shit because I won't fuck her on her night off.*

“No,” Beatrice said, answering his thoughts. “A full-time entertainer and a full-time empath is

telling you to get out because you robbed her.”

Marcus stood up and walked towards the exit.

“You robbed me of my offering!” She shouted as he shut the door.

Outside was worse than it looked from Beatrice's apartment. The water was that much colder, that much more wet. The cement was that much harder, that much more gray. The alleys were darker, the light reflected off the clouds more dim.

Alone.

The Pub-Trans had stopped running and walking was going to be a long trip.

A long trip indeed...The drug from Communion had started to take effect. Each raindrop was a splash of cold water. Each flash of lightning a thousand times more blinding than the display from Hypnagogue. Each thunderclap a thousand times more deafening. He heard it not just in his heart, but the soles of his shoes. In my very soul...

The fight with Beatrice had insulted him. *She called me a thief—a god-damned thief. An auto buzzed by. What did I ever take from her? I can't cheat on Leigh. Being psychic must screw with their heads.*

How wonderful it would be to be in bed now. Marcus imagined himself wrapped around Leigh, his hand on her thigh.

His hand on Beatrice's thigh...

No, that was someone else. One of those free-love people who doesn't understand a monogamous relationship. *What do those people know about dedication, devotion, faith...any of that?*

The alleys were dark ominous scars between buildings. Any moment some pus of muggers would run out; he could see panhandlers discharging into the street. *The fleas on my great glass cat.*

Beatrice was right; he hated people. He hated the smell, the touch, the annoying, grating voices. Leigh liked public outings; she was better suited for gallery openings.

Where does she get off calling me a selfish shit? The wind was picking up and needles shot through Marcus' wet clothes. *She's just a stupid little whore in a stupid little drug-cult talking about free love and why-can't-we-all-get-along and mother earth and all that shit.* Thinking about it made him angrier. *Her and her holier-than-thou crap. 'We're all connected—we're all the same.' What tripe.* Marcus' stomach turned. *They're just a bunch of puerile sheep looking for a slaughterhouse. That psychobabble about biorhythms and the collective stream of...*

A flower peeped out from the cold sidewalk. Marcus stepped on it and started to grind it into the pavement. “Stupid flower! Don't you know this is the city? You're not supposed to grow here! Nothing grows here!”

“That's a pity,” a girl was standing across the street under an umbrella. “Do you have to kill it just because it tries harder than you?”

“Fucking hippie!” Marcus shouted back.

She laughed and started to walk away. “Fucking *dry* hippie.”

Alone again. Don't go. I'm cold. I'm frightened.

Marcus ran across the street after her. He was just about to grab her shoulder when she swung around. Something hard hit him in the gut.

She had a gun.

“Are you going to beat up the poor fucking hippie and steal her umbrella? Get away from me you drunk bum.”

Marcus dropped his hand. “I'm not drunk.”

“So you're just a hostile son-of-a-bitch who likes to bother girls on their way home from work?” Marcus heard her cock the gun. “Back off, bum.”

“I'm not a bum.”

She laughed. “You're walking around in the middle of the city, in the middle of the night, in the middle of a rain-storm. Yeah, right, you're not a bum. Get the fuck away from me or I'll drop you where you stand.”

She took three steps back and Marcus turned away. She kept the gun on him until he was back across the street.

“Don't be so agro and maybe someone will give you some change!” she shouted and continued on her way, occasionally checking to see he wasn't following her.

Marcus resumed his walk home.

I had no idea the city was so large. Without Pub-Trans, Marcus had to make the trip above ground, watching street signs to make sure he was going the right way. I should have taken my auto he thought. I'm going to get sick. Hell, I am sick. The way I jumped after that girl. Christ, I'm lucky she didn't kill me. God, no wonder she pulled a gun; I'll bet she gets that kind of shit all the time. I'll bet she got mugged or worse one night and won't ever let it happen again. I am a bum. I've been bullshitting most of my life, thinking I was some kind of genius when I'm really just a fucking hack. Leigh has so much more talent and I...I picked her off the street so I could have a grateful little pet to make me feel young again or make me feel like I was in control of things again and...she just gets better and better while I get worse and worse.

Marcus shook his head. The drug from Communion was running through his system, picking up any emotion and cramming it under a microscope.

I am a selfish shit. I wanted to discredit her religion and went in like a thief. I am a thief. I stole a wafer and I didn't know what to do with it and now it's wasted. Someone else could have taken it and been in the right place and had a good time. Now I'm paying for my sin.

He was crossing the bridge now—the midnight mass swirling beneath. He watched the Great Glass Cat stretch out its back. *I could end it all right now and no one would care. Leigh would care. Poor Beatrice. I should have stayed with her. It would have been warm and dry and it wasn't like I had to tell Leigh what happened. I could have just stayed there—maybe had a few cups of coffee and listened to music or read one of her books.* He looked back the way he had come. The trip was half over and by the time he got back to Beatrice... *She won't let me back in. I'm fooling myself. She tossed me out because I wouldn't let her in on...on how I felt about her. God, she had such nice skin. If I had only stayed she could have run her soft fingers all over me and... Marcus imagined the supple limbs and warm tan skin. I wouldn't participate and she...she would have known.*

I want to be home.

The rain had let up. He was in a less well off section of town and streetlights flickered on and off; no one would fix them.

This is who I am. Cut off from the world and trying to do it on my own. I couldn't accept help if I wanted to. I push people away and I get what I deserve. I want to be alone and they sense that. He laughed to himself. They sense how I feel about them.

Maybe we're all a little psychic. We must be. A city like this isn't one man's vision. It takes a lot of people to make a city like this. People want to be together; that's why they build cities. It makes them feel safe to have more of their own kind nearby. Maybe. Maybe once.

That girl was going to kill me. She was that frightened. Oh, I was scared; but, I could smell the fear off her, the rage, the indignation. She wanted to hurt me because she's been hurt so many times before and I was just another aggressor. She thought I wanted to hurt her and I didn't. I just...I just wanted to be dry. I wanted to walk with her to wherever she was going: someplace warm and dry.

Marcus shut his eyes and pictured a Japanese print of a couple under an umbrella. Like a heart with an arrow shot through; it meant the same thing. For the first time, he understood why. *They keep each other dry and warm. People keep each other dry and warm. That's why they build cities. Warm*

and safe, safe, and dry, safe...

The rain started up again. Pulling the jacket close would do no good; it would only draw the wet fabric next to the goose bumps beneath.

I want to curl up with Leigh and keep her safe and warm.

I want Leigh to keep me safe.

Leigh understands people. She can talk to them. What was it Beatrice said? 'How can you talk to them without being one?' she's so right. I think I'm better than them and Leigh doesn't and that's why her art is better than mine. She...speaks to them--in their own language. She's tapped into something I cut away a long time ago because I thought it made me weak. We're all so weak—so weak and tiny we had to get together to be bigger than that. More than the sum of the parts. One plus one equals three because you have the unit and the unit is so much stronger than its parts.

The buildings were looking more familiar. Marcus found his street and looked for his apartment.

The only lone wolf is a sick wolf, an old wolf, and wolf walking away to die in the snow.

He fumbled for his keys. His fingers were so cold he couldn't feel the sharp tang of the metal.

click

Leigh was sitting on the couch, sipping hot tea. The fireplace next to her was the campfire of an ancient tribe. She was all warmth, all love, safety, and togetherness.

“Leigh?”

Her head snapped up, the shudder almost spilling her cup. “Marcus! My god, where have you been?” She set her tea down and ran up to him. “You're soaked!” Wet jacket—off. Wet shirt—off. Wet shoes, wet pants, wet socks—off.

Marcus huddled naked by the door. Leigh had run off to the bathroom and returned with a dry, warm towel. She rubbed his body vigorously.

I'm a newborn kitten. Mama cat is bathing me.

He laughed.

“What's so funny?” she barked. “You're going to get sick standing there. Get off your ass and warm up over here.”

Marcus stumbled slowly to the fireplace drying his hair and sat on the hearthstones. The heat dried his skin and radiated through him. It was wonderful.

“Where have you been?” Leigh fussed. “I caught a ride back from Hypnagogue and you weren't here. I was so worried. You hadn't taken the auto and everything was locked up—I thought you had fallen off the balcony or something. I didn't know what was going on and I was so scared for you...”

“I went to Hypnagogue,” he explained.

“You...you what?”

“I went to Hypnagogue,” he repeated.

“Oh,” she seemed more confused and worried now. “How did you like it?”

“I left with a hooker.”

She laughed. “Was she any good?”

“She was an empath. She told me to get out because I was a worthless shit.”

She huddled down in her seat and sipped at her tea. “How much did she cost?”

Marcus rubbed the towel across his face. “She said she wanted to do it for free, as an offering to the human race. I told her I couldn't because I have a girl friend. That's when she threw me out.”

“You should have stayed with her,” Leigh mumbled.

Marcus looked up from his feet. “Should have...? I didn't sleep with her—I mean—I wanted to, yeah, but any normal man would have but I didn't because I didn't want to hurt you and...”

“It wouldn't have hurt me,” Leigh smiled. “That was her offering. She wanted to share something and you wouldn't let her. You probably hurt her and yourself more than anyone else.”

Marcus was dumbfounded. “Do you make offerings like that?”

Leigh reached out and took his hand. “My artwork is my offering. That's how I share myself with the human race. I want to give it to people; I don't do it for money.”

“I see,” Marcus took her hand and rubbed his lips with her fingers. The sensation was incredible. *Her fingers were so...* he could feel every groove of her fingerprints.

“Did you take Communion?” she asked.

“I didn't take it when everyone else did. I took it right before Beatrice threw me out.” He moved her fingers over his nose, his eyebrows, his chin.

“Beatrice? That was her name?”

“Yes.”

“And then you walked all the way back, in the rain, without an umbrella?” she asked.

“Yes,” he answered. Her fingers were so wonderful. He rested her palm against his cheek; the warmth radiating off her was so soothing.

Leigh set her tea down. “Okay, you big baby, let's get you to bed.”

“Okay, Mommy,” he said softly.

She laughed and took Marcus' hands. Slowly, she lifted him up from the fireplace into the apartment, her long robe brushing his ankles as he stood. Together they entered the bedroom.

“Were you aware of the fact that you glow?” Marcus asked.

She turned down the sheets and slipped out of her robe. “I've been told that.”

“Well,” he said. “It's true. You really do. You have a calming aura about you and I want...I would like it very much if...if you could...”

She giggled softly and brushed her hair out of her eyes. “Would you like to bask in my nice warm glow?”

“Yes,” he smiled. “I would like that very much.”