

# Heaven

*(From Where They Arrive)*

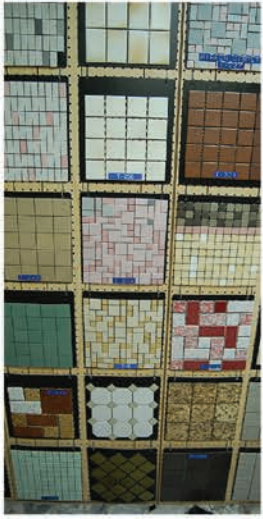


JORDAN BARSE

Robin prayed to Ryūjin for the strength and elan to carry out the rest of the Barrister project without the crutch of her wreckless assistant. She prayed to achieve spatial harmony, functional design that would meet the needs that her clients didn't even realize they had yet, awakening them to a higher purpose to their time on Earth. She prayed for a partner that might reinvigorate her dormant sex life, and one that had nice taste in music or art. She prayed, reconsidering Ryūjin's lane, for the protection of the vaquita, a beautiful and increasingly endangered species of porpoise native to the Gulf of California. She prayed for the end of this dreadful recession.



for Jacques



The Sorohāto Temple was a small former office space on the eighth floor of a mid-century modern black glass building. Shortly after the unit was purchased by devout and affluent Shintoist financiers in 1988, the floor's brown wall-to-wall carpet had been excavated and paved over with smooth Japanese cobblestones imported from a notable quarry, in the pattern of the Triple Tomoe, which was like a circular formation of a comma-like swirl. The walls were painted a bright midnight blue and out of the center of the Tomoe rose a radiant cedar kamidana shrine.

## Heaven (From Where They Arrive)

### Part One

Robin arrived at Sorohāto breathless, euphoric, and suddenly no longer needing to pee. It felt like dopamine was radiating from her central nervous system out through her aura and she just had so much energy to share with Ryūjin. Amazed to find the temple empty, Robin eclipsed the silence of the room with the pounding of her elevated heartbeat. She placed one hundred dollar bill in the monetary offering box and rang a bell to invoke Ryūjin, the dragon god with a palace under the sea made of red and white coral. She hung her head in silent supplication, worshipping Ryūjin for his heavenly aquatic dwellings adorned with magical tide jewels that controlled the whims of water and graciously subjected turtles and fish to indentured servitude in the way that only a benevolent, yet fearsome dragon god can.

by Jordan Barse



## Act I

Robin quickly rotated her free wrist one hundred eighty degrees, back and forth, imagining she might stop the hand on her mother-of-pearl watch from ticking against her will. She billed by the job, not the hour, and her hiring of Peter, a recent graduate with acne scars and an increasingly apparent penchant for failure was barely built into the budget. Through the receiver a pre-recorded showroom mission statement was halfway through its third loop.

“OK, hi—sorry,” Peter’s shaky voice cut in. “So I told them what you said... but what they’re telling me, I guess, is that the order was never actually placed? Because I guess they don’t accept new orders from clients with unpaid bills? But they’d be able to get the curtains ready for pickup in two weeks if we messenger a check over today!”

“Peter,” said Robin, “That check? Was supposed to be brought over by *you* in June, was it not?”

“Actually—” Peter said. Muffled voices hurled rebukes and disavowals at Peter from the background. Another line was ringing in the showroom.

“Can you get off our goddamn phone already?” carped Lucinda, the Brunswick & Fils showroom manager. It was almost impressive how easily Peter could piss on the operations of two businesses at once. Surely destiny had another professional plan for him. Perhaps a lounge singer or stay-at-home dad.

“Peter,” she said kneading her temples. “Peter, dear, I really can’t go through this again with you. I gave you that check weeks ago. I have the finishing carpenter coming to Connecticut tomorrow at nine in the morning and two deliveries to sign for on Monday. The shoot with AD is next Wednesday— non-negotiable. I need those valences installed before then. Do you understand? I’m up to my ears in bloody problems and I sent you across town with the express purpose of solving *one* of them. For God’s sake, Peter! If you can’t get these curtains, just don’t come back. Leave your keys with my doorman on your way home and I’ll drop your last paycheck in the mail on Monday.”



In her interiors, Robin strove to create total environments, not just rooms. She believed that one should feel constantly charged by the harmony of spatial arrangement and that if one’s surroundings are attractive, then that attractiveness reflects directly onto the inhabitant. She had been finding a lot of strength in the meditative practice of Shintoism. When Robin felt dejected or uninspired she took one of her little white pills and walked to East 49th Street to sit before the kamidana and reconnect with her gods.

★



She rolled her red desk chair over to the humming PC and jiggered the mouse to revive it from its screensaver dream state. On an invoice to Mr. and Mrs. Don Barrister she itemized the latest antiques with a range of subtle value adjustments. The glass apple could easily go for \$1,200 to someone who'd never been to Murano. The 1927 ambroyna sideboard was marked up by \$7,000. The Josef Hoffmann dining chairs, whose lacquered bentwood had been variously nicked upon acquisition and gingerly retouched with black paint, were valued at double what Robin paid. The hours she spent phoning around to every dealer she knew, plus the cost of shipping the damned things from Brussels (of all places, of course Brussels) more than legitimized her case. Which was what, exactly?

Well, it was that her competitive flat rate designer's fee, lighter in weight than the Roberts, Angelos, Marios and Peters that ruled the sea she was drowning in, was hardly sufficient to maintain the kind of lifestyle that made a designer like her seem so chic and fun to work with. When that S.T. Dupont Laque de Chine ballpoint pen exploded in her nylon Prada messenger two weeks ago and she showed up to old the Rosensteins' townhouse with that big purple stain, Walter Rosenstein actually asked her if she would leave her belongings in the mud room "just to be safe". She bought a new bag with the 40% tax she imposed on the Apogee upholstery for Walter's home office.



Robin hung up before he could plead or contest. It wasn't even that urgent, if she was being honest, but it *should* have been done by now. If she had been managing everything herself it probably would be, and she would be just as exhausted. Teach a man to fish and it takes precious time away from focusing on your own fishing game. Her temple throbbed, and there was a little red blur on her skin where the watch had begun to chafe from the wrist flicking. She returned to her legal pad and drew several hasty ovals around the checklist item *B & F Curtains*. What else was there?

- *Mercier Frères cabinet*
- *K.M. sconces*
- *Bathroom tiles*
- *Clarence House upholstery*
- *throw pillows—make sure proper spheres this time*
- *Naga Antiques!!!*
- *Uchide-no-Kozuchi*
- *Arrange Victorian carpet balls*



It was 6:30 pm and the last things Robin ate were a croissant and Granny Smith apple at 11. She groped at her pocket impulsively, feeling for the little orange bottle. Not now. The phone rang, and at the risk of further irritation from her ex-assistant she lowered her head onto the desk and waited, eyes closed, for the answering machine to sound.

“Hey, Rob, it’s Julie Barrister. Just wanted to let you know that Michael and I just got invited to Napa for the weekend and we decided to make a little trip of it, so we’re probably not going to be around much while you’re out here prepping for the shoot and whatnot. Better to have us out of your hair anyway, right? Well, I’ll be around tomorrow when you come in, but I just wanted to give you a heads up in case there’s anything you want to go over for the upcoming week, bill-wise and what-have-you. Okay, darling. *À demain!*”

The machine beeped.



Robin lifted her forehead and stretched her arms from her giant white desk and clawed forward, tugging the toggle of a spring tension roller shade to reveal one of several shelves full of binders and samples and binders of samples. Bravely raising her tired, bony rear from the seat, she plucked the Barrister binder and began to sort through the week’s receipts.



She spread out several yellow carbon copies plotted with nonlinear scribbles and faded ink printed characters she squinted to make out. The purple scent of the mimeograph ink The numbers were just so faint, so hard to recall, so clouded with the acerbic energy of her intensive labor and dedication to the pursuit of functional harmony. A precious Franco Moretti frosted glass apple that had a chip so tiny that only an eye as shrewd as hers would ever notice was marked down from \$600 to \$380. The Japanese six-panel Kano School painting on gold leaf screen was a brilliant deal she’d cut with Naoki at a few shy of \$10,000, but Robin knew the Barristers expected a price nearer to six figures, based on the 16th century Nanban screen they’d been initially inspired by. The average American couldn’t tell their Meiji from their Muromachi so she wasn’t really worried about detection so long as she was convincing in her kanji provenance transcription.

