

Chiaroscuro

Fiction

Karin L. Frank

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A lone figure stood before a door. Townsfolk had ridiculed her for years because she walked daily to this same spot.

No one else saw any reason to do so. And when they asked her what drew her, she could only shake her head. An answer reverberated deep in her brain but she could never quite grasp what it was.

Since this made no sense to anyone, including the odd one herself, they added the epithet, crazy.

She had never gone beyond this before. She had never questioned why a door existed at this location. A door implied a space on the other side. But at this juncture the village merged into subdued light that greyed all colors and obscured the outlines of people and structures.

Lackluster hues formed the underlying fabric of the village and the inhabitants' lives. Sameness seeped into all bodies and buildings. The people of her acquaintance relied on that. They had little need to speak, to clarify with thoughts made audible. They went about their daily lives cushioned in nearly total monotony.

The day was early. The grey was pale.

A neighbor out walking his dog crept up beside her.

"Beware the other side," the neighbor, a beige-skinned, mannish stick figure, squeaked at her. "Beyond may lay cities and crowds of people unlike us. You'll have to learn new rules, pay heed to forgotten ones."

The dog, an indeterminate four-legged mound of beige fur, stalked up to the door and lifting his hind leg peed in its direction from a safe distance.

They scurried away.

The acrid scent of their anxiety seeped into her nostrils and back out through her pores.

She paused.

Then she reached out—almost spastically. I've no control over what I'm doing, she thought. But she knew that she had.

At the moment she turned the knob, the crystalline handle making prickly indentations in her fingers, a tickle spread up her arm.

The door swung open and waves of azure light laved her skin. She paused on what had become a threshold and bathed in a flood of color, refreshed.

She entertained the idea of camping out in the doorway. She envisioned her body stretched across the threshold—head in the invigorating blue and feet securely planted in the familiarity of reassuring fog.

Can't, she thought.

Air held a morning chill on both sides of the doorway. She shivered and stepped through.

The rush of fierce light pinpointed her figure. Every wrinkle in her clothing stood out, distinct. To one side of her and attached at her feet lay an elongated ebony version of her body. "Shadow," she mouthed unfamiliar words. "Welcome back, sister."

Green—she remembered—the color of her outfit—green. She raised her arm. The sleeve’s material glistened with an almost metallic sheen. Her hand stretched out beyond the cuff, she saw the long forgotten violet and walnut highlights in her own fawn-hued skin.

How lovely, she thought—and at the same time—I feel like a bug pinned under a glass. Startled by this image, she hesitated.

Strange voices reached her ears. They spoke languages vaguely familiar from another time but grown obscure with disuse.

Scraping deeper into her memory, she came up with a word. She thought it was a greeting. “Hello,” she called in a voice clotted by unfamiliar twistings of her tongue.

A few of the people passing by on what seemed urgent business turned when they saw her emerge. She looked back. On the other side of the doorway murk reigned.

Rousing himself from a doze, a man in a suit with epaulettes on the shoulder stepped out of a small kiosk positioned near the door. The shoulder decorations gave him an official look.

The uniformed man strode over, hand outstretched. “I’m this door attendant,” he said. “Once in a long while one of you returns. I’m stationed here to welcome you back.”

“Back,” the odd one repeated.

“To the human race,” the attendant said, clapping her on the shoulder. “The very first thing you have to do is choose a side that you will champion without question forever.”

“Choose? Forever?”

The person looked back through the door still open a crack. The grey gloom looked cozier than it had before.

The neighbor had warned her and here was choice on the very threshold of the other side. “Between what and what?”

The attendant waved his arm taking in the entire street beyond him. One side was bathed in pure azure light. The other side was bathed in pure azure darkness.

“How do you keep them separate?” she asked.

“Rules,” the attendant said.

Thinking of the beauty of both dark and light azure, the newly returned refugee blurted, “That’s ridiculous. I won’t.”

Indignation sharpened the gatekeeper’s previously welcoming tone. “And who do you think you are to refuse to choose between dark and light.”

Using the only word that ever had been applied to her that resembled a name, she said, “Crazy.”

The attendant suppressed a snarl. “Everyone here will call you a rebel.”

The word made her shudder. Long suppressed memories of the responsibilities that went with that label overwhelmed her. She almost turned and slinked back through the doorway.

She wasn’t at all sure yet why her refusal to participate in mutually exclusive choices was so important but she did notice that she could feel the breath moving now in her body—invigorating, tingling, alive.

With some effort, she shook off her fears and wrapped the new epithet about her person like a shawl against the wind. “I’ll just have to deal with that, won’t I,” she insisted.

The attendant sidled up beside her. “Shall I be your guide?”

She glanced back at the gray mists seeping through the still open door. And shut it.

“I’ll find my own way; thanks,” she said.

Karin L. Frank is an award-winning author from the Kansas City area. Her poems and prose have been published in both literary journals and genre magazines in the U.S. and abroad. She blogs at **karinlfrank.com**. Follow her twaiku and twenryu on twitter.com/ **@KLFrank1**

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