

**Detailed Synopsis of MYTHS OF NEW YORK, by Vanessa Montfort, translated by William Gregory**  
**Originally published in Spanish by Algaida Literaria**

Dan Rogers is an Ivy-League drop-out and mathematical genius who makes his living card-counting and working undercover for the NYPD's Commissioner Ronald, infiltrating illegal blackjack dens. He is one of Ronald's many informants, which include Barry, the jazz- and movie-loving Subway elevator operator who first introduced Dan to the Commissioner, and who is convinced that he, Dan and the other informants are the real-life incarnations of the comic-book Avengers or, as Barry calls them, the 'myths of New York'.

Ronald summons Dan one day for a high-risk mission: the city has been plagued by a series of gruesome murders whose scenes are based on well-known artworks and whose victims are all found with dice wedged into their corpses. The culprits are the Sons of Fate, a notorious gang of gamblers and killers. Their method involves luring the rich owners of recently-acquired *objets d'art* to a card game, tricking them into gambling the piece (and losing it) and then, when the victim inevitably tries to wriggle out of the debt, taking murderous revenge. Dan is to pose as the fictional Herman Oza, to act as human bait for the killers. The police will do the initial work; all Dan need do is await a text message inviting him to a card game.

As he waits, Dan decides to do some investigation of his own, meeting one by one the other informants whom Barry labels 'The Avengers', and all of whom have special powers of a sort: Wanda, a former midwife whose photographic memory left her with painful images too powerful to bear, lives now on a rubbish dump with a hoard of abandoned children and memorises every item that finds its way there, including some paint cans matching the paint used in one of the murders. The Wasp, a Chinatown-dweller with an extraordinary sense of smell, identifies the combination of ingredients required to make two murdered newly-weds die by a mere kiss. Tony Newman, terrifying Wall St mogul and secret nice-guy, a friend of Dan's from college, promises to use his many contacts in the high-end auction scene to find out whatever he can. And Silvio, an insomniac Italian who runs a New Jersey car pound, has found a car with boxwood dice in the glove compartment, matching those from the killings. The car is also marked with a mysterious message, the first of many from an 'invisible man' who seems to be communicating with Dan.

Dan is side-tracked too by other distractions: his widowed mother, culturally superior and maternally cold, sits in her Long Island beach house, expecting him for Thanksgiving and little else, her piano, art collection and wealthy lifestyle a constant reminder of the expectations he failed to live up to. His little Jewish neighbour, Elias Weisberg, a comic-book lover like Barry, is determined to become Dan's sidekick, and takes shameless advantage of Dan's attraction to his sister Myriam in order to achieve this goal. And finally, most distracting of all, Dan's 'croupier'.

'My croupier' is Dan's only name for a woman who, initially appearing to him in dreams, invades his life with ever-growing frequency in increasingly disturbing visions. First as the flash of a hand, or a pair of eyes over the Hudson, but then as a full-blown vision that superimposes itself on a cinema screen while he and Barry watch Superman: in a bar in an unknown city, this mysterious woman sits reading a novel entitled *Myths of New York*. More disturbing still, when he glimpses the pages, Dan sees that the book is telling his story. Initially believing that he alone can see this, Dan soon discovers that Elias Weisberg is also sharing these visions.

Having finally received the text message from the Sons of Fate summoning Herman Oza to the fateful card game, Dan battles now with a double trauma: fear for his life as he faces a brush with a gang of art-loving psychopaths; and fear that his life is a fiction now that he knows he is a character in a novel. He is plagued by mortal terror, and by the visions of 'his croupier', whom he now knows

to be named Laura. Laura is a failed artist whose paintings languish unsold against the walls of the flat she shares with her brusque boyfriend Roko, and who ekes out a living not as a croupier, but as a waitress somewhere on the other side of the Atlantic. Her career having come to nought, and her relationship with it, Laura's depression grows into an obsession with *Myths of New York*. Such is this obsession that, when the night of the fateful card game finally arrives, and Dan Rogers, despite his instincts, fulfils his mission deliberately to lose, he emerges from the basement blackjack room to find Laura standing in the street. She has crossed the ocean to find him, but her New York is not the same as his: they inhabit parallel worlds. Dan's presence in Laura's world is only through the novel; Laura's in Dan's, only through his visions.

The card game lost, Dan must now await the Sons of Fate's instructions for the handover of the fictional antique which he has deliberately gambled away. Before he does, however, another murder takes place. After a Christmas Day charity auction attended by Dan, his mother and Tony Newman (at which his mother buys *Myths of New York*, a breath-taking canvas in unreal colours by an unknown painter), one of the other bidders, the poodle-owning socialite Natasha Cole, is found murdered in the guise of *Venus at her Mirror*.

More messages from the invisible man lead Dan to Roosevelt Island, an islet halfway across the East River. As he approaches, Tony Newman calls with an anxious message: he has identified the Sons of Fate and will reveal all to Dan in a few days' time on the top floor of his office building. Dan advances through the island, past the former site of its smallpox hospital to a lone fold-up chair sitting on a grassy promontory, with another message from the invisible man inviting him to sit. When he does, he is plagued by visions: blood spilling over his mother's piano; Wanda locked away in a lonely apartment, Barry in a grimace of terror.

Laura, meanwhile, fails to establish herself in New York, finding neither Dan nor a job. Defeated, she takes a cab to JFK, but as a storm gathers over the city and threatens to make her miss her flight, she spots a terrifying article in the newspaper: mirroring *Myths of New York*, a real-life *Venus at her Mirror* murder has taken place. Transfixed, she returns to Manhattan, but soon runs out of money, and a case of mistaken identity (she mistakes a gigolo in a Stetson for a potential client) is left humiliating and penniless.

The Sons of Fates' killings accelerate: in Bushwick, their most ambitious montage yet sees a regular at Dan's card games executed in a scene from Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, surrounded by children's corpses piled up and ornamented. The victims include one of Wanda's adopted brood, but when Dan goes to tell her, he finds his old friend evicted from her outdoor home, transferred to a tiny apartment and driven mad by her memories and lack of freedom.

The Sons of Fate strike again, and again too close for comfort: Dan makes the date with Tony Newman, only to find his friend murdered, crucified in the style of Dalí's *Crucifixion*. Barry is also an indirect victim: he arrives at his elevator one morning to find the disembodied head from one of the Sons of Fate's earlier attacks. Beaten up by locals who take his possession of the head as a sign of criminality, Barry is confined to hospital. Upon paying him a visit, Dan bumps into Elias, whose visions once again fill Dan with terror: he foretells great evil and warns Dan of an unbearable burden.

Finally receiving the summons from the Sons of Fate, Dan enters the hall of mirrors in a faded Coney Island amusement park. The gang makes the rendezvous and, at the roll of the dice, gives Dan (or rather, Herman Oza) three days to yield up the fictitious Japanese antique. Dan's hopes of discovering their identities at this meeting are thwarted, however: they are masked, and obscured by the mirrors' play of light and shade. On returning home, Dan finds his neighbourhood filled with

flashing patrol lights as a crowd huddles in the park around the corpse of a child. It is Elias. Teased by local kids and believing himself to have super-powers, he has fallen from the window trying to fly. Elias' story draws the entire city to an unusually united halt, but Dan and Barry are crushed. Using Silvio's Italian connections, Dan sees to it that the boys who teased the young Elias to his death are punished.

The day of the sting approaches and Dan is terrified for himself and for his mother. Determined to keep her in his sights while the police stake out Herman Oza's fictional apartment, Dan arranges a trip to Handel's *Messiah*, which she is only too pleased to attend. During the concert, a rush of messages reach his phone, including Tony's clues to the 'Seven Wonders of the World': they are the seven prints of famous artworks displayed in Mrs Rogers' piano room. Suddenly understanding, Dan initially suspects his own mother of being behind the Sons of Fate murders, but his terror is doubled when he digs into his own pocket to find a small boxwood die. A flurry of flashbacks confirm his horror: the lacunae in his memories have blocked out his own part in the killings; the invisible man is Dan himself attempting to leave warnings for the next time the story is told; and the recurring dream of his mother, dead and bleeding at her piano, is a premonition of his next crime, the 'seventh wonder' in a series of killings targeting the society he simultaneously hates and forms part of.

Apparently devastated at the revelation that her hero is a cold-blooded killer, Laura transfers her Manhattan mission to the search for Benedict Abbot, author of *Myths of New York*, whose new title, *The Sons of Fate*, has just been released. When Laura finally tracks Abbot down, Dan's horror is twofold: Firstly, Abbot, the focus of Dan's hatred, is the spit and image of his protagonist. But second, the true focus of Laura's obsession is revealed when she presents two watercolours to the writer: one depicts a society woman and her dog murdered in the pose of *Venus at her Mirror*; in the other, a male prostitute lies killed in a Christ-like position. Both have been painted first-hand.

Dan's devastation is complete: he cannot escape his fate. He will carry out the final matricide of the story but will fall into oblivion as soon as the book is closed, only to begin the whole sorry story once again with his next reader, regardless of his attempts to dissuade them and despite his warnings to himself at the invisible man. Laura meanwhile, paints a last picture – a vibrant cityscape in unreal colours – before signing it *Myths of New York* and disappearing in between the Manhattan towerblocks. Ending his story on a bench overlooking the water, Dan longs for an impossible escape as the final page turns, the raindrops freeze suspended in mid-air, and a fog of oblivion rolls over the City of Fiction.

MYTHS OF NEW YORK is narrated in two voices: in the first person, by Dan Rogers; and in the third, by Benedict Abbott, with Dan regularly interrupting Benedict's flow in order to give what he describes as a more honest view. A self-aware protagonist, Dan is all too conscious of inhabiting a New York composed of cultural myth, with a colour scheme that seems somehow unreal and a day-to-day life punctured with strangely familiar scenes: a girl in a black dress nibbles on a croissant outside Tiffany's; a street is invaded by a gang of dancing kids in leg-warmers; and men resembling Al Pacino seem to be everywhere. As his frustration with Abbot progresses, Dan attempts to dissuade the reader from engaging with the author at all, but to no avail. He sees Abbot as simultaneously as an unreliably witness and selfish god with no thought for his creations: a 'hack' who feeds on collective myth while forcing his characters to lead unbearable lives.

*Published in Spain by Algaida, 2010*

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