'The Great Night,' by Chris Adrian
Glenn C. Altshuler, Special to The Chronicle
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The great night

By chris adrian

(Farrar, straus and giroux; 292 pages; $26)

Arriving at her boyfriend's house on Fourteenth Street on Rollerblades, Molly tours the dilapidated five-story mansion; its huge basement filled with bicycles, newspapers, pickled creatures, pot, hash and empty suitcases; and the courtyard garden, which features a strange oak tree with golden leaves, silver bark and a cinnamon scent. Why did the previous owners need all this stuff, she asks, as well as a cage, a spanking post and a pair of stocks. "It's San Francisco," Ryan replies. "People do all sorts of things here."

In "The Great Night," his droll, dark and challenging new novel, Chris Adrian pushes that hypothesis to its limits. Set in Buena Vista Park in 2008, "The Great Night" retells Shakespeare's comedy "A Midsummer Night's Dream" through a story of two parallel worlds that intersect, with potentially catastrophic consequences. In the faerie kingdom, Titania, distraught at the death, from leukemia, of her changeling son and the departure of her husband, unleashes a "Beastie" capable of killing all mortals and immortals. She senses that her actions will end in joy or ruin, "and somehow that was easier to abide than an endless, static grief."

On the other side of the hill, Molly, Will and Henry, each of whom is inconsolable over a relationship that has ended badly, get lost on the way to a party they would rather not attend. And Huff, a homeless person, is trying to bring down the mayor, a handsome man with "a negligent attitude toward the schools [and a] policy of enforced cannibalism," by staging a musical production of the science fiction movie "Soylent Green." All of them will be trapped inside "walls of air" thrown up by Oberon, "in his lamentable absence and considerable wisdom."

"The Great Night" can be ribald, raucous and seriously funny. After he's married to Titania by the mayor (or is it Puck?), Huff wonders what he should ask her for. Should it be world peace - or a sandwich? But after a while, he parts her dress, puts a penlight under her perfectly formed, warm and glowing breasts to see if they are real, and places his face between them, making a "joyful little speedboat sound." Huff had once almost been arrested, he recalls, "for lurking in a Laundromat" and sniffing piles of warm clothes, "and now he knew what he had been seeking when he did that, the ideal experience of which that, pleasant as it was, was only a degraded iteration."

They are about to die, along with everyone else, Titania tells him, "but pleasure has a way of lengthening the hours." Actually, it shortens them, the homeless man replies. "And cold nights are longer than warm ones."
Through his own form of magical realism, Adrian boisterously and bravely tests the limits of our capacity to "actually understand anything" about suffering and joy. "I'd really like a straight answer about this," Will tells one of the faeries. "Of course you would," he observes. "Mortals always do." Not one to give up, Will, who has never been certain that everyone deserves to be happy ("Genghis Khan? Dracula? Rumsfeld?") tries again, with a pleasant-looking but hostile girl, who persists in identifying herself as Tallulah Marie Jingleheimer Schmidt. "We're all in this together," he says. "Not really," she shoots back.

With a terrible honesty, making us laugh with tears in our eyes, Adrian reminds us that "it won't be all right, not exactly, not ever." Try as we might, and perhaps as we must, we won't be able to extract a satisfying, let alone permanent and profound, meaning from our lives, our losses and our death.

Nonetheless, Adrian doesn't end - and doesn't let us end - with an "it's all for nothing" despair. Huff keeps his legs (and his lips) churning, even though he knows that he and his actors might "become burritos" before they get to sing the "first transfiguring bar" of their musical and that, if, by some miracle, the show goes on, the mayor might well be deaf to the effort.

The more she drinks, the more clear-headed Molly becomes, beginning to be convinced that "there is always room to enjoy yourself, and always something to appreciate, even when you've lost your mind and lost all hope and have clawed your way down" into - and beyond - the slough of despond. Faced for the first time with the prospect of her own death, Titania concludes that she'd rather not spend her remaining time reducing the hill "to a scarred lump" - and that there is something "mildly appealing about rehearsing a nonsensical play while extinction loomed."

These are simple existential truths, of course. But in the hands of a master - and, at his best, Chris Adrian is masterful - they are powerful and persuasive principles we ought to try to master well before the music stops and the curtain falls.

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