



*Original Horror, Weird Fiction, & Ghost Stories*

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**THE YELLOW BOOKE.**

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*Edited By M. Grant Kellermeyer*  
2015 Edition.





*An Oldstyle Tales Press Original Publication.*

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*The*  
YELLOW BOOKE.

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❖ CONTEMPORARY ❖  
WEIRD FICTION, GHOST STORIES, HORROR

*And OTHER TALES of HORROR,  
HAUNTINGS, MYSTERY, & MURDER*

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*Edited by*  
M. Grant Kellermeyer





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# INTRODUCTION

— *M. Grant Kellermeier*

THE following tales demonstrate a deep and passionate allegiance to the tradition of the classic tale of horror. Some are written by authors who have never been in print, some by professional authors, and some by published writers who have not tried their hand at horror before, but all are fans of the Gothic literature which has mystified and titillated generations of readers. Men wearing periwigs and tricorne hats and women in petticoats and stomachers hid dog-eared editions of the sensational Horace Walpole, sentimental Mrs Radcliffe, and decadent “Monk” Lewis in discreet places, saving them for the dark hours when their household had turned into bed and they could light a candle and read without fear of interruption or embarrassment. In a different century, the sooty streets of London were filled with middle-classed merchants and housewives rushing over gritty cobblestones with the ghost stories of Wilkie Collins, J. S. Le Fanu, Amelia B. Edwards, Rhoda Broughton, Charles Dickens, and Mrs Oliphant clutched shamelessly in their hands, looking forward to opening up the magazine during their journey home by hansom, carriage, or train car. Within another seventy years the philosophical sensationalism of Lovecraft, Hodgson, Machen, Chambers, Ashton Smith, Derleth, and Bloch were lovingly collected by adolescent boys, bored playboys, and jaded war veterans whether Wall Street was booming and gangsters running rough-shod over the law, or whether the soup lines stretched gloomily down city streets and Europe was darkening under the shadow of a new war. The novels of Bram Stoker, Mary Shelley, Robert Louis Stevenson, and H. G. Wells, the collections of Oliver Onions, M. R. James, E. F. Benson, and Ambrose Bierce, and the strange legacies of Hoffmann, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry James, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Washington Irving haunted the personal libraries, nightmares, and imaginations of many thousands and even millions of artistically-endowed spirits: painters, illustrators, sculptors, playwrights, story tellers, novelists, musicians, composers, philosophers, critics, poets, historians, and the overlooked participant of art – the passionate reader. This collection has been designed and engineered by those same spirits. Some offer chilling homages to their literary heroes – Ambrose Bierce, M. R. James, William Hope Hodgson, E. F. Benson, J. S. Le Fanu, and others – which both

emulate their styles and develop creatively upon their legacies. Some offer thoroughly unique and original works that challenge the conventions of the horror tale, building past the expectations and boundaries of classic speculative fiction. Some of the tales – you should be warned – are humorous. Some are farcical. Some are merely eerie, dark meditations. Some are wholesale landscapes of gruesome horror. Some are found documents. Some are disjointed narratives. One is a poker game. But all are sacrifices upon the altar of the tradition of the classic horror story, and all are pleasantly terrifying, and deliciously weird.

*M. Grant Kellermeyer*

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA, FALL 2015



## ✠ AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES ✠

### *David Maurice Garrett*

David was born in 1969 in Birmingham, Alabama and currently lives in Colorado Springs, Colorado. He is an officer in the United States Air Force currently stationed at The Air Force Academy where he will be retiring after 26 years of service in 2016. David began writing horror while in high school after reading the works of Poe and Lovecraft. He is highly gifted and belongs to the Triple Nine Society - an organization for those possessing an IQ in the 99.9th percentile. His interests span Music, Art, Literature, Philosophy, Psychology, and Science. He plays guitar, composes music, draws, and writes on numerous topics.

David has a Master's degree in Psychology and is currently working on writing weird stories in an Impressionistic, Epistolary style that explore Psychology in Horror. He explains in regard to his artistic vision: "I've always loved the possibilities of the epistolary novel. Combining this technique with Impressionism as an art form in literature allows for a wide range of styles and perspectives. I want to write psychological weird tales that utilize a very schizophrenic technique of mixing diaries, letters, journals, newspaper articles, song lyrics, quotes, poetry, and whatever else paints a pictures of madness that can be used to tell the story."

David has published two books of short stories: "Intertwined in Limbo" and "Tome of Horror".

### *Matthew E. Banks*

Matthew E Banks is a graduate of University of Plymouth with a degree in English and Creative Writing. He lives in deepest, darkest Cornwall with

his wife Samantha, who is an English Literature postgraduate. Matthew's main field of interest is the supernatural in all its manifestations having published numerous ghost stories, horror film history and research on Bela Lugosi. His fiction is influenced by M.R. James, Stephen King, H. R. Wakefield, and J.R.R. Tolkien:

"It may seem strange, but my inspiration for my ghost stories, other than M.R. James, the father of the modern ghost story, is J.R.R. Tolkien - in as much as I want to create a world/place where the dead do walk. Cornwall with its unworldliness and remoteness is the source for this 'world' that I have created within the confines of my short stories."

He also likes Dr Who, haunted houses and Vampires and regularly contributes to We Belong Dead Magazine, Reflections Magazine and The Spectral Times.

## *Douglas Kemp*

Douglas Kemp took early retirement from the civil service in England in 2013 and lives in Northamptonshire, with his wife Cathy. I read widely and enjoy membership of the London Library - a wonderful institution and resource. I am also a Reviews Editor for the Historical Novel Society. Authors that have especially inspired him have been E.F. Benson and M.R. James, as well as the Pan Horror anthologies by Herbert van Thal that fascinated him as a child in the 1970s.

## *Allen J. Gittens*

Allen J. Gittens is a writer, teacher, graphic designer and photographer. He lives by the sea in beautiful Devon with several Apple Macs, countless books and an enviable collection of Classic Rock CDs. My earliest influences are the horror and fantasy stories of H. P. Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith and Robert E. Howard, as well as SF writers E. E. "Doc" Smith, C. L. Moore, Leigh Brackett and many others.

Throw in generous helpings of Edgar Rice Burroughs, Arthur Conan Doyle and Sax Rohmer, sprinkle with Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen and E. F. Benson, and serve... I was too young to have read most of these first time around, but there were numerous inexpensive paperback anthologies reprinting these authors, which I devoured avidly. Which brings me to my teens, when I discovered... Oh, it's a long story. Buy me a beer and I'll tell you the rest.

## *Edward Moore*

Edward Moore is a Brooklyn transplant currently living and working in the San Francisco Bay area as an environmental professional. He enjoys music, movies, writing and experimental cooking, always trying new recipes and ideas from his imagination and food/culinary publications. In addition to having several stories published on the Internet, he has had fiction printed in *Futures Mysterious Anthology Magazine*, *Berkeley Fiction Review*, *State of Horror - Louisiana* and several anthologies and now The Yellow Brooke!!

His favorite writers are John Sandford, Christopher Golden, Victoria Thompson, Harlan Ellison and O Henry.

## *David Mossley*

I am a freelance education and management consultant by day (<http://www.davidmossley.co.uk>), and a philosopher and writer of fiction by night. I am currently working on a number of fiction projects, including a series of ghost and supernatural stories, and a novel for children with an historical setting.

I grew up and still live in Lancashire in northern England, an area of the United Kingdom rich in history, characters and stories. From old industrial towns and vibrant cities, to stunning moorland farms and wide

empty estuaries, the whole region is teeming with tales to be told. I hope I can convey something of this part of the world in my writing. My favourite writers include Bram Stoker and H P Lovecraft, but it is M R James's classic supernatural stories that inspire me the most.

## *Ash Hartwell*

Ash Hartwell writes tales of horror from his home in the Northamptonshire countryside. His stories have appeared in over 25 anthologies from J Ellington Ashton Press, 13 O'Clock Press (Horridified press) Undead Press, Wicked East Press and Static Movement. His own collection of ten stories *Zombies, Vamps, and Fiends* was published in January 2015 by J Ellington Ashton Press and is available via Amazon. Ash can be found on Facebook, Twitter, Amazon and Ashhartwell.co.uk

A brief list of authors who have inspired me would include, but by no means limited to;  
Arthur Conan Doyle. Edgar Allan Poe. Richard Laymon. James Herbert. Joe Hill. Stephen King.

## *Thom Newell*

Thom Newell is a filmmaker, and storyteller, living in Los Angeles by way of his hometown of Chicago. Horror is his heartbeat, and stories are his blood. He can often be found at the local whiskey bar, drinking fine scotch, collaborating on projects, and trading tales with anyone who is up to the challenge.

Favorite horror authors: Stephen King, Dean Koontz, Edgar Allan Poe.

## *Charles Wilkinson*

Charles Wilkinson's publications include *The Pain Tree and Other Stories* (London Magazine Editions). His stories have appeared in *Best Short Stories 1990* (Heinemann), *Best English Short Stories 2* (W.W. Norton, USA), *Unthology* (Unthank Books), *Best British Short Stories 2015* (Salt), *London Magazine*, *Able Muse Review* (USA), *Ninth Letter* (USA) and in genre magazines/ anthologies such as *Supernatural Tales*, *Horror Without Victims* (Megazanthus Press), *Rustblind and Silverbright* (Eibonvale Press), *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction*, *Phantom Drift* (USA), *Bourbon Penn* (USA) and *Shadows & Tall Trees* (Canada). *Ag & Au*, a pamphlet of his poems, has come out from Flarestack and new short stories are forthcoming in *Nightscript* and *Best Weird Fiction 2015* (Undertow Books, Canada).

He lives in Powys, Wales, where he is heavily outnumbered by members of the ovine community. His favourite horror writers include Ambrose Bierce, Robert Aickman, Joel Lane, M.R. James and, on the occasions that he writes weird fiction, Julio Cortazar.

## *Jeff Baker*

A lifelong native of Wichita, Kansas, Jeff Baker was raised on a steady diet of comic books and shows like Night Gallery and Kolchack: The Night Stalker. He has been published in "Space and Time Magazine," "Zombie Lockdown" and the 2014 edition of "Yellow Booke." He cites some of his favorite writers as Robert Arthur, Henry Kuttner, Ramsey Campbell and Rudyard Kipling. "The Vacant House" is, in fact, dedicated to Kipling's memory. A 1983 graduate of Newman University in Wichita, Mr. Baker drives a delivery truck for a living and writes when he grabs a spare minute.

## *CM Muller*

C.M. Muller lives in St. Paul, Minnesota with his wife and two sons—and, of course, all those quaint and curious volumes of forgotten lore. He is related to the Norwegian writer Jonas Lie and draws much inspiration from that scrivener of old. His tales have appeared in *Shadows & Tall Trees*, *Supernatural Tales*, *Xnoybis*, and *Visiak's Mirror*. He is an occasional contributor to *Weird Fiction Review*, and edits/publishes the annual journal *Nightscript*.

## *Robert Subiaga Jr.*

Robert Subiaga Jr. is an educator and occasional science/communications consultant working out of the Mojave Desert in far-southern Nevada. Originally a native of Minneapolis-Saint Paul, his forays into creative work include a fair amount of various poetry/spoken word performances, the 1993 novel *Eyes* (which he hopes to soon re-release as a self-published e-book), and being writer/executive producer of the 2005 short film *The Gnostic*, starring the late Francesco Quinn (based on the prologue of another of Subiaga's novels to come out soon as an e-book). That is, when he's not chucking it all for open-topped Jeep rides across the West, camping out in "haunted" places as a vainly ghosthunting skeptic, or coaching youngsters how to slip the finer points of catch wrestling into their high school matches.

## *Taral Wayne*

A native of Toronto, Canada, the author has been a professional comic artist and magazine illustrator, and has 11 Hugo nominations for Best Fan Artist ... but has never actually tried to write a story for professional publication before. Instead, Taral has spent most of the last 40-or-so years writing humour, personal reminiscences and critical material for the fan press. Growing a little long in the tooth, and wishing to try his hand at

something different, he has only recently begun writing fiction, and even those stories have been largely about what Taral knows best – fandom. Even more of a paradox, Taral seems driven to write stories that are not at all the same as the sort of stories he prefers to read! While a big fan of William Hope Hodgson, he confesses that he reads very little dark fantasy. In fact, the most recent work of fiction he has completed is set in a children’s television show – Fraggles Rock.

### *M. Grant Kellermeyer*

Michael Grant Kellermeyer (b. 1987) edits, illustrates, and owns Oldstyle Tales Press. He grew up in Berne, Indiana where he cut his teeth on Walt Disney’s *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* at the age of five, a startling vision of humor and horror that began his love affair with speculative fiction. First earning his B.A. in English at Anderson University, Michael wrote his Master’s thesis on dialectics of national identity in the 18<sup>th</sup> century novel of sympathy at nearby Ball State University, before pursuing a career teaching writing at the college level.

On a more basic, human level, Michael plays violin, paints and draws, cooks fairly basic, fairly tasty food, enjoys spats of archery and hiking, and takes pleasure in air-dried laundry, lemon wedges in ice water, mint tea, gin tonics, straight razors, sandalwood shaving cream, strong pipe tobacco, the films of Stanley Kubrick, and a hodgepodge of music ranging from sea shanties, the Delta Blues, and John Coltrane to The Decemberists, Fleet Foxes, and Classical music of all eras and types.



*The*  
YELLOW BOOKE.



## A GOOD, OLD PLACE

— *M. Grant Kellersmeier*

THE rain had started early, before the sun had begun to warm the sky, and was falling in dull sheets well into midday. The weather was uncharacteristic of Indianapolis during the peak of May, but would later prove very characteristic of a summer that would break records for its low temperatures and constant storms. The College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences was an atypical location for a course in teaching English abroad, and from the outset the situation reeked of abnormality to the bored man who staked out his seat in the left corner of the square semi-circle made up of three long folding tables. The bored man was tall and thin, a 24 year old graduate student whose khaki shorts and sandals bespoke his taste for a more coastal climate. His unkempt, curly black hair dripped in loose strands around his neck and ears, and a wiry beard girded his jaw, almost but not quite connecting on his upper lip. He had driven up from Richmond, paid \$1,200 for tuition, and was spending his nights at the Indianapolis Hostel. Four weekends – nine to five, Saturday and Sunday – and he would be certified by the Oxford Seminars to leave Indiana and spend two – or three or five or ten – years in some shiny East Asian city in Japan or China or hopefully Korea, far away from the orange brick Italianates and rectangular storefronts of rural Indiana. But so far the process had been torturous. Two hours into the seminar he began to dream of its conclusion while the Hoosier sky darkened the Hoosier landscape and drenched the window panes with a constant supply of water.

He was disappointed and a little disgusted by the group that had formed around him after he had been the first to arrive in the darkened classroom at 8:45. There was Andy, a 35-ish hippie with the hair and beard of the Sallman Jesus – a vapid metal head who joked through the exercises, was constantly distracted, and seemed never to have aged past fifteen. And then there was Bonnie, a 60-ish police chaplain whose bulbous body and bulging head resembled a 1950s baby doll. Fierce, arrogant, and overcompensating for her lack of authority as a student, she scolded her classmates, constantly drew awkward attention to her roles as a pastor and a chaplain, and bullied the shier students for not knowing enough about their country's kitschy history: who Liberace was for instance, an American icon that all patriotic millennials should be able to converse

about. There were half a dozen meek female college graduates of average or less-than average looks, most with a modicum of foreign travel experience (“My family went to Rome for a week”; “My youth group spent a weekend in Mexico”; “I was on a safari last year and think that Africa’s really fun”), and there was Chen – a quiet Vietnamese girl who spent her breaks with a boyfriend who slept in the hallway during class – and Lakshmi – a Pakistani-American single mother who had no plans for the future other than to “move someplace and teach kids.”

Worst of all was Bob. Bob was older than Bonnie (who apparently had developed a crush on him), and could barely hear or think straight. He was the bored man’s assigned partner, much to the younger man’s misery. At first Bob was cute: a tottering old fart who had never married and wanted to see the world, particularly “Pwerta Rica,” “Hondurruz,” or his old Army stomping ground in “Koh-ree-yuh.” Bob was small and round with a buzzcut and a leering, unsettling grin, two glassy eyes that were magnified into watery blurs by his prescription lenses, and a sonorous-but-schmaltzy voice marked by a yokel accent from Southern Indiana or Northern Kentucky, the bored man couldn’t remember where. He had all the charisma and personality of a retiree who stumbles through announcing a tee-ball game or a BINGO contest at a decrepit VFW. Only Erin was a break from the mediocrity. She was short but athletic, spry, and witty, with brown-gold skin the same color as her sun-stained hair, and green eyes that gleamed with engagement when someone else was speaking. The bored man liked when she came into the classroom with her hair pulled loosely into a ponytail or knotted into a shiny bun, effortlessly wearing hoodies and track shorts that heightened rather than diminished her figure. She was an Olympic weight trainer even though she – like the half a dozen meek girls with their braces, pimples, and grey complexions – was only 22. Erin was pretty but even she was relatively uninspiring, not being sure whether she would travel abroad or teach English to immigrants. In any case, she sat at the tip of the table across from the bored man, and they rarely interacted. The course was helmed by Kenneth, a soft-spoken world traveler who had apparently settled for living in Indianapolis – a fact which discredited him severely to the bored man who resented anyone who didn’t churn with disgust at the thought of living in a landlocked state past the age of 25. But Kenneth was experienced and a good teacher, so after time the bored man warmed to his style. But nothing could warm the weather on that first day.

The class was held in an antique classroom on the second story of the aforesaid College of Pharmacy, etc. – an old brick building lousy (so the bored man thought) with age – on the campus of one of Indianapolis’

oldest university campuses. The surrounding buildings inspired little more confidence. Some dated to the 1960s, but most reeked of the Edwardian Arts and Crafts style – a combination of medieval and Gothic architecture, with baroque details, heavy black timbers, and ornate geometric flourishes carved into stone set in time-darkened brick and limestone. The bored man resented its age and quietly envisioned wrecking balls and bulldozers crawling over the campus like worms on a corpse, executing the necessary job of worms on a corpse by tearing down that which is spent and useless. Chrome was needed here, he thought. Vast panes of tempered glass, and – if brick there must be – fresh, red bricks outlined in clean, white mortar. He loathed what Erin – in a moment of disappointing sentiment – had referred to as the “graceful ageing” of this outdated monument to men and ideas who had died long ago.

The walls of the College did nothing to help: they were lined with massive group portraits of the graduating classes of decades and centuries past. The “College of Pharmacy Class of 1895, Anno Domini” was browned by time, and stared dully out at him with the eyes of 149 dead men, men wearing sober, depressing faces, whose fanciful facial hair, black frocks, and white cravats reminded him more of tedious melodramas and demented great-grandmothers than the intended sense of legacy. And they marched on: 1905, 1917, 1922, 1936, 1944, 1965, 1978, 1989, 2003. But he couldn’t help feel that the newer, crisper, colored group photos were somehow contaminated – made illegitimate – as if the somber men of 1895 were orchestrating them still. He sensed a connection between the class of 2015 and the 120 year old photograph which was – to use his exact thought – unnatural and out of place, somehow incorrect and wrong, like a great, dead arm was reaching through decades and ensuring the continuance of outmoded traditions. Why have these photos at all? Why not publish them online? He passed them on his march to the bathroom on his break, and it was almost as if he were slipping through the wormhole that would deposit him in a foregone time: faces changed, dulled, faded in color, then lost color altogether, until he was passing under the gaze – not of cheerful girls in pink and yellow blouses with modern haircuts and laughing eyes – but of the sour, bearded men who still seemed to hold a conscious domain over the young college students who unknowingly accepted their guardianship and entered their paternal dominion.



The first break of the first day took place at 10:30. The bored man was the first to escape the classroom, swiftly but discreetly hopping from his chair, slipping around the table, and shuffling into the hallway. He wanted to escape his company, so he opted to float down to the first floor

bathroom. No one else followed, and he was able to relieve himself in solitude, away from scatter-brained Andy, bumbling Bob, and preachy Bonnie. Even the bathroom disturbed his sensibilities, however, with its walls lined in octogenarian subway tiles and its pre-war wooden stalls painted in black enamel and stenciled with gold paint. Everything was old, old and misplaced, like a new house filled with antique furniture, or a young man with wrinkled skin and one eye white, glaring and spectral from cataracts. He emptied his bladder and wandered into the hall, up the stairs, and into the classroom. He had been in his chair for three minutes when he looked up and saw the bleeding man. The figure was young, perhaps a year or two younger than him, with cropped hair, blue jeans, and a white crewneck. The t-shirt was, however, slathered in deep maroon stains which were already flaking and hardening into black mats. A sash of deep red ran from his right shoulder to his left elbow, and speckles of brown peppered the material in otherwise dry spots. His face was mangled by a laceration above the eyebrow, with two others – bigger apparently – being muffled by gauze and tape which were already drenched with coffee-colored stains. His cheeks, nose, and eyelids were swollen and black, and his nostrils and teeth were purple with slushy gore. The phantom hovered in the doorway, stumbled into the classroom, and stood in front of Kenneth, who politely walked up to him and shook his hand which was darkened by purple stains which had apparently been vainly scrubbed at with water.

Was he real, then, the shocked man wondered? Kenneth was talking to him, cool as mist, and was pointing and gesturing fluidly as if his joints were oiled and loose. Was there no blood, then? Was it just a trick of the light? The bleeding man nodded to Kenneth, and to the shocked man's horror, he shuffled into the room, rounded the desks, and sat two chairs away from him. He leaned painfully over the table and winced as he settled into the chair.

"Hhh," he muttered through clenched teeth. "Ahuz inuh arr ahkdehm ash ighm." "Hi. I was in a car accident last night." The concerned man felt his heart slow down as the phantom became flesh. But with that assurance, he became disgusted at yet another awkward classmate. Car accident or no, for God's sake wash up and get a new shirt! What a gruesome sight. Beck – this was the bleeding man's name – was allowed to stay in the class because of the circumstance (he had just been released from the hospital, and his jaw was wired shut), and would sit for the rest of the class time lathered in rotting blood. The smell was sweet at first, like wet pennies, but soured as the day passed. The concerned man became annoyed as Beck attracted the attention and sympathy of the girls

– Erin in particular – and as his very obvious intelligence and linguistic acumen (in spite of his muffled voice) became tremendously apparent. The Bob leaned over to the annoyed man and grinned stupidly “Boy, if he ain’t clever! I don’t think I’d uh made it here if I’d uh been in a masher like that. Why, when I was in th’ service I seen two cars had a real cruncher out there in Koh-ree-yah. Why the two fellers what were drivin’ were all pulled to chuncks and bits. Couldn’t barely tell that they wuz human. Huh, huh, huh! Well sometimes I ‘spose you just can’t. In the war in Koh-ree-yah I seen quite a lot what yuh’d never ‘spect were human, huh, huh, huh! Burns can do a spell on yuh! You ever been burned, there, pal?” The annoyed man tuned the Bob out and fantasized about the lunch break... then the end of the course... then packing his few necessary possessions into two light suitcases, abandoning the Midwest and flying west to a new, better life in a new, better culture – one where he saw no reminders of the generations which had tried so pathetically to uphold the outdated values of a past era, where no one knew him by the name of his father, his grandfather, his great-great-grandfather.



Kenneth let the class out at one. They had an hour to eat their lunches, and most of the students clustered into groups and headed for the restaurants off campus. The plain girls left together, Chen and Lakshmi and Erin left together. Andy and Beck followed them in Andy’s battered jeep. Bonnie marched off with a militaristic air in the direction of the parking lot, and Bob wandered aimlessly down the hall. The annoyed man scooped up a plastic bag; he had packed his lunch. He was tired of the moldering Pharmacy building and was pleased to see that the rain had let up. With a smile and a sense of glee he wandered into the open air and clipped along the sidewalk towards the picnic area. It is unnecessary to described how he unpacked his lunch on a table under the sky, how he began to eat without noticing the bank of dark vapor slithering in from the northwest, how the rain fell on his lunch while he was engrossed in fantasies of life abroad, and how he rushed to the nearest shelter which was a massive Arts and Crafts academic hall built like a Gothic church. The point is that – clinging to his last two pieces of sushi, and holding a bottle of sparkling water under his armpit – he rushed to the immense oak doors, pried them open, and found himself standing under a titanic ceiling crisscrossed by black, time-worn timbers with long, ill-lit halls extending in two directions, and a tremendous wooden stair case reaching up and down. Its steps were hollowed down into two trails – one ascending, one descending – and the risers were battered by decades of slipping toes, almost as violently as if a ballpeen hammer had been flailing them for

hours. The wet man was surprised to find Arthur Something Hall – a name he partially learned on his way out by looking at the medieval script chipped into the stone above the oak doors – was even more aged and redundant than the Pharmacy building. And yet there was something intense about this new edifice, something that shunned ridicule and invited awe. He was no less repulsed by the unnecessary antiquity of the place, but he felt his spite hushed and muffled, like a militant atheist who is comfortable mocking Muslims on television and in malls and shopping centers, but who is stunned to vulnerable silence on walking into the unshaken, lordly halls of the Alhambra, his cultural disgust proven weak and shallow when transplanted from its comfort zone. It was a temple, he felt, to age and time, and he looked sheepishly and longingly at the grey sheets of water that prevented his escape. Sensing a need to sit and close his eyes after such a dreary day, he turned down the hall to the right and almost unconsciously began to explore his foreign environment.

The building seemed entirely deserted. It was summer, and even though the hall was the center of all of the humanities classes, offices, and clubs during the school year, he only saw two office doors ajar, and one light on in a conference room where a white-haired janitor was silently polishing a mocha-colored table with furniture wax. The old man never looked up from his religious devotion to the century-old mahogany, and the outsider walked onward down the hallway. The walls were framed with the same immense timbers – two or three feet square – studded with the grey, battered heads of heavy iron spikes. In between the timbers were spans of thick wainscoting. Wooden carvings – flourishing leaves, intricate scrollwork, geometric designs, and the figures of birds, lions, knights, and peasants – were cut into the wood, with the kind of rustic roughness and obsession with detail that might be expected from a cathedral in Bavaria or Gascony or Bruges. The light emanated from the leaded and stained glass windows and the stripe of fluorescent lights the ribbed the ceiling of each hallway. These lights were on only at the ends of the halls and the central joint where the stairway hosted a landing, lending a pale grey glimmer that barely peeled back the murky shadows which filled each section of hall, intersected only by the blue glow of the few leaded glass windows which appeared at the alcoves formed by the landings.

Silence and loneliness seemed to run down the walls almost physically, as the only sounds he heard were the clap of his footsteps on the marble and limestone halls, and the faint buzz of the lights at the end of each hall. Without thinking about what he was managing, the outsider turned back down the hall, stopped at the landing where a suite of wooden benches lined an alcove which was dominated by an enormous

window of stained glass, he turned to mount the age-darkened stairs and ascended to the second story. Here there were no lights, only the icy light which flickered from the windows on the landings. Every door was closed, every room silent. Again he climbed the staircase and entered the third story – the quietest and darkest yet. Only the incessant clatter of water on the panes interrupted the ghastly still. But why did he enjoy it so much? Here he was, surrounded by everything he hated about the United States and the Midwest: a morbid nostalgia, an impractical sentimentality for the past, a servile protectiveness about tradition – and yet he felt somehow drawn to these unpeopled caverns where his personality and ego were tempted to fill and dominate the empty space. But it was no charm that drew him in: even in his drowsy reverie he felt a wrenching hate of this clumsy building, and fantasized about – where did the idea even come from? – buying a lighter and a newspaper and starting a fire in one of the huge trashcans in the bathroom. The timbers would burn for hours and hours before buckling and bringing the stone and bricks down in a shattered black heap. It needed to be removed from society, he thought, but my natural, legal means. It wasn't his problem anyway, though. In a month he would have a certification from the Oxford Seminars saying that he was licensed to teach English as a second language. A week would probably be all that it would take to get a job teaching stylish, cosmopolitan Korean entrepreneurs how to speak his language. By August he would surely be on a plane to his new culture – one which spurned age and traditions, one which was modern and practical.

When he noticed the form at the end of the hall, his rhapsody was interrupted. It was lumpy and squat like an obese dwarf or a pile of discarded pillows and bedding. The light was so dim that all he could make of it was a shadowy silhouette. He remembered his previous flight of fancy – the bleeding man who was actually a fool named Beck – and he soundlessly turned to walk back down the stairs, wondering why the janitor would have left this pile of bloated trash bags – for so, in the weak silver light they surely seemed to be – out in the unattended hallway. Having the building empty was no excuse to slack on his job. Another feeble retiree who deserved to be canned, he thought. Another old man who is taking advantage of someone's sentiment and pity. Another old codger who reminded some weak sap of their dead grandpa and finagled his way into a young man's job, who is now wasting money and time and space. Well, grandpa is dead and can't come back, he said. And he did say it. In fact, he shook a little and his lungs stung with the sharp inhalation of surprise when he realized he had spoken, for his words thundered in the empty landing and rattled their way down the staircase and into the black

basement stories below: We'll grandpa is dead and can't come back... *Dead and can't come back... Can't come back... Come back... Come back... Back...*

After lunch – and you will be glad, I'm convinced, to know that the rain lifted enough to keep our explorer dry during his race back to the Pharmacy building – the class reformed and did their work devotedly. Bonnie still lectured the young girls and reminded everyone of her calling, Andy still made weak jokes and referenced his garage band with painful regularity, Beck still mumbled through his teeth to (nearly) universal approval, and Bob – simple, dull Bob – smiled like a goon and answered questions he hadn't heard with meaningless tangents. When the time came, the bored man happily returned to his hostel, did his homework, and went to sleep after a quick meal of kimchi and ramen. He would dream of leaving the country his parents naively adored, the ground that his grandfather had tilled and harvested, the earth where his great-grandfather's bones had been digested after their rotten coffin had succumbed to time.



The next day class moved forward easily. The bored man let his classmates rattle off and ramble while he imagined the year to come. They easily filled the time with their enthusiasm, chattering gleefully as Kenneth led them in group activities which the bored man mimed his way through. And what was the jeopardy in miming? Truly? To pass the class he merely needed to be present at every class session and not be outrageously uninvolved. For God's sake, Bob, who was as unplugged and out of touch as anyone could possibly be while conscious and sober, and he was virtually guaranteed a license as long as he continued to show up. So they talked while our fellow sat and imagined the sparkling skyline of Seoul, and before long it was lunchtime. Andy and Beck followed Erin, Chen, and Lakshmi again. Beck's face was now a monochromatic rainbow of tones of pink, purple, blue, and black, bulging with lumps and stained pink with blood. His lips were bloated like two engorged leeches, and his laceration was now black and hard, but the girls tripped around him like nurses in a melodrama, and the group set out for a Chinese restaurant where Beck could have soup while his jaw healed. The gaggle of girls absconded in one vehicle, and Bonnie marched off with meaningless purpose down a hallway with Bob shuffling dopily beside her. The bored man took his lunch and went to the picnic table from yesterday.

The rain was floating in and out as if particular cloudbanks were taking watering shifts, but when the bored man arrived at his table, it was damp but under a swathe of blue sky. He ate his sushi in silence, looking up from time to time at the stone archway that had THE ARTHUR



SOMETHING-OR-OTHER MEMORIAL HALL cut into its streaked surface. It cast a particularly deep shadow when the sun was out, and the ponderous oak doors looked like polished black steel as they lurked under its solemn protection. A few raindrops landed on his hand. He knew that they had been blown from a tree by the touch of a passing wind – he knew this, you understand – but he thought to himself “damn rain’s back. I’d better go inside while I wait it out.” And he dropped his trash in a nearby receptacle as he climbed the worn limestone and pulled open the studded door with an eager wrench.

Today, thought the curious man, I should go downstairs and see what there is down there. The halls were still dim, still soundless, and this time, no tottering pop was shining the woodwork while he gorged on social security. He began down the stairs, but looked up as he set foot on the first landing. The climbing handrails of the three landings above him pointed upward as if suggesting a different direction, ultimately fading in the darkness above like a shout from a distant bystander whose voice is gradually swallowed by increasing distance.

He felt more at peace with the basement when he pushed open its heavy steel door: it was shockingly modern in comparison to the higher levels. But for all of its modernity, it was a complex and disorienting honeycomb of twists, turns, and surprising transformations. Small rooms bloomed into vast floorplans, and open spaces led to cramped hallways that branched into lightless passages. There was a labyrinthine locker room at the bottom of the stairs, which broke into a series of chambers lined with lockers and lit with dark orange bulbs. Beyond this was a breakroom of sorts – open and split up into a variety of areas, nooks, and alcoves, it was illuminated by three vending machines, and the same twilight glow of neon orange lightbulbs. Past this were three hallways which splintered off of the main path, each populated by offices and conference rooms – empty of course. At the end was a locked door which allowed no view of its interior despite a small rectangular window above the handle.

The curious man tried the handle. It refused to yield to his enquiry, and the door remained fixed to its wall. He pressed his face against the thick glass and his eyes strained to identify something behind its surface. As he pressed the skin of his hand into the steel beside the window, he heard or perhaps felt a voice murmur coarsely. He could not say whether it was to him, or whence it came: when recalling it he sometimes thought it came from the opposite end of the hall, sometimes from around the corner of one of the perpendicular passages behind him, sometimes from the other side of the glass, and other times from within his own head.

Surely, wherever it came from it was a dull, garbled voice that seemed to have no wind behind it, and what it said was this: "Come my friend, it is a sin to look in there, and you know it." Windless though it was, the voice was paternal and eerily familiar, like a cheery uncle who has caught his favorite nephew raiding a cookie jar before supper. He felt almost as though a light hand had been laid delicately on his shoulder and a cold, dry cheek had brushed the side of his ear. A surge of hatred burned in his stomach at this chiding, puritanical patronization. Before he had the chance to reason away the hallucination he barked over his shoulder: "Mind your business, you fucking useless old man!" But the sound of his voice and the implication of his talking to himself – especially in so violent a way – filled him with nervous dread, and the anger that he felt to this imagined guardian of tradition melted away into stunned self-consciousness.

He was about to leave the hallway when he felt what he could only described as a fat, sweaty hand on his forefinger, about the level of a toddler. Before he had a chance to process the sensation, a second phrase came to his mind. He didn't hear it, but he thought it, and the thought was this: "They have no right, you know. They're just afraid of being forgotten." Whatever sensation had tugged at his finger was utterly gone, and he would later be convinced that he had caught it on his cargo pocket which was wet from brushing against the wet juniper bushes outside the building, but the idea of the thought, confusing as it was, reinvigorated his resolve to have his will felt.

It was nearly two o'clock, so he wandered up the stairs and into the empty hallways where the electric lights buzzed at each end and dusk pooled in the crevices of the timbers, doorways, and molding. Putting his weight on the oak doors, he entered the courtyard like a sinner leaving a church before confession.



The girls came in first – the room was empty when he came in – followed by Kenneth. They giggled and joked in a knot on the opposite table. Erin came in later, with Beck walking with his right arm hanging behind her left arm, like two snakes poised to intertwine. Andy was next, with Chen and Lakshmi on either side, his Messianic hair knotted back in a ponytail, his face creased with a goony smirk. Chen's boyfriend lingered outside and faded away into the hall lined with antique class photographs. And then there was Bob, waddling slowly through the door, his round, balding head rocking with each swaying step, a ludicrous smile cut into his flesh like clay pressed by fat fingers. Two o'clock came, but Bonnie

failed to arrive. Kenneth started the class without her, and the day moved on.

During the next break, Kenneth leaned over to Bob.

"Hey, Bob, what happened to Bonnie? Wasn't she with you at lunch?"

Bob's head rolled over on his shoulders and his eyes blinked sleepily behind his glasses. The grin wrenched up a notch or two, and his flabby cheeks wiggled as he spoke in a slow, cheery drawl.

"Oh... Bonnie? Why, I dunno... She said she was gunno be behind me, but I didn't see her at the res'trent."

"What restaurant?"

"Why... The Bob Evens res'trent. That's where I told her I'd be getting muh dinner."

"So you never saw her?"

"Well... no... No, I s'pose she went somewhere else."

"She's not here at all."

"No... No, she isn't. Why... maybe she went home, do yuh figger?"

And then Kenneth left to call her phone. She didn't answer, and class started again.

The class ended at its usual time and the students filtered outside into the misty afternoon air. Kenneth stayed behind and pulled out his phone. The bored man looked up at the row of windows that marked their classroom. Kenneth was standing with one arm over his chest, the phone to his ear, facing the grey sky with a frown twisted into his face. The rest of the students hobnobbed and lingered. The bored man quickly made his way across campus to the parking lot. He was halfway there when he realized that he was taking an unnecessarily circuitous route. In fact, he was walking in the opposite direction of the car lot, taking a trail that wound through the campus like a wavy fishhook before changing directions and leading behind the Pharmacy building. In the meantime, it cut across the West Mall – the common green whose picnic tables he had used for his lunches. He was walking past the Arthur Something-Or-Other Memorial Hall. In the dimming light it was silhouetted against the southwest sky, where the sun – muffled though it was in rain and fog – glowed a glassy, neon blue through the shifting planes of cloud. It was monumental against the sky – sepulchral and tomblike. "It really is," he said slowly to himself, as if being coached in a pledge "...it really is a good, old place. Maybe there's more to it than it seems." He looked up and along its stonework, blackened with moss and shaggy with ivy. The Pharmacy building faced it like a younger brother coolly admiring the family favorite. He wondered – and he then wondered why he wondered – if the two communicated to one another. Not literally – perhaps – but

figuratively, through tunnels. He knew that the Pharmacy building had a basement. Maybe there was a better way to get to the Hall. It would save him from ever getting wet on his way to lunch. And then he laughed. Since when was that his official lunch spot? He could just as easily eat in the common area on the ground floor of the Pharmacy hall – or even more easily in their classroom. But even as he laughed, his brows grew heavier and he felt his heart quicken its beat. Exactly why, indeed, was it that he felt so urged to spend his time in that nasty old graveyard? It was as if he had woken from a dream that he had been sure was real, only to recognize the truth. A good old place? No, no. It was a building that his grandpa's father would have studied in, a building that his great uncle would have thought was grand looking, a building that his father would have called quaint or charming. But they were all dead, and so was everything that these old white men – the starchy sires who planned the buildings, taught the classes, and posed for the pictures – stood for. It was a new century – two new centuries, in fact – and a new world. A global world. A nationless world. A connected, viral world that spat on the puritanical patriarchies and ethnocentric nationalism that had purchased every stone and brick and glob of mortar. To hell with it, he thought he said, and he turned around and went back down the trail in the direction of his car.

Bonnie never arrived at her home, the police told him on the phone three days later. Her car was in the parking lot. Her purse was in her car. The keys were missing, and so was the driver. They were calling anyone who might have seen her, and all the bored man could tell them was that she had spoken of driving to a Bob Evens with the dowdy Bob, but had never shown up. This was not new information to them, as Bob himself had been the second one to call the police after Kenneth. Their combined testimonies seemed to be the only useful ones. No one had seen her leave the building – the heroic Beck had been in deep conversation (as deep as one can get with one's jaw wired shut) with the fawning Erin, Chen had stayed inside with her wilting boyfriend, Lakshmi had been on the phone with her babysitter, and the gaggle of plain girls had been watching Andy play hacky sack, taking turns challenging a true master of the craft. The indifferent man closed his phone. The IPD would be sending a detective to interview him in the morning, but neither he nor the man on the phone expected it would do any good; it was merely a formality. He pictured Bonnie in his mind: her pig eyes, her pig jowls, her misshapen, Kewpie doll body with its bulbous forehead, stubby limbs, and astonishing center of gravity. Then there was her voice – grating and severe like a fire-and-brimstone radio preacher whose hatred of harlots is based in a secret youth filled with rampant fornication – and her condescending attitude

towards the younger students. Another dinosaur whose asteroid has come, he thought. Another relic buried under time... Just so. Just so. He had very few conflicting emotions about her disappearance, though it concerned him at times when he realized that he had no doubt that she was dead. In fact, he was freely pleased with her apparent demise, and the only pangs of remorse or guilt that he felt were borne out of a sense of his humanist/atheist devotion to the preservation of life from famine, flood, war, and execution. It was a part of his credo that conflicted with Bonnie's own severe worldview. Perhaps that was the source of his utter satisfaction with her demolition: a woman who espoused capital punishment, blamed the poor, cheered American imperialism, and snubbed the Palestinian apartheid surely deserved the lot which she had so effortlessly recommended to others. Death. And a horrible one, too.

But that stopped him in the act of eating the plate of gomtang and ramyeon that he was picking at. Horrible? Why horrible? It was as if he had read on his newsfeed that she had been found boiled in turpentine or smothered by corn in a grain elevator, the seed spilling out of her mouth, packed in her nose and ears when they extracted her. After all, she might be perfectly fine, or even if she were dead it might have been the gentle hand of her god, quietly stopping her heart in an act of peaceful euthanasia. He shook the thoughts from his head and readjusted his chopsticks, which had begun to droop in his limp hand.



The days plowed forward like waves tearing away at a sandy cliff. His passport was now ready, and he had the necessary shots, references, and travel arrangements. He had preemptively sent resumes to schools in South Korea, Japan, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand, Nepal, Burma, and Bangladesh. He was working on submissions to other employers in Malaysia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, and Indonesia. And yet his mood darkened with each new opportunity. The more he sent, the less he felt secure about his next adventure. His obsession with the jobs in Seoul seemed tame and ordinary when compared to a life in the mountains of Nepal, which seemed clichéd when considering the wind-torn steppes of Kazakhstan and Mongolia, which felt dull when posed against the hubbub and sheen of Hong Kong. He felt an urge to be released from all boundaries, nationalities, passports, and visas, a need to be everywhere at once, and no where he felt beneath his ambitious spirit. He wondered if his passion for Korea would survive the first six months – if he would not be as bored with their plastic, pop culture before he had even taught a semester. But anyplace was better than Richmond. He had gone to school in Muncie, to grad school in Bloomington, and had worked off and on in

Fort Wayne, Jeffersonville, and Lafayette. There was nothing he detested more deeply in his marrow than this place, and even if the farthest he would travel were Florida or California, it must be done. For the salvation of his soul.



Week passed into week. The police were entirely confounded about Bonnie's disappearance. The cadaver dogs had scoured campus, and the few willing members of her family (she was indeed a decidedly unpopular human being) who cared to devote time to the search had abandoned the search and handed the reins entirely in the hands of the IPD. From time to time the students saw a brace of plain clothes detectives or a cluster of blue-clad men following a German shepherd, but the third weekend came and went, and no Bonnie was ever found.

Beck was in better shape: his jaw was still clenched, but the bandages were gone, and only a few streaks of dark brown showed where the lacerations had been. His right eye was partially swollen – the skin thick and pink – but otherwise he was almost wholly recovered. Erin had begun seeing him outside of class. They held hands and talked about the countries they would like to see – ostensibly as a matter of conversation, but in reality planning their synchronized trip abroad. It sounded as though Italy was their favorite idea – a country that the jealous man thought festered of age, whiteness, and clichés – and the plain girls vicariously mooned over the new couple while Andy diverted all of his bumbling, stoner's attention to Lakshmi – his efforts to woo Erin and breakup Chen from her boyfriend having equally failed. Bob told the jealous man that he thought Erin was a swell gal – real purty and everything; great legs, too – and that Beck was a sharp feller with a real great head on his shoulders. They were an attractive pair, indeed, but the jealous man resented Bob's fumbling rhapsody. Under his breath he muttered that he hoped whoever nabbed Bonnie would nab Beck. Erin, too, if she was really that stupid. Bob didn't seem to hear – Bob indeed heard very, very little – but his eyes sparked and his smile grew serious as his young friend stood and left.

Lunchtime came, and the group scattered. The effortlessly lovely Erin led Beck to her jeep by the hand. Chen and her boyfriend faded down the hall. Andy – with his chiseled beard and flowing hair – walked off with Lakshmi, a redeemed, brown Magdalene to his marijuana-pocketing, metal-head Christ. The gaggle slumped out of the classroom, apparently saddened that all of the men had been scooped up (the jealous man never had much mass appeal), but quietly hopeful that they would someday cease to be alone.

The jealous man left the room with his sack lunch and descended the stairs. Just as he was about to step off the landing onto the first floor, he looked down the stair well at the door which led to the basement. Before he made any decision, he felt the prickle on his neck which heralded a secret anxiety – a tension between instinct and curiosity. He watched it, as if a door could suddenly turn around and address him, and thought about what might be behind it. He remembered the comparatively modern area beneath the Arthur Hall, that medieval-looking eyesore. Maybe there was a 21<sup>st</sup> century beauty beneath this 19<sup>th</sup> century beast as well. “It is a sin and you know it.” The voice was again glowing coolly into his ear. It was a memory, that was all, he said under his breath as he shook his head. A memory of a figment of my imagination, he said. This time he barreled past the warning without stopping for fear or doubt, and plunged down the stairs.

The door was old like most of the doors in the two buildings. It was wooden with a glass window in the middle of the top – perhaps a foot square – made up of separate panes held in place by tin bars and solder. But no light came from behind the glass, only the soft red burn of an exit sign around the corner. He entered the basement and went down the hall.

Turning the corner, he found another door, this one more modern with a push-bar and a small slit-window. A light went on when he opened this door, and he saw that a small stair led down into the real basement below. Dusky orange light glowed somewhere in the background. He walked slowly down the steps and peered around the corner. A locker room. Just like the basement below the Arthur Hall. It too was a honeycomb of twists and turns, lit only by a handful of vague, colored bulbs. Remembering the Arthur basement, he easily but cautiously navigated through the lockers, to the break room, the common room, the branching hallways. This basement was identical in almost every way to its brother across the West Mall. Here was a Pepsi vending machine where over there had been a Dr Pepper contraption. Here was a left turn where there he was almost certain there had been a right turn, or a dead end where there had been an office. But overall, the scene was a carbon copy. As he walked through the dim hallways he sensed a struggle between his mind and body: his mind was determined to sleuth out this new territory – territory which had offered nothing in the way of danger in the Arthur Something Hall – but his body was prickling with rebellion against every forced step. He felt his hairs raise every time he looked around a corner. His hands shook on the few occasions that he tried door handles. His feet seemed to wrench backwards from time to time, as if some internal force was attempting to overthrow his cerebral authority, to force the steps

back, and to flee. It was true, he had to admit, that he sensed some sort of intelligence down there. Something observant and careful that minded his movements and sleepily ignored them. But, he thought once – and only once – to himself, there really did seem to be a feeling of prowling, and an atmosphere that suggested that at any moment, at any false step or offending sound, there could be a bound and a capture. But he banished these thoughts. The spirit was willing, but the flesh weak. If there was anything that he loathed more than boredom, more than the past, more than his upbringing, it was the limitations and foolishness of the body. He wished he could eviscerate himself – smash the cage and free the bird. He knew better than his body – his human brain knew better than his ape brain. And so he moved forward, banishing the anxiety that curdled underneath him like a tea kettle bouncing on the stove, waiting to scream.

At the end of the hallway he found a familiar door. It was unsurprisingly locked, and he once more placed his flesh against its grain. This must communicate to the same room as the other locked door – but from the other side, he thought.

Just as he was pressing his face against the glass of the window – like a child reaching his arm into a tiger's cage in the dead of a lightless night, hoping to feel fur, and careless of teeth – just as he was arching his eyebrow to let in as much light as that silent room might be able to offer him, and just as he had taken a deep breath, as though staving off breathing for a few seconds would increase his powers to see, his phone whirled in his pocket.

He fell away from the door and pulled out the device. Its searing white glow cast the hallway in the sparkling shine of manufactured moonlight. It was from Kenneth: "Where are you? Class has started." The terse message seemed to voice Kenneth's discreet but obvious anxiety about Bonnie's disappearance. He was a quiet man with a sad and watchful face, and while the bevy of plain girls and the rest of the romantically minded students were too consumed with flirting and gossip to notice, the bored man had seen a shadow fall over Kenneth, like the tense alertness of a seasoned deer who smells men in the woods during mating season. Indeed, Kenneth resembled a protective parent who allows his cubs to frolic and lope in the safety of the den – shielding them from the anxiety that burns in his brain – while his eyes and ears are trained on something unseen just beyond. He was not at peace with Bonnie's disappearance, and more than suicide, accidental death, or even murder, his senses appeared coiled to receive some horrible explanation that he wouldn't even consider discussing with his students. All he had imparted was a piece of advice: "It's probably best if you guys stay in groups or pairs,



and I really think you should stay in places where people can see you; don't do much exploring or wandering off." The bored man had little patience for Kenneth's pulsating paranoia.

There in the basement of the Pharmacy Building – or rather, so it seemed, in the tunnel which communicated with the basement across the Mall – the bored man texted back a simple apology and turned around. But as he sent the message, his brain seemed to go dizzy. It suddenly dawned on him: if class has started, then he had been down here for an hour. He looked at the clock: 2:15. An hour and a quarter had gone by. How was this possible, though? He hadn't even had his lunch. He hadn't even left the damn building? Or even sat down or taken a little nap. He had only gone down the stairs and walked through this honeycomb of halls and alcoves. Maybe he had been standing at this door longer than he had imagined. He turned and made his way back. As he left the hallway, he thought that the basement was surely the most untended, unnoticed space on the campus. Why else, he grumbled, should the trash go so long without being emptied? He thought this as he passed what – in the twilight dark illuminated only by exit signs – he knew to be a trashcan. It was bulging – swollen and pulpy – with what must be weeks of refuse, and the smell was indescribably foul.

It took him five minutes to regain the classroom with the use of an elevator. It was their last day on campus: next week they would meet at a hotel conference room in downtown Indianapolis. The police were eager to scour the campus (apparently, though they did not elaborate, Bonnie's loss was not an isolated phenomenon), and were nervous about the group meeting on what amounted to a campus deserted by all but a handful of savvy maintenance workers. The janitors knew their way around the buildings and were in regular communication with one another, but if something insidious was happening on campus, then a group of young out-of-towners who had never even been to the university before were sensible targets for a predator. The next four hours would be the last that the class spent in their little white room on the second story of the Pharmacy Building whose walls were solemnly adorned with the faces of the smiling living and the watchful dead.



Beck and Erin were asked to pay attention on two or three occasions, albeit in Kenneth's characteristically kind manner. He, like the tittering gaggle, saw little harm in their budding affections. Apparently, over lunch, they had formally decided on teaching in Italy. It also became clear that the two lived in the same suburb of Indianapolis, and that they were seeing one another regularly out of class. Beck's speech was much more

understandable, and his face was almost fully healed. Andy, too, seemed to have made great strides with Lakshmi, who seemed to be whispering more and joking more. The jealous man observed them rub one another's backs from time to time. Chen's Vietnamese boyfriend had emerged from the wallpaper, so to speak, and was now sitting in on the class (perhaps a defensive measure against Andy), and was now considered a class favorite, whose thoughtful opinions about learning and teaching language were useful to the otherwise American class. The gaggle of girls had decided to join the same teaching company, and were preemptively offered jobs teaching at the same school in Shanghai. Bob alone had yet to make any progress – personal or professional – in the class. He and the jealous man sat together like the last two picks in a game of kickball. But Bob didn't care; he didn't even know where he wanted to go. "Cahstuh Reecuh, or Mexicah, maybe," he said. His eyes bobbed stupidly in his head – his fat lips spilled over his thick teeth in a senile grin.

The jealous man watched Erin cross her legs so that one brown, sandaled foot bounced softly against Beck's leg. He realized that he both adored and despised her. He wanted to grab her – either to kiss her mouth or shove her into the ground, he wasn't sure which. Beck, though, with his heavy jaw and green eyes, was an object of fatal hate. He imagined luring them into the basement, where the darkness flows down the walls and pools on the floor, cut only by muffled red light that seemed to cast more shadow than provide light. He saw them – the bronzed, silky haired athlete following after the plodding invalid, whose limp identified him in the crushing murk. There they were, and there was her voice – a creamy alto – "Beck? Beck, I can't see anything." He felt that his point of view was behind something, or around a corner, and then it was moving – slowly and low to the ground. Suddenly, even the blackness was a blur, and he felt air rushing over his face like a man who is running with his eyes closed. Then there was something in his teeth, warm and leathery, but it tore, and then there was a man's scream, and then a girl's. He was feeling a man's arms and chest, looking for something he knew he must find. And he found it. And he ate it. And then he smelled her tropical conditioner and her floral body spray, and he knew that she must also become his. And he was low to the ground again, but now with a sudden jolt he reached forward to grab something he didn't see but knew to exist in the dark: an ankle. Then he hoisted himself up the calf, soft and shaved, and with his weight he pulled her down, too.

The sound of clapping shocked him awake – or out of his daydream – and he saw that the last presentation of the day had concluded. Now the

students were standing and talking. Bob sat, almost sadly, looking at Bonnie's empty chair, while the others milled in groups.

"Okay, guys," said Kenneth, "great work today. Remember now that we'll be at the Hyatt next week – nine in the morning as usual. There's free parking across the street at the parking garage if you let them know that you're with Oxford Seminars, so be sure not to pay for anything; we'll have that covered since this move is unexpected. One last word before we go – and I'm sure this won't be an issue since this is the last day – " and here he cast a cool glance at the jealous man, "but the police are still concerned about what happened here with Bonnie, and I hope that you won't linger on campus or spend much time in places without people around you. Just play it safe. Okay... well that's it guys. You have a good one and we'll see you next week at the Hyatt."

The curious man left without saying anything to his classmates. Andy and Lakshmi disappeared in his tattered jeep. Chen's boyfriend drove them around the corner in his rented Fiat. The girls left in two batches, some watching Andy with sad eyes, others laughing distractedly at jokes which no one could hear. Bob sauntered down the hallway and was no more. Beck slipped his right hand into the back right pocket of Erin's jean shorts. The jealous man watched them sashay down the hall passed the silent banks of dead, mustachioed men, who seemed to watch over them protectively as they strolled under their frozen gazes. Something about their white, faded visages tempered the jealous man's loathing, like the warning glance of reprimand from an observant parent, which chills the mischief of a young bully.

They left together, kissing on the sidewalk, and leaving campus in Erin's vehicle. The rain had returned, dropping from the sky in full sheets, and her windshield wipers peeled away the water in silver leafs. The jealous man had brought a cheap umbrella with him that day, anticipating the farewell tour that would take place on this final day on the university campus. He went down the hallway with the untied umbrella hanging limply from his hand like a sleeping bat's wing. With his eyes focused on the ground, he avoided the long-dead sentinels' gazes. Here again he was passing from one century to another, slowly and methodically, from the bright cheer of the last graduating class, to the muted tones of the sun-faded 1970s, to the silver ambassadors of the 1950s with their black ties and horn-rimmed glasses, to the stern, yellowed eyes peering out at him from the Gilded Age. It was with some disgust and satisfaction that he cleared the class of 1895 and stepped into the stairwell with its blank walls and unaged atmosphere.



The umbrella ballooned to its full stature with a quick jerk of his wrist, and he was protected from the clattering downpour as he walked onto the sidewalk and crossed the West Mall where rivulets were swelling and sloshing down the sidewalks. Kenneth had left uncharacteristically early, otherwise he might have called out to the bored man and shared some of his own experiences – warned him of what he knew and had seen. But he was not, and the curious man was drawn towards the hazy outline of the Arthur Something-or-Other Memorial Hall. Blurred by the deluge, which muted it as effectively as fogged glass, the towers and halls seemed to take on the outline of a crouched figure, head down, body pressed into something, hands supporting it, elbows erect and rising in thick nubs over the prostrate trunk. It was uglier than ever. Uglier than the first day when he had seen it and hated it. Uglier than his grandfather who had died obese, corpulent, and moaning. Uglier than his father who had died emaciated, skeletal, and rattling. Uglier than the cancer that had ravaged the latter, or the pulpy fat which had strangled the former. Uglier than sin and death and lust. And yet he walked on into the splattering haze, and crossed the Mall, and achieved the stone patio, and found shelter under the medieval archway that cast its shadow over the oaken doors. It was, after all, a good, old place, in spite of its dated gloom and repulsive atmosphere of age and history. And a good, old place is worth exploring one last time regardless of how much one might want it to be demolished – its stone ground to powder and its bricks buried under the sea.

Here he dropped the umbrella, laid his backpack aside, and shook the rain out of his sandals. The door was still unlocked. He needed one last look at it all. Just one more stroll through these unpeopled hallways with their silent peace. And with that thought in mind, he opened the door and entered the Hall.

It seemed quieter than his last visit, and yet the crash of the rain against the windows and roof filled the lobby with a clatter like a drumroll being struck on a trashcan wrapped in wool. He looked left and right. The darkness of the storm had leached away the silver glow of his last few inspections, and other than the fluttery light at the ends of the hall, only a blue, syrupy glow came in through the windows. He thought he saw the old janitor cross from one room into its neighbor across the way – a white-headed man who flitted briefly into the open before being consumed by another task in another room – but realized that neither door was open, and neither room appeared to emit any light. With the dimness deepening, he decided to have one last look at the strange door before he would turn back for his car.

Today there were no half-heard voices – no warnings or encouragements, no admonitions or goadings – but the stairwell sang with the hiss of rain on the exterior, and his head seemed thick with garbled thoughts and smothered whispers. Down the stairs, down to the landing, down to the door. He opened it into the locker room, and crossed into the basement that sprawls under the Hall.

The pleasure of these clandestine explorations had been in their secrecy and his sense of unchallenged individuality which he experienced in the faceless walls of the good old place. It was far from the photographs in the Pharmacy building and far from the fools in his class. He could cast his personality here like a shadow, and stencil his cameo on the wall. But today, in spite of his eagerness to feel that conquest one last time, he had never felt less alone. It was as if a party was being had in every room that he approached. That's not to say that he heard talking or laughter, in fact he never heard a thing. It was rather like a surprise party, like room after room filled with people who crouched patiently and knelt with anxious excitement, waiting for him to enter and be enveloped. The locker room was particularly rich with unanticipated tension and suspense: at every turn in the shaggy gloom he thought he saw shadows moving about, reaching from benches to lockers, kneeling to touch the top of one foot, raising an arm and rubbing the exposed underarm, some pulling garments off of trunks, others watching the disrobing with discreet glances. Each row of lockers posed a booby trap which might at any moment prove loaded with venom, and each twist in the path presented an opportunity for him to round the corner and walk into the knowing embrace of a patient assailant.

But he cleared the lockers and found himself in the weakly-lit common space – a faculty lounge area, he supposed – with its soft-glowing vending machines and silent-but-staring microwaves. The commons was a hub that served to mediate between several hallway branches, which shot out from its sides like spokes. As such, each hall was denoted by a red EXIT sign. The vending machines and the exit signs combined their feeble light to form a matrix of crisscrossing shadows which fell across the floor and shot along the walls like the cords of a spider's web. For a moment he felt like sitting and drinking in the less claustrophobic space, but something arrested his attention, and inspired the first unanimous concord between his mind and body since he had first begun to haunt these lonely spaces – for the first time, instinct reached out to grab awareness, and the two agreed about what they observed. The idea of Bonnie – her harsh voice, piggish eyes, and cruel nature – had never entirely left the bored man. He had never fully felt her shadow lift from his

mind. To put this in a more communicable way, it was never as though someone mentioned her and he thought “Ah, that’s right! Bonnie used to be part of this group and now she is not. I’ve just grown used to her not being here, I suppose.” Rather, it was as though she was perpetually using the bathroom, or out in the hall waiting to come in. He remembered Beck, how at his first appearance he had looked up from his desk to see the bloody image of a man whose gore-plastered head seemed to strike outrage in only his soul. This is almost what he expected – something of that nature, at least: Bonnie staggering through the door holding her head by its bun, sitting calmly beside Bob, and placing the severed member on the table in front of her, twisting it to face this person or that. This was his imagination, however, and as farcically Gothic as a casually decapitated Bonnie was, the Bonnie that he saw in front of him now had none of the melodrama of that far more pleasant spook. The Bonnie that he could see there in the gloom of the basement was a rumpled shade of a human figure, and the very sight of it, silent and watchful, flooded his soul with fire.

It was Bonnie’s figure, fat, squat, and frowning, but the look on its face was not at all healthy to look at in the semi-light of a basement where no one was remotely close enough to answer his calls or share his horror. The expression – or what he could make of it in the dusk – was stripped of self-awareness, of human-ness. It was vulpine and twisted, like a pen sketch which has gone through a washing machine: a distorted, warped, drained version of its original nature, suggesting its design, but deviating so drastically that its original character has been shredded into a barely recognizable caricature. He would not go so far as to say that anything materially about the face was different, but that it was drained of a human spirit – a hopeless metaphor to communicate to any except those who have seen a man lose his mind – and leeches of all sympathy. It was like looking up to see a scant, ragged creature in the woods: your eyes lock, and the two animals are eyeing each other. To look into a human’s eyes is to see motives, fears, origins, and character, but to look into a wild animal’s eyes – one unseasoned by human society – is to see the lack of recognition and mercy which makes it effortless for a wolf to tear the throat from a pregnant woman, or for a bear to maul a blind child. This was the manner of thing which glowered at him from the back wall of the room – somehow remorseless, and instilled with a ghoulish curiosity. Her head tilted watchfully now that their eyes were locked, and he realized – even in the darkness – that they were somehow not the eyes of a person: black, round, and lidless.

Its clothes were tarry and matted around the bowels, and a dark mark glistened under its chin, as if it had been gored under the jaw. It was clear in any case that if human it had been, it could not be expected to live with such hideous injuries. The dark hue of its mottled skin and the retched stench of its putrefaction were enough to lay any doubts to rest. But human beings are at heart optimistic and relational, and the frightened man's instinct was to appeal to it in light of his obvious disadvantage.

"Bonnie? Bonnie, are you okay? They're looking for you, Bonnie."

But the sound of the name meant nothing to it. It didn't understand the idea of a name, or the idea of language. It only saw a bleating herbivore which backed away with shaky steps. It was time to own its food, and it flew to the floor and scuttled forward with a sudden burst of energy.

Its jaws clacked together smartly, and its lips and tongue slathered against the teeth that were now clenched and glinting. The frightened man felt his stomach lurch as the thing wormed its way towards him in a manner that caused him to make a horrible sound which he had never heard before. But now his body took over from his mind, which was already in the first stages of decay. Half-mad, he lurched forward and dove for the doorway, but the crocodile slithered quicker than he could run, and it was behind him and in front of the exit. With his reason fatally blunted, he now rushed down the hallway in the direction of the locked door. He could hear the flabby skin dragging along the tiled floors – a sound like wet rubber – and the swollen hands smacking thickly in rapid cadence. A sad, low wail, like that of a hungry baby squealed behind him. Bonnie's mauled body lurched desperately forward, eager to feed on its wonderful prey, but the frightened man's mind was not entirely dead, yet, and when he saw a fire extinguisher on the wall, he wrenched it from its moorings, and hurled it with all his force into the putrid thing behind him. The stench that filled the air after its back split open from the blow nearly knocked him down, but the corpse stopped in the middle of its stride and lay silent on the floor. Dead or unconscious, he couldn't tell, but the door was now in front of him, and it was terror more than curiosity that caused him to raise the extinguisher over his head once more to shatter the window. He reached inside, and felt for the bolt. It turned sharply, and the bolt retreated from its socket with a loud clack. He extracted his hand with a jolt, and suddenly a haze lifted from his mind.

It was as though everything was paused, and he looked back at the form on the floor. It was not laying as he had seen it, sprawled in the attitude of a crawling woman, but leaned gently against the wall, with an inflated hand resting on its chest. It was too dark to see if the bloodstains

were still there, or the gruesome wound, but the figure now seemed different – still ghastly – but asleep or deflated. He sensed that he had been afforded an opportunity to turn and leave. It was a chance to escape before whatever it was that had been there with him in the basement. A period of grace, a display of forgiveness, a second chance – he could be absolved and return to the surface if he chose to step over the slumped thing behind him and race for the stairwell. But with the return of his sanity, came the return of his Self, and he felt anger fill the void of fear. He remembered the thin hand on his shoulder, the cold voice with the paternal warning, and he cursed it in the same moment that he grasped the handle and depressed it. Whatever was being kept from him was now his, and he wrenched the door from its jambs.

Pale blue light poured into his eyes, and he winced after having lived so long underground. The room that it lit was long and featureless like a perfectly smooth tunnel, or a hollow globe. There was no sense of beginning or ending, but a detectable roundness to the walls which appeared to be imbued with the light. It was like being in an aquarium after dark, with the flashing, undulating blue gleam splashing softly on the black floor and ceiling.

In one sense he was not surprised to see the white faces that surrounded him. Finally, here were the Sentinels – the Watchmen, the Guardians – the silent and staring Old Guard of all of this moldering, redundant history. Black frock coats, white ties, and dark beards which were unquestionably familiar stood motionlessly around him, topped by hollow, dry cheeks and round, wispy-haired scalps. The eyes were not like those in the pictures: rather than staring and bright they were sunken and lost in shadow – perhaps nonexistent, even. But the mixture of light and shade made it impossible to see what glared from beneath the stony, hairless eye ridges. The waxen faces were facing him by the time he walked in, and he had yet to see them move a hair. In fact, he thought, they might be mere dummies or mannequins – maybe effigies for a Halloween party, dated and ghastly in their Victorian garb. There was, however, and inescapable sense of sentience radiating from this silent, sad-faced Old Guard. They didn't seem to hate him or despise him, but they observed him watchfully, like an audience who brace themselves for a familiar tragedy with a plot they know and characters they pity. One figure, wearing an academic gown which seemed to have faded green with age, had a shaggy beard which was nearly as white as his bleached, bloodless forehead. He was the first to move, taking a step away from the silent crowd and holding his hands perpendicularly to his chest, like a pastor invoking a benediction or a high priest consecrating a sacrifice.



The curious man was not terribly surprised to see them, but he was surprised to see Bob hobble stupidly through the door behind him. There was the asthmatic sound of his breath, there the telltale smell of his cough drops, and there the distinct cadence of his limp. The curious man didn't understand what was happening now: he didn't think that the ghosts of the college wanted to harm him. They were revolting to behold – withered and skeletal – but they were not threatening: poised for some nameless event, but not prepared to deliver the blow. He knew that something was coming, some event or person, and he was unsure if he was about to be indoctrinated or ejected. In either case, he loathed Bob for having wandered stupidly into his ceremony, like a little sister who opens the bedroom door when her brother is losing his virginity. He hated the old, worthless man and secretly hoped that whatever had eviscerated and possessed Bonnie would quickly do the same to this waste of air and space. Bob staggered wearily into the blue light and wiped sweat from his bald head with a spotted kerchief. From the side and in this dim light, the curious man thought that Bob resembled the janitor he had seen polishing the table upstairs – the one who had seemed to dart from one closed door to another just an hour before. But it was Bob, not a janitor. Hideously senile Bob. The little man pocketed his kerchief and looked over at his young friend. The smile that he gave him was startlingly unpleasant; the curious man had never noticed how white or long the old man's teeth were, or how untrimmed and keen his fingernails were.

"The last one did not work well," he said in an uncharacteristically dry and thin voice.

"We granted you that only because she was closed to us," said the bearded man in the faded gown. "Now she has been put to peace, and you can no longer count her among your own."

"What of him?" hissed the Bob.

The sad old man in the faded gown raised his thin hands above his shoulders and bowed his head. As if preparing to participate in a somber and uncomfortable ritual, the other white-faced figures circled the little group and raised their hands over their heads. The light glowed through their membranous skin, outlining the dead bones beneath. The frightened man no longer wanted to be a part of what had been withheld him. He no longer wanted to have access to every nation, city, responsibility, truth, or understanding. There were now doors which he was all right keeping closed, secrets he didn't need to know, places he didn't need to dwell. But now the door was fastened, and the circle of silent men had completely enclosed the three figures in the center. The Bob looked eagerly at the grim phantom, like a dog who trusts that it is to be granted the heart of

the deer he has helped his master capture. And his face only continued to brighten as the old man looked sternly at his prisoner. A dull hum reverberated from the throats that surrounded them, like a consecrating “om” lifted up to the orchestrating powers of the universe. Slowly the blue light began to grow dimmer and greyer. Shadow lowered from the ceiling and rose from the floor. It became clear, he knew not how, that the darkness above and below him was not a lack of light, but the featureless embodiment of unrestricted time and matter, somehow held at bay by the Sentinels. It was the realm of demented chaos – the realm of the Bob. The past was obliterated there, but so too was the future: it was all crushed and compacted into a terrifying vat of purposeless expanses without points of reference, time, or identity. The Bob began to take energetic strides towards his shivering prey as the Patriarch lifted a prayer to the soaring, lightless spaces above them, and as it faded into the inky shadows, the Bob’s vulpine face was horrible to look upon.

“He has resisted us and intruded unconscionably into the Other Domain. He has spite for his Fathers and animosity for his Fellows. He is beyond our Power. We commend him to you, and turn him over to the Auto-da-Fé with clear consciences and worshipful hearts. *Pater misericordiae, ora pro nobis peccatoribus, nunc, et in hora mortis nostrae. Sed libera nos a malo. Amen. Amen.*”

The light was snuffed, and his screams were absorbed into illimitable infinity.

# FINGERLESS GLOVES

— *David Howley*

THE Beckwith Liberal Library was a tired old building in a tired old part of town. It had been founded by public subscription and an endowment from Sir Edward Beckwith, a local industrialist, in the early years of the twentieth century to promote the reading of “enlightening literature by working men”, according to the worn brass plaque to the right of its once-impressive double doors. Its rain-pocked sandstone front sported a classical portico, out of proportion, and out of place on a street that was now home to pound shops, bookmakers and a tanning salon.

It was small for a library even when it was constructed, but it had been well-used until the later 1960s when the clearance of local terraced houses had left it bereft of members, except those who were prepared to travel from the more-distant new blocks of flats. Over time, the local authority had taken on more and more of the maintenance and running costs of the library as the endowment dwindled, but there had been very little attempt to update the facilities, apart from the installation of an electronic checkout system for the shelved books. There were no computers beyond an antiquated catalogue system for the more frequently borrowed titles, accessed via a green-screen VDU and a chunky cream and brown keyboard with missing Q and O keys. There were no CDs, no DVDs, and definitely no e-books. There was now never enough money to refresh the stock of books to keep it relevant.

In the early days, the Beckwith Liberal Library had been run by a senior librarian with at least three assistants. By 2012 there was only one elderly librarian left who had given his life to the ideals of Sir Edward, only to be told that cuts to the local authority budget would mean the closure of the library two years before he was due to retire. There were no plans to redeploy him elsewhere.

The librarian’s name was Mr Hull, a portly, balding but still healthy man, whose default mental state was one of distracted concern for “things in general”, punctuated by moments of whimsical animation and a quiet passion for ideas. He lived with his house-bound wife, who I never met. I came to know him quite well, however, when I learned that Sir Edward’s bequest included a clause that no books were to be ever disposed of, and the library had thereby accrued an incredible, if patchy, backlist of late nineteenth and twentieth century titles, with lending records all intact. Mr

Hull had been more than happy to allow me to help him explore rarities in the basement store on behalf of the university; and for myself I was more than glad of the opportunity to get away from the horrors of research frameworks, learning and teaching committees, and disgruntled student “consumers”. We spent many studious hours in near-silence, working through musty old boxes of foxed books, and rusty, dark grey filing cabinets, most pre-dating Mr Hull’s tenure, only to exclaim with joy when some gem emerged which we would then discuss at length, relating it to events in our lives and the associated memories of books and reading. My aim was to analyse the lending patterns found on all the stamped book plates to tell the story of the uses of literature in the local community before it had been cleared away by the concrete modernisers.

It could not last, of course: my university found the idea of pure research, especially of such an apparently pointless and limited historical subject, incomprehensible, and a month or so before the date the library doors would finally close for ever, I was instructed to make one final visit to terminate my research.

It was a punishingly cold January afternoon, and the first flakes of a promised snow storm were just beginning to fall. The weather was so poor that when I arrived Mr Hull told me I was the only person he had seen all day.

“You look frozen to the marrow,” he said. “Why don’t I just lock the door and we’ll have some tea in the office.” He smiled wanly to me, turned and shuffled ahead. I was glad of a moment to pause, while I thought about how I might tell him of my departure.

The “office” was a pokey back room with a sink, an antique gas fire of two elements that looked like ceramic coral, a fly-leaf dining table, and two horse-hair stuffed leather chairs. Mr Hull kept the table piled high with papers and books that looked as though they were becoming sedimentary. The walls were painted hospital green. The only natural light was from a small window that opened onto the bins at the back of a pub behind the library, and so was never opened at all. However, Mr Hull was a connoisseur of tea and had fresh leaf Darjeeling from Fortnum’s, a modern electric kettle, and good china mugs and a teapot always ready for “favoured guests”; although, I do not imagine there were many of them.

He seemed to be moving more slowly than usual as he set out the tea things, and oddly I had the impression he was also delaying the principal reason for my visit by not sitting down to face me. I perched on the edge of my seat in silence, while he poured boiling water on the tea, unable to begin. He smiled again as we waited for the tea to brew.

“Did I ever tell you about my predecessor ... as chief librarian?” he said, as he handed me the steaming cup, around which I gladly warmed my hands. I said that he had not, but that I was aware he had left under something of a cloud. He nodded vaguely. “A cloud, yes. He was an alcoholic in the end,” he said, “I was with him when he died, you know.” For a moment he closed his eyes, then opened them, suddenly looking at me intently: he had made up his mind about something.

It had become quite dark and we both glanced at the tiny patch of failing light simultaneously. The snow was falling thick and fast, individual snowflakes swirling round the window and sticking to the glass briefly before the wind carried them back into the heavy air. It was unlikely I would be leaving for some time. Mr Hull switched on the overhead light.

“Let me tell you about Mr Cedric Mellor, of the Beckwith Liberal Library from 1949 until 1976,” he said, as we both settled back into the chairs in front of the hissing fire.

By the time he was appointed senior librarian, in 1955, Cedric Mellor was well-known as a bachelor of fastidious and fixed habits. He had been an assistant librarian for six years before being promoted rather unexpectedly, taking to the new role and higher pay with very little change in his personal routines and attitudes. Cedric had been in the Royal Signals in the War and had carried military discipline into civilian life without a pause. On first meeting him the immediate impression most people formed was of a man who was neat, self-contained, regulated. His clothes, although not new, were always spotless and in excellent repair, his black leather shoes polished to a mirror. He was never without a clean handkerchief and always wore a tie. He was always clean-shaven.

He lodged in one of the larger houses in the old streets near the Beckwith, as he called it, where his rooms were kept meticulously tidy and clean, with a few tasteful luxury items added to the landlady’s furniture: a Chinese vase here, an Edwardian watercolour there.

As with his home life, so with his workplace: the library had never been more popular, nor so well-run and orderly. No book was out of place, and should one be misplaced by a casual browser, even just a couple of places from its Dewey-determined home, Cedric would restore it within the hour as he patrolled the shelves. At the issue and returns desk he had added a portrait print of the Queen and an alabaster bust of Mr Churchill. Cedric was a small man, but commanded respect from all who worked with him for his attention to detail and consummate fairness in dealing with staffing disputes and petty concerns. Everything ran smoothly and with a military precision in its planning. When he could, he greeted everyone who stepped through the Beckwith’s varnished and polished doors with a polite

“Good morning, Mrs Brown” or “Good afternoon, Mr Naylor” and a formal bob of the head: he knew the names of all the library’s regular members.

He kept the back room, the office, at the Beckwith for himself. In those days it had an open fire and a slightly grand, old-fashioned desk, facing the door, behind which Cedric sat when dealing with the staff. The rest of the room was given over to filing cabinets of records for library management.

If there was one area of his life where Cedric felt he did not have complete control it was over hygiene and cleanliness. On the whole, books stayed where he put them, systems could be tweaked, men and women directed in their work or dismissed, but dirt, grime, filth ... it was infinite. Dust and litter collected everywhere. Smuts of soot from countless chimneys marred stonework and windows, clothes and skin. Mud splashed from road to pavement and back again, endlessly. Germs lurked on every surface, infecting the world. The public returned books from homes that were riddled with goodness knows what diseases and dirt.

After much argument he persuaded the board of the library to have a sink and a hot water gas geyser installed in his office so that he could wash his hands; the idea of using the sink in the gentlemen’s facilities was anathema to him. At first, he made sure he washed with simple soap at lunchtime and the end of the day, but over time he started using carbolic and a nail brush, and washing more and more frequently. His hands often stung and the skin felt raw, but at least they were clean, for a time.

In February 1959 Cedric’s landlady announced that she was selling up to live with her sister by the sea. She was a canny woman and had a sense that radical changes were on the way for the area. Cedric was forced to find new lodgings on the other side of town. In fact, he rather enjoyed the planning involved in the move, and in finding just the right places for his belongings in the more spacious modern rooms he had chosen: it was an operation with complex communications, requiring timing and order. For once, Cedric took a brief leave of absence from the Beckwith to make the arrangements and ensure everything was completed correctly without damage to persons or property, which, of course, it was.

On the following Monday morning he set out to walk from his new home to the library at a time he had calculated to the second. He had mapped out the route with care and it involved going down busy Market Street. It was there he first saw the greengrocer.

Piled high on a street barrow at the edge of the open market, practically on the pavement, was an indifferently-fresh selection of apples, pears, a few imported bananas and oranges, potatoes, root vegetables and greens. A faded sign said “Caraway’s Quality Fruits and Vegetables”. The

man that stood next to the barrow was perhaps in his mid-sixties, tall, lean and stooped. Cedric was immediately and forcefully struck by how dirty he was. The man's clothes, a tattered jacket and trousers without a coat, were mired and were stiff with grime in places. His hair was grey, dull and lank, his face was shiny and lined with a sheen of grease and ingrained sweat. But his hands ... his hands were large, strong, with long, purple-grey, calloused and grubby fingers ending in chipped, claw-like fingernails. Initially Cedric thought the hands themselves were completely black, but he realised with a quiver of revulsion that they were covered by a pair of fingerless gloves, so filthy that the material could not be determined at first sight. The man, Caraway, was touching the pears, turning them to best advantage, hiding bruises and marks. For a moment, for Cedric, they were no longer fruit at all, but parcels of fetid decay, likely to rupture and splash out onto anyone close by if those fingernails penetrated the skin.

Cedric briefly considered crossing to the other side of the road, but thought this would appear cowardly and odd behaviour. As he briskly passed by he felt Caraway's intense gaze following him. Just as the man moved out of his peripheral vision, Cedric heard a noise, a grunt or half-chuckle in the throat. He increased his speed.

When he reached the Beckwith, Cedric scrubbed his own hands with extra vigour and was ten minutes late opening the doors. For the rest of the day he felt out of sorts and was short-tempered with the boy who delivered the new book catalogues because his tie was crooked. By the time he returned home that evening the market had closed: the barrow, and its owner, were gone, the regular stalls swathed in darkness. As he approached the same spot, he chastised himself for being so disturbed by another man's lack of personal hygiene, and vowed that a mere greengrocer would not deter him from taking the most efficient route to the library. And he consoled himself that Mr Caraway would not be there long, since he could surely have very few customers, if any.

The market was held on Monday, Tuesday and Friday each week, so the next morning Cedric braced himself as he turned onto Market Street. He was prepared for the sheer filthiness of the man Caraway. But there was no barrow there: the space he had occupied the day before was empty. Cedric was surprised at how much relief he felt. The day went well, and he was pleased to note a record low in late returns for the previous month as he analysed the statistics that afternoon.

However, on Friday the greengrocer was back. Cedric was caught off-guard, and when he passed the barrow he had briefly to close his eyes to

stop himself staring at Caraway's gloved hands with repugnant fascination. Again, Caraway chuckled gutturally as Cedric scuttled by.

Over the coming months Cedric learned that there was no regular pattern to the appearances of Caraway's Quality Fruits and Vegetables on the market. Some weeks Mr Caraway would be there every market day in all weathers, in the same unwashed state with no alteration of clothing regardless of the conditions; other weeks he was absent entirely; sometimes he turned up for two days, sometimes for only one. Cedric never saw anyone buy anything as he passed by early in the morning, but the goods displayed did change, reflecting seasonable availability and local tastes.

The unpredictability of Cedric's walk to the Beckwith began to play on his nerves; in the evenings he started taking a small glass of brandy before bed to help him sleep. Little things had started to slip in his work, such as not arranging to have tickets made for new members as promptly as he used to. Each night he resolved to start afresh the next day, once he had walked to the library. Yet he often dreamed of massive, dirty hands in fingerless gloves that somehow adhered to them organically, and that moved and oozed with soil and maggots and pus. He would wake in the dark drenched with sweat, and the next morning all his new resolve would be gone.

Things came to head after just over a year of this gauntlet running. It was a Tuesday, and as he turned the corner into Market Street Cedric saw the barrow and its owner in the usual spot. It was ridiculous that he should devote so much emotional energy to just walking to his place of work, and he was determined to deal with his nerves by speaking to Mr Caraway directly, however distasteful it might prove; besides, he wanted to know what Caraway found so amusing as he passed.

He had rehearsed what he was to say many times, trying out various versions of nonchalant greeting, indignation, even aggression. However, as the moment approached he found the only words he could think he might say were "Good morning, Mr Caraway," formally, as if he were a member of the library.

He walked up to the barrow. He walked passed the barrow and Caraway, unable to speak at all.

"Morning, squire," said Caraway. Cedric was so shocked that he stepped into the road causing a cyclist to swerve, and swear, violently to avoid hitting him.

He recovered himself and stammered a reply, "And, and to you." Caraway was rubbing his hands together for warmth. It seemed to Cedric that a fog of dust and muck was rising from them. He could not stop





staring at them. It felt to Cedric as though part of his mind was being overwhelmed with ghastly sensations, so that it was blinded, paralysed. Then something happened that Cedric could not control: he curled his lip and backed up a step.

Caraway became motionless. His expression hardened. "Buy an apple," he said flatly, almost with a sneer, his eyes piercing and clear. He reached out to pick a red one off the pile. Cedric darted forward and snatched one for himself before he had to watch Caraway handle any of them.

"This. This one. I'll take this one, thank you." He fumbled for a coin and dropped it into Caraway's gloved, outstretched palm.

"Are you sure that's what you want?" Caraway said, offering him a different one, his long malodorous fingers perilously close to Cedric's face.

"Yes, absolutely. This. Goodbye!"

For the first time since 1945 Cedric began to run, away from the barrow. He was shocked and appalled. He soon reached the end of Market Street and out of view of that terrible man. He was panting and dizzy. He stopped. The image of those wretched talons proffering the fruit still swam in his vision as he tried to regain his composure. He began to realise that other people on the market would have seen his extraordinary behaviour. He felt nauseated, but also embarrassed and angry with himself for his responses. Why could he not have said a simple greeting straightaway and just walked on by? Why had he bought anything at all? But also he found himself asking what those horrible, awful gloves were actually made from.

He looked down at the apple. It was completely rotten. In his tight grip it had collapsed, covering his skin with a foul-smelling, brown, sticky paste. Then faintly, but close behind his shoulder, he heard a short throaty laugh. He spun round. There was no one there, besides a group of gawping old women some distance away.

He spent the whole of the day locked in his office. The staff heard the hot water geyser running constantly.

After that, Cedric decided he would take a longer route to work that involved a considerable detour, whatever his diminished pride told him. His nightmares became considerably worse and he drank more than a single glass of brandy at night to try to avoid them. He was often late in opening up the library and started delegating this and other tasks to his assistants. However, the systems and training he had previously put in place meant that the Beckwith itself did not suffer too much, and many of the junior staff and younger library users thought he was finally becoming less "square" at last.

For several, uneventful weeks, Cedric walked an additional mile and half each day to and from the library, through the rundown back streets of

the town he normally studiously avoided. His shoes and trouser turn-ups were regularly mud bespattered, requiring extra cleaning both at work and home. Slowly he started to regain something of his former composure. He was furious with himself for his weakness, but he felt trapped by his decisions. If he now used the old route down Market Street it would be obvious he had been avoiding the place: it was not the summer holidays after all, and the break had been too long in any case. Yet the longer he left it, the harder it would be to return with any sense of dignity. However, deep down he knew he simply could not bear to see that disgusting man again.

Then it came to him. He had been remarkably stupid. The market was only on three days a week. He could take the shorter route on Wednesdays and Thursdays as a practice. He had never seen Caraway on non-market days in the past. He could use the empty market and pavement to re-familiarise himself with the street and to regain confidence, like a war-game exercise with blank weapons, developing tactics on how to navigate the thoroughfare without being close to the barrow.

So it was that the following Wednesday he left his rooms determined to retrain himself, just as he had to retrain his library staff on an annual basis.

As he came onto Market Street once more, however, he had to pause to catch his breath and wait for his heart to stop pounding with panic. The market was closed, but there, in its usual spot, was Caraway's barrow. There was no Mr Caraway. As he approached, Cedric saw that there were only a few potatoes and a carrot on the stall; the sign was lying discarded next to them. In the road there was sand and sawdust.

A young police constable was patrolling nearby, and Cedric had to ask him what had happened.

"I'm afraid there was an accident yesterday, sir. Mr Caraway was hit by a coal waggon and was killed instantly. We're still investigating. Did you happen to know the gentleman at all, sir? We need to contact someone to clear this stall away."

"No, I certainly did not." Cedric said sharply.

The policeman moved on, leaving Cedric to his sudden, guilty sensation of elation.

He examined the barrow for the last time, now with no fear at hiding his disgust. It was covered in mud and indescribable deposits. But something caught his eye. There, trapped under the sign and almost hidden, were the fingerless gloves. He could not imagine under what circumstances they had been removed at the roadside. Next to them,

similarly weighted down, was a brown paper bag. Without thinking, with every fibre of his being revolted by the sight of them, he pushed the gloves into the bag using the discarded carrot, and then shoved the whole thing into his pocket.

He glanced round. No one had seen him. He laughed to himself at his bravery.

However, later Cedric was deeply appalled by what he had done. He locked the office door and sat staring at the paper bag.

When he had finally arrived at the Beckwith he had spread out a piece of newspaper on his desk and dropped the bag onto it. He had then spent a good ten minutes scrubbing his hands with a new bar of carbolic soap. But there had been a whole series of demands on his time that day, from a child that had been unwell in the toilet, to his having to supervise the arrival of a new shelving unit and its installation. The juniors had not understood the need for its precise placement. And yet all day the gloves had been foremost in his mind.

It was now well after closing time. They opened until later on a Wednesday, and night was falling. He switched on the light, which flickered briefly before becoming constant; power cuts and a variable electrical supply affected the Beckwith quite often these days. He pushed his chair as far back as he could. What on earth had compelled him? Of all the things he could have done at the moment he realised Caraway was dead, this seemed the least explicable.

A corner of the bag was open. The interior seemed totally dark, a fug of filth. He shuddered involuntarily. But he so wanted to get the gloves out and inspect them. He imagined himself using a pencil to prod one out as he grimaced and covered his mouth with his handkerchief. He wanted to dare himself to do it. But he looked at his own pristine hands and felt his courage faltering, melting away. No, he would light a fire in the grate immediately to burn the monstrous things without delay, bag and all. He banged his hands down on the table with resolution.

At that precise moment the light blinked out.

In the darkness the only thing he could see was the faint, dull-grey patch of the high window.

And then he heard a rustling sound. The sound of a paper bag being opened. He froze with terror. With a ghastly speed he felt a sensation of slithering on his fingers and both hands, something slightly damp and fetid was over them.

The light stuttered back on. He was wearing the fingerless gloves. The black, stinking, matted nastiness of them was touching him, enveloping him.

But it was worse than that. He held up his hands, with a silent cry on his lips. The fingers, his fingers, had become long, bony, purple-blue, calloused and completely dirty with a kind of crawling filth. The nails were uncut, horrible, yellowed and stained, with years of muck lodged beneath them. They were *Caraway's* fingers.

The light failed again and a deep guttural chuckle filled the room.

In the dark Cedric screamed out like an animal. Scratching and clawing at his wrists he wrenched the gloves from his skin and flung them from him. He ran, sobbing, out of the library, crashing into shelves and desks and boxes in blind panic.

Outside, by a streetlamp, he examined his hands minutely. They were restored. But they were deeply ingrained with grime, and in his frenzy he had gouged three deep lines on the back of his left hand with the transformed fingernails of his right.

After several years of almost uninterrupted service to the library, Mr Mellor was going to be taking a break for a few weeks it was explained to the staff by one of the board members. The board were confident that the systems and staff put in place by Mr Mellor would be able to cope admirably during his absence. Many of the juniors were rather pleased, because old snooty Cedric's manner had become decidedly strange of late.

In fact it was almost six months before Cedric was deemed well enough to return to the library. He had always worked hard and saved much of his income, and the board had respected his need to recuperate after nervous exhaustion, as the doctor had called it, with additional sickness payments – they were a liberal foundation after all – so he had managed to just about pay his rent and live frugally without his full salary. When he did come back, he was a changed, broken man, who paid much less attention to how things were being run.

“And, of course, in the end he started drinking at work too. And that was how he was when I first knew him, when I joined the library in 1975,” Mr Hull concluded. “A broken wreck, secretly drinking almost constantly. What they call a functioning alcoholic, I believe. He told me about the gloves not long after I arrived. I was the only other member of staff by then. I think perhaps he finally wanted to tell someone. To get it off his chest.” He got up to take the cups to the sink. “At least, that version anyway.”

I had been completely captivated and horrified by the tale; my own hands felt grubby. It was now dark outside.

“That version?” I said. “You mean those things never happened?”

“Oh, I think they probably did. When Mr Mellor was dying, of cirrhosis of the liver, I went to visit him in hospital. No one else went. He told me

then that he had known Caraway all along. He said that he was his own predecessor here at the library and that his real name was George Conway.”

“Is that true?”

“I don’t know. George Conway was the senior librarian during the War, and for a while afterwards. But he was dismissed when one of his junior staff accused him of stealing money from the petty cash.” He paused. “I don’t know that there was much evidence though.”

“And you think that junior was Cedric Mellor?” I was appalled.

Mr Hull shrugged. “Everyone takes something from somebody,” he said. He shuffled some papers on the table. “I know you’re not coming back here. Now you’ve got the information you want.”

The room was chilled, despite the fire. I felt a resentment from Mr Hull that I had not sensed before. I wanted to explain about research impact, but he did not meet my look. He started digging around under the sink for something. There was not much that I could say. I stood up to leave.

We walked in silence through the dusty library to the main exit. Outside the world was transformed by the clean, white snow. At the door I turned to him.

“Mr Hull, I can’t thank you enough for ...” but he interrupted me.

“It’s a cold night,” Mr Hull said. “You should take these.” And he thrust a crumbled, brown paper bag into my hand. Something in the bag moved slightly as it touched my skin.

## THE YEAR WE MADE CONTACT

— *Robert Subiaga, Jr.*

HOT, humid--a bad day to wait for a bus in Minneapolis. When I first saw her I noticed was how sweat trickled under her Lycra tank-top, with a “Batman” logo threatened by darkness spreading between her breasts. Clear there was nothing underneath the T.

I thought she should’ve worn a bikini top, or a bra. An understated lace bra to go with her skirt and Doc Martens and no-lens tortoise-shells would’ve been fashionable. Hard for Lyn-Lake’s hipsters to keep up with Bed-Stuy these days. Her bag was big, but not heavy, and she had that swagger. The one of an independent woman, not entirely secure in her independence. But then again, who ever was?

I pulled my red Corvette up next to her. Song blaring by our local hero, The-Artist-Formerly-Known-As-&-Now-Again-What’s-His-Name. Not coincidentally, *Little Red Corvette*.

No intention to say anything to her. Just enjoying the afternoon, and the thought I could have said something.

“Sweatin’ to the Oldies today?” she called out.

Then stared at me like a woman about to fend off a shark when I looked back. Like a woman used to it. Is that what I was? Or at least how I looked?

I’m sure I did. Well over two decades on her. I tried an innocent smile. Nodded to the stereo and said “Coincidence. Think I planned this?”

“No,” she said. Then, “Think I did.”

Cheeky girl. I blushed. Turned the music off.

“So that’s you trying to assert free will?” she chuckled. “Pathetic.”

I looked sheepishly straight ahead, waiting for the traffic signal to change.

“Offer me a ride,” she ordered.

“Would you like a ride?” I obeyed. How had she ...?

It must have been in her eyes. ...Nice eyes. *Hazel? Blue? What was that color?*

She suddenly hopped in the passenger side. Smiled. Said something I didn’t catch as I looked straight down and tried to avoid that gaze. I didn’t even recall touching the stereo knob again, even as the speakers came to life.

1999.

“S’OK,” she just about snarled hungrily. “I like the Oldies.”

“Good,” I said. “As I am one.” And remembered when I first heard that song, in high school. Just as I remembered when the day came and 1999 spilled over into a second millennium and even from something as trite as two or four digits for a year code like two or three fingers to make the sign of the cross in Old Russia it didn’t really matter after all and the world didn’t end.

Yet. In the end, of course, it always does. Entropy wins, in the end. Even over Them.

As if she could read my mind, or at least my face, this thought seemed to touch her. A hand that felt like something too cool to be skin came to rest lightly on my arm and I chanced a look at her again out of the corner of my eye, honestly fearing either the possibility this wasn’t flesh or that it was.

“So... Where you from?” Stupid question.

“Stupid.” She confirmed. “Ask where I’m going,” she commanded.

“Where are you going,” I said. My tongue was starting to go numb.

“Anywhere I want.” This came more kindly. But, sometimes, kindness can mean only more pain is coming.

Then she pointed an elegant finger that could have been freckled and not scaled, if freckles were sea-green, her too-long and too-slender tongue peeking out to lick too-wet and too-pink lips, and run over too-sharp teeth.

“The light’s green.”



# INTO THE DARKNESS

— *Thom Newell*

THE beads fell down from the ceiling like strips of dried blood. The room beyond this guarded doorway was dark. Was it small, or cavernous? Something, or someone, lay just beyond sight. As Clare spread the beads apart, light shone in to reveal an old woman sitting at a small table, adorned in a purple cloth that looked more ancient than the woman's creviced face. Clare walked in, knowing this was the end of the past, and beginning of something new. The woman did not speak, but lead Clare into the room with a small wave of her hand. Clare, feeling beckoned by something stronger than the psychic's body language, stepped in and sat at the table.

"Umm. I don't exactly know what to do here," she said nervously.

"You do only what you want to," the seer responded.

Clare thought to herself for a moment. Before she could come to a conclusion, the psychic pulled back the purple cloth, revealing a small crystal ball, no bigger than a fist, on the table. A mist circled inside. The ball reflects the small amount of light in the room, making it feel slightly brighter, and even more inviting. Clare felt a little more at ease.

Her eyes fixed on the sphere. Maybe this was the right thing to do.

"You know why you've come. Why don't you tell me?"

Clare looked up. Her eyes now fixed on the reader's. She opened her mouth, as if to speak, but shut it again. The psychic noticed the hesitation and spoke up.

"I'm Julia, and while I do have the gift, that doesn't mean I know everything," Julia smiled at Clare. She was coaxing her. Clare could tell, but she came here for a reason, and needed to get on with it.

"My girlfriend. I need to know something."

"You already know," Julia said, almost cutting off Clare.

Clare shifted in her seat. Julia was right. She did already know. A sadness came over her, anger quickly trailing behind.

"Well, she's cheating on me," said Clare, slowly, as if the admission would be what made it true. Her heart beat like it would explode from her chest. Her throat went dry. Her fingers shook.

"And?" asked Julia.

"And..." Clare said, turning her head. Was that a sound? She turned around and saw nothing. She was so nervous. She felt physical pain. Why

was Kirsty cheating on her? It was driving her crazy. She's in a psychics' reading room. What the hell is wrong with her? And now she's hearing things. Great. This was all Kirsty's fault, and tonight it ends.

Julia reached her hand to Clare's and touched it gently, bringing her back to the present space. Her eyes were deep, filled with comfort, or perhaps filled with something else.

"And?"

"And I want her to hurt. I want her to feel how I feel. I want to bring her pain," Clare announced. It was a statement full of pride and vengeance. She was disgusted with herself.

Julia sat back. Her eyes narrowed. She read Clare's body, looking her up and down.

She needed to know if this client was sure of her request.

"There is a price for what you ask."

"How much? I can pay," said Clare.

"I'm sure you can," said Julia, slowly. She snapped forward and pulled up her sleeves.

"Don't worry. You'll be able to afford it."

Clare looked behind her. Was that another shuffle in the darkness?

Julia ignored this and wiped her hands over the crystal ball. Softly, slowly, assertively. Her movements were not random, but formed some sort of language within the space occupied by the ball. Clare turned back and watched Julia's preparation. She took Clare's hands, who looked sharply at her, and held them tightly around the ball, in a vice grip between the two of them.

"Look," said Julia, beckoning her client to stare at the ball. Something was happening. The cloudy substance inside started to separate. An image was forming. The light reflected from Clare's eyes as Kirsty walked into her bedroom. Clearly the abode of a young millennial, books were strewn across the floor, the curtains flung open, exposed brick absorbing the moonlight that shone in. She sat on her bed, busy texting someone, who was clearly not Clare.

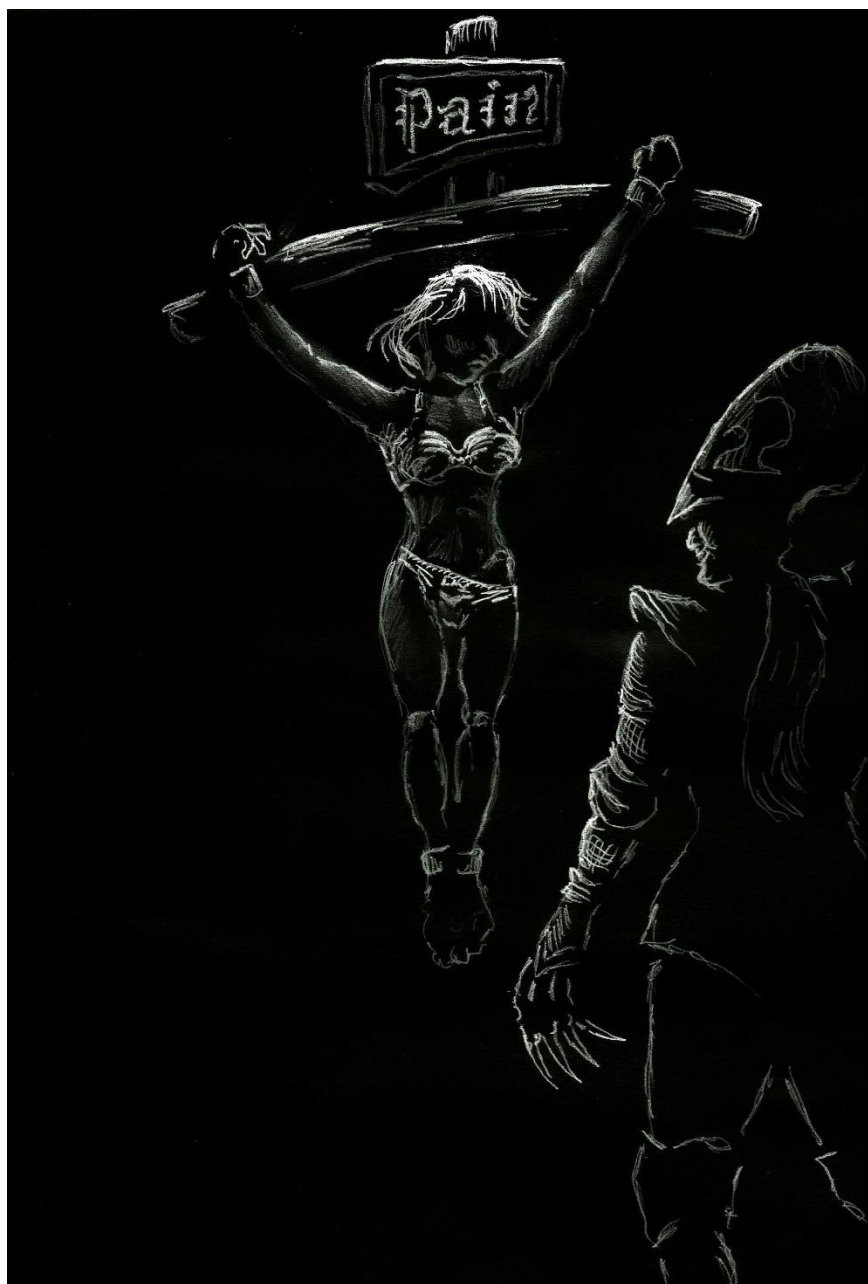
See you tomorrow? My gf is out town. - Kirsty

See you tomorrow, hot stuff. - Frank

Kirsty smiled as she plugged in her phone, next to her bed. She switched off the light, and turned over to go to sleep, her back to the open window. The moon still shone brightly through, casting a cold cobalt shade across the room. The corner next to the window, where the light could not reach, was pitch black, with a hint of purple.

Kirsty shifted in bed. The cool room seemed to shift in temperature.

The purple hue started to grow. It moved forward, toward the bed.



Kirsty was already drifting into the beginning stages of sleep, unaware of her surroundings.

The purple stepped out from the shadows. It was the hue of the exposed skin on the stomach of a creature that could rival any nightmare. A demon in black, its outer shell, almost an armor, covering everything except its violet stomach, breasts, hands, and face. And what a face. Fangs protruded from its mouth as it smiled at its prey. A strong brow ridge rested atop eyes that looked hungry for some sort of hedonistic satisfaction. The skin on its face was rough and leathery. How old is this creature? Decades? Centuries? Perhaps it is timeless.

The demon walked closer to the bed. Its armor was silent. It organically connected to her tendons, an evolutionary trait protecting her from predators, or perhaps some devilish way to intimidate its prey. Either way, it was silent in the room as the creature walked to the bed, looking at its next piece of flesh. It licked its lips in a starkly sexual fashion. Its hips swayed back and forth, almost like a mating dance, as it stepped even closer to the edge of the bed, to the edge of the young woman.

Kirsty turned upwards, still barely asleep. She felt warm, her arms under a comforter meant for the winter cold. She shuffled. She couldn't get her arms out from under the blanket. She shuffled again, starting to wake. She opened her eyes and looked down, a demon hand shot to her mouth, closing it before she could scream.

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Kirsty awoke. Or did she? Was this a dream? Where was she? She looked to her left, to her right. She looked ahead. She couldn't look behind her because chains were holding her hands and feet in place, spread out, ready for crucifixion.

Around her, the stone walls dripped with condensation. Rock pillars stood around the room. Were they supporting anything? She could not see the ceiling. The floor was a mystery for that matter, covered in a thick layer of fog. She could feel it though, with her bare feet. It was stone as well. She stood in this room, this dungeon, in nothing but her underwear. Had time passed? How did she get here?

"What the Hell?" she wondered aloud, her voice echoing in the chamber. The only other sound was dripping water somewhere behind her. "Where am I?" she beckoned into the dark. "What am I doing here?" she screamed.

"You know what you did," a voice answered. It was clearly the voice of a woman. Or was it?

"Hello? Is someone there? What's going on?"

The demon walked into the light, she stood out in her exoskeleton of black armor, against the pale stone surrounding them. Her lavender skin gave her an almost royal look, one that was augmented by her hair. Thick, protruding, strands of hair were spun atop her head like a crown, before they fell all the way down her back, looking like shredded tires, with a weight to match. Her hands were adorned with claws instead of nails. Her fingers were poised and ready to strike. Her sensual gait was more emphasized here. She was ready to play.

"I am here to send a message" growled the beast.

"What message," asked Kirsty, anxiously.

The demon looked at her eyes. Kirsty let a tear fall from her eye. The creature laughed.

"Pain."

Kirsty looked horrified. She pulled on the chains. There was no escape.

The saturated beast struck Kirsty across her face, leaving thick gashes in her wake. She stabbed into her ribs, like a Roman soldier confirming a kill. She scratched Kirsty's abdomen, being careful to make a shallow wound, that would not kill. She had done this before. It was obvious. This monstrosity would not let her prey die until she wanted it to end.

Kirsty screamed as the demon continued to penetrate her flesh, blood pouring out onto the fog-laced floor. With every ounce leaving her body, her energy waned.

"Somebody. Help me," she gasped between slashes.

The demon slashed at her legs, arms, and punctured her gut. Kirsty coughed up blood as her head fell to her chest. The pain lead to shock. The shock lead to disorientation. As she continued to feel the blood rush from her wounds, Kirsty grasped for words but could not find any. Cold spread outward from her chest. The blood from her heart finding its path out of her body instead of into her extremities. Weakness took over her body. The chains were the only thing holding her upright; holding her ready for more attacks. The lavender monster stepped back to look at her work. Kirsty growled, looking faintly upward. She looked into the eyes of this immortal thing, just as the demon took one step forward, slashing her through the stomach, severing her lower half from the upper. Her waist fell into the fog. She could no longer feel the floor. Perhaps she was flying? That was the last thought to cross her mind as she drifted into the sweetness of death. The demon smiled in its hedonism, licking its lips.

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Clare sat back, aghast. She looked up, not knowing where to avert her eyes. They found Julia.

"That was terrible."

"She felt how you felt," uttered the reader. "That's what you wanted?"

Clare's mouth was agape. Yes, that's what she asked for, but is it what she wanted? Was that real? What kind of a medium was this? That could not have been real. Clare would not accept it. She shifted in here seat and took her wallet from her back pocket. "I just want to leave. How much to I owe you?"

"Oh, no money."

"Wait. This was free?"

"Oh no. I said you could afford it, but I don't want money."

Clare looked at Julia. Just then, a noise behind her again.

"What do you want, then?" asked Clare. She swallowed hard, a bead of sweat traversing down her temple. She had done something wrong. It was real, wasn't it? Clare felt something. Julia nodded as she looked down at Clare's right shoulder. Clare shifted her gaze to her shoulder. Long, sharp, purple claws grasped her, softly. She looked up to the psychic.

"No," she said in a whisper.

"Yes," responded the seer.

Clare was pulled back into the darkness of the room, disappearing before Julia's very eyes. Clare gasped for air to scream...

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Clare opens her eyes. She is chained. She is surrounded by stone and the stench of fog. She is stripped down to her underwear. She looks down and cannot see her feet, the floor covered in mist. Stone pillars stand around her, growing into a ceiling so high it is unseen. She screams.

"No! Help! I shouldn't be here! No!"

The demon bitch walks in from the darkness. Her claws gleam as she spreads her fingers, ready to strike. Her legs cross in front of each other seductively. She licks her lips. She cackles hideously.

"You know what you did," says the monstrosity.

Clare screams.

# THE DUST CHILD

— *C. M. Muller*

OLIVER had his first glimpse of the dust child two weeks after his mother began receiving treatments. Per his usual after-school routine, he peeked into the dim interior of her room, startled to discover a presence looming at her side. As it shifted its gaze toward his prying eyes, specks of dust drifted from its ill-defined skull. Pushing the door wide, Oliver watched its body distort under the sudden influx of air and then begin to dissipate. By the time he reached the bed to clasp his mother's hand, it was gone.

Most days after checking in on his mother—who at this stage was still mostly capable of taking care of herself, even though she rarely seemed to leave her bed—Oliver would retreat to his room to read until his father returned home from work. But on this particular occasion he remained at her side, figuring that doing so would prevent the dust child's return. In a way, it had brought him closer to her, encouraged him to spend more time in her presence; a kindness and closeness which, since her physical change, he had avoided more often than not. The treatments had taken so much from her, and it pained him to continually witness her metamorphosis. Her hair had recently begun falling out, and on most mornings he awoke to the sound of her crying in the bathroom as she showered.

But now Oliver found solace in her restful countenance, the surface of which seemed to reflect so many fond memories. She had always been there for him, always made certain he was happy. Never once had she raised her voice against him, and she had always made him feel encouraged and loved. He wanted so bad for things to return to the way they had been. As he started to cry, he tightened his grip on her hand, stroking its bony surface with his thumb. He glanced to the spot near the window where the dust child had been, mesmerized by the ever-shifting particles, curious and yet petrified to know their origin.

He must have been staring for a bit longer than he imagined, for when he turned his attention back to his mother, he was startled to find that she had awoken and was studying his own features as though for the first time, as though he and the newborn which he had once been were one and the same. She was smiling and he could not help but mimic the expression, believing for an instant that she had miraculously overcome her sickness, that she was beginning to heal.

#

From that day onward, Oliver dusted the room every day after school.

And even though he knew it was impossible to clear each speck of dust, he did his absolute best, often repeating the process two or three times to make certain the majority had been removed. It hadn't even occurred to him, until a few days in, that the floor, and in particular the space beneath the bed, hadn't been cleaned in months. The thought of all that dust collected in the carpet's fibers unnerved him as he walked its surface, and when he peeked beneath the bed and saw the dirt-like accumulation there, he felt sick to his stomach.

By week's end, however, Oliver began to realize the hopelessness of his efforts. As thorough as he had been, the dust seemed bound and determined to outwit his due diligence. He'd swipe one surface and move on to the next, only to look back and find that the dust had re-accumulated, giving the impression of month-long neglect. As he stared in disbelief, he could almost sense the dust child watching him from the shadows of the room, silently snickering and waiting, just waiting, for the appropriate moment to reappear, to bully him into a corner and blow dust in his face.

"Oliver, what's going on in here?"

He turned to find his father standing in the doorway, his work tie loosened into an inverted noose. This had not been the first instance Oliver had lost track of time. Normally, reading was the culprit, but now it was the dust—or, rather, the task of its removal—which swept time away. Without a word, he walked past his father to a spot in the hall just far enough from the room so as not to disturb his still resting mother. His father was quick to follow, asking if everything was okay.

Oliver nodded. "Just thought I'd do a little cleaning for Mom is all."

His father smiled, ruffling his hair. "You're a good kid, Oliver. We're going to make it through this thing. I promise."

Part of Oliver wanted to tell about his experience with the dust child, but another part knew that his father's response would involve something along the lines of his reading too many of those imaginative books. In the hall, away from the room, Oliver very nearly convinced himself that this was the case.

#

Upon waking the following morning, Oliver sensed something amiss. His dreams had been filled not only with dust but a smothering sensation as well. Still clad in his pajamas, he made his way to his mother's





room, pausing momentarily to listen to the heavy snores emanating from the living room. Lately, his father had been spending a lot of time on the couch, watching TV after work, falling asleep there late at night.

Oliver opened the door a comfortable two inches, just enough to peek inside.

The dust child was waiting for him.

“Get away from her,” he said, his voice full of whispered fury. “Just leave her alone.” But the thing stood its ground, continuing to study his mother. The movement of its head was methodical, like that of a surgeon contemplating a specific task. “I’m coming in to clean, so you better leave now.”

Striding to the dresser, Oliver located the rag he had placed there yesterday. As he started to dust, he bravely inched himself closer to the intruder. “I’m not afraid of you, you know. Not one bit.” He was not staring at the dust child when he said this, but rather at the barely discernible reflection of himself in the dresser’s dark surface. “You’re nothing but dust, anyway.”

Only then, with these words spoken, did Oliver find the courage to turn.

But the dust child was gone.

#

Later that morning, not long after breakfast, Oliver started vacuuming the room. He used every available nozzle, collecting as much dust as he could from the sides of furniture, baseboards, and the area beneath the bed. His meticulousness surprised and delighted his mother, who had awoken at some point and propped herself up to watch the proceedings with a prideful smile, motioning for him to turn off the vacuum.

“You’re going to too much trouble, dear,” she said. “I don’t mind a bit of dust.”

Seeing his mother sitting up like that heartened Oliver to a degree, for part of his rationale for cleaning—aside from the fact that doing so should effectively starve the dust child—had to do with speeding up her recovery: that the cleaner and more organized he kept her room, the sooner she might be made whole again.

But all this work was for naught, for later that afternoon, not long after his father had left for the grocery store, the dust child reappeared. With its return came a renewed boldness: it wanted to be seen, wanted to share its secrets. And even though its featureless face was incapable of forming a sinister grin, Oliver could tell that it was doing just that; silently taunting him, worse than any bully at school.

Bracing for the worst, he strode to the opposite side of the bed, his gaze fixed upon the manifestation, asking what it wanted, why it had chosen his mother. The thing did no more than turn dispassionately in his direction, as though it could actually see. But making eye contact or attempting to communicate had never been its objective. It simply wanted an audience, wanted Oliver to pull up a chair and observe.

And he did just that, staring in horrified disbelief as the dust child moved its fingerless right arm in a precise and fluid motion toward his mother's chin; watched as the stub of this simple appendage reformulated into a kind of tube, an impossibly configured siphon which eased its way into the anemic mouth, pulsing as regular as his own heart; and, finally, watched as the thing's body grew even more dense with the essence of his mother.

That the dust child was feeding, Oliver had no doubt.

And it was consuming its host faster than any cancer could.

#

Nearly every afternoon, after arriving home from school, Oliver would find the dust child waiting for him. Only then, as it became aware of his presence, would it insert the siphon into his mother's mouth. Her arms would invariably stiffen at her sides, just above the bedspread, fingers raking the soft fabric as though doing so might prevent her from floating away. It seemed to be her final act, and Oliver could not stop watching the desperate movement of those hands, knowing that when they stilled she would be gone.

He had never been quick to anger, but on one particular occasion he simply could not stop the rage which ignited within him. He rushed headlong into the room, uttering obscenities he would never dare express in front of his mother—but in this instance not caring, certain she would understand—until he came to a huffing halt a few inches from the dust child. He hoped that this close proximity would scare the thing off, but its focus remained unwavering.

Shifting his attention to his mother, Oliver was startled to discover that her eyes were open and her expression was serene, almost angelic. She was staring at the dust child as though it were Oliver himself, her expression brimming with emotion. Nearly everything about her reminded him of the way she had been before the treatments.

"Mom, it's me," he said, hoping to break the spell. "It's Oliver."

Her expression abruptly collapsed under a racking cough, each outburst sending a plume of dust into the air. The siphon shifted in a surprisingly fluid way, and as her cough subsided she lifted a weak hand to caress the dusty feed arm, rubbing its surface gently with her thumb. The

gesture enraged Oliver, and in a burst of renewed anger he screamed and leapt at the dust child, pummeling it like the bullies did to him at school. The entirety of his body was encased in dust, and he began choking so violently that he fell to his knees. He felt dizzy and on the verge of passing out, but he did his best to shake it all off.

His mother was calling for him now, her voice distant and frail.

Oliver pulled himself up, standing directly where the dust child had been. His cough lingered, though he controlled it as best he could. He was proud of what he had just accomplished, but had he really changed or put an end to anything? Sweeping the thick residue from his face, he parted his hair in an attempt to make himself look more presentable.

In an instant, his mother's expression changed from joy to disbelief. Oliver could tell by the look in her eyes, and her quivering upper lip, that she was seeing something else standing there, not him. "You're not my Oliver," she said, uttering the statement three additional times before Oliver bolted from the room. His tears made a mess of all the dust still lingering on his face, and he couldn't stop blinking as it gathered in his eyes. He leapt into his bed, deep beneath the covers, shivering and muttering until his father returned home.

#

The next morning, he remained in his room longer than usual. When his father eventually checked in on him, Oliver made a convincing plea as to how terrible he felt, and in the end was allowed to stay home from school. It was partially true, of course, because he still had a lingering sore throat and continued to feel a chalky residue with each swallow. And while he was certain he could have made it through the school day, he remained fearful that if he left the house something bad would happen.

Only after his father had left for work did Oliver enter the room, half expecting his mother to turn on him as she had during the last visit. In this instance, however, she was overjoyed to see him. Not only that, but she seemed to have regained a bit more energy.

"Your father said you're not feeling well?" She motioned for him to come closer.

"Getting a cold, I think." He had brought along a few paperbacks, and after setting these on the nightstand he climbed into the bed and lay down beside her.

"How are you doing, sweetheart? Everything okay?"

Oliver tried to push his emotions aside and offer up his stock response, but instead he broke down and began to cry, telling her that he didn't know what he was going to do when she was gone, that he didn't think he could live a moment without her nearby.

“I’m not going anywhere, Oliver,” she said, inching herself slightly more erect. “Trust me on that, okay? I’m going to beat this thing, and you’re going to help.”

For a moment Oliver thought she was referring to the dust child, that she had known of it all along, but he soon realized that she was talking about the cancer and nothing more, about the thing that neither of them could see and he hardly understood.

“There’s something I need to tell you, Mom,” Oliver said, wanting but unable to describe what he had witnessed yesterday. When she encouraged him to continue, he faltered, knowing that she would never believe him. Instead, he asked if he could read to her. She nodded and so he picked up one of the paperbacks and began fanning through its pages. He started the first chapter, savoring the odor of its newly printed ink. Such a ritual always cheered him up.

“Honey,” his mother interrupted as he finished the first paragraph. “Why did you tell your father you were sick today, when you aren’t?”

Oliver immediately flushed. His mother had always been able to see under his skin, so to speak, to understand exactly how he was feeling. And even now, in her debilitated state, she knew the truth and was calling him on it.

“You wanted to keep me safe, didn’t you?” Her smile was so full of life. “Well, I’ll keep your secret for today, I promise, but I really don’t like you missing out on school. So tomorrow you’ll be ‘better,’ okay?”

Oliver nodded reluctantly, thinking about all the things that were wrong with that idea and dreading the moment he would have to leave her behind. She would be all alone if the dust child returned (which he suspected it would), and this time it would most certainly complete its task. As hard as it was to imagine, his mother’s days were numbered.

“What’s wrong, honey?” Her expression had shifted to concern.

Oliver couldn’t stop his hands from shaking as he held the book. He set it aside and tucked into his knees in an attempt to smother his emotions. A few seconds later he felt his mother’s palm upon his back, rubbing gently between his shoulders, whispering, “Everything will be okay, it truly will....”

#

But it wasn’t okay. Not by any stretch of the imagination.

Oliver did exactly what his mother had wanted, venturing to school the following day in a kind of daze, slogging through every minute as though each bore an hour’s weight, suffering more than he ever had during a school day, his thoughts continually on his mother’s well-being,

knowing that leaving her alone was equivalent to his having passed a death sentence. Numerous horrible scenarios filled his mind, and more than once his teachers asked if he was okay, if he needed to visit the nurse's office.

He had bowed to his mother's wishes, and now he hated himself for it. Why hadn't he explained the real reason for wanting to remain at home? Would that have been so difficult? And who was to say she wouldn't have believed him. Then again, maybe she *wanted* to be alone with the dust child. The idea infuriated him, particularly when he recalled that adoring expression she had shared with the thing.

At the final bell, Oliver leapt to his feet, feeling as though it was more than just the end to another school day. Something had happened at home. He had felt miserable all day and by the time he walked through the front door he was completely drained. Stilling his emotions, he peered into his mother's room.

The dust child was nowhere in sight. In the area where it normally stood, dust drifted lazily through the muted light. Oliver walked around the bed, running a hand along the dusty dresser and then wiping the residue upon his forehead. Near the window he searched the floor, half expecting to find the dust child collapsed into a pile of refuse waiting to be swept away. But there was nothing. He didn't even sense the thing's presence, whereas in the past it had seemed to reside in all the darkened parts of the room.

Oliver turned his attention to his mother. She looked so peaceful lying there with her head angled serenely upon the pillow. Had her eyes been open she would have stared directly at him. But they were closed, closed and unmoving. He stooped over slightly, listening for her breath but already knowing that the last of it had expired, perhaps when that school bell had begun to toll.

The bedspread was covered by a thick layer of dust, the accumulation suggesting a year or more. Oliver set his hands palm-first upon the surface, the particles already beginning to collect upon his flesh as though magnetized, as though they were, and always had been, a part of him. He played with the surface of the spread as if it were some dust-coated mirror wherein memories and reflections waited to be revealed.

In time Oliver began coating himself with dust, cupping it into each palm and painting his face, clothes, and hair, not stopping until every portion of his body was shimmering with the stuff. Satisfied with his work, he shifted his attention to his mother, waiting for her to open her eyes, to see what he had become. When she did not, he knew exactly what he

needed to do. Leaning close, he carefully inserted two dusty fingers into her mouth. And waited.

He wasn't sure how long he had been standing there before a disturbance shattered his focus and forced him to gaze slowly, dispassionately toward the door. A figure was silhouetted there, calling to him in a familiar voice, a voice that rose in desperation and would not cease repeating his name, over and over again.

But he ignored it and returned to his mother, continuing to tend to her until he could no longer, until hands clasped his shoulders and yanked him back—and he began to drift, like so much dust, away, so very far away.

## THE CANARIES IN THE DARK

### *A Carnacki the Ghost-Finder Story*

— *Taral Wayne*

It was a few days before Christmas of '19, that the expected summons came from Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, to attend Thomas Carnacki's dinner party. Since the end of the Great War, his summonses had been less forthcoming than had been the case in the years prior to the struggle, and each came with a sense of foreboding that it was perhaps the last. As had all of us, Carnacki had aged more than he should have in the past five difficult years.

Among other signs of change to the elderly townhouse at Chelsea, upon my knock the door was opened by a butler. Haynes was a man of late-middle-age, whose long nose and grave expression seemed to be the badge of his profession, but I knew that he had been in Carnacki's company at the Somme, and had followed his captain into civilian life at the mustering-out.

When I was shown into the parlor, I saw the others – Jessop, Arkwright and Taylor – had already arrived. Taylor was still looking much the worse for wear after a perilously long convalescence from the Spanish 'flu the year before. Carnacki himself appeared a moment later, leaning upon a cane.

“Is that knee still ailing you, Thomas?” I asked.

“As a rule, only upon inclement days such as this,” he replied. There had been a beastly wind from the east all day, and every sign of rain or wet-snow before morning. “But come, Haynes has dinner set out. We only waited for your arrival, and here you are.”

Dinner, as usual, was excellent. Carnacki himself had doubtless directed the cooking, since the braised asparagus was served with an unfamiliar but savory groundnut sauce from a recipe he brought from Indonesia many years ago. The roast beef was tender enough that the thick slices cut easily with the fork, and swam in their own juice. There was horseradish on the side, potatoes with butter and parsley, fresh rolls, country butter, and, of course, a silver pot of rich, bitter, black coffee in the center of the table. At the end of a very pleasant repast, our host bade us back to the parlor, where Haynes had already brought the sherry and five glasses.



While I began the ritual of cutting, mouthing and lighting one of my Havanas, Carnacki began to speak.

“As you know, few people have had much taste for unusual phenomena or mysterious goings-on in the last while. Everyone’s main concern has been to get back to their normal style of life, just as quickly as possible. Yet, the ab-normal does not cease to exist merely because we do not wish to see it, or look away. Since returning from France, I have looked into a number of perplexing matters, each concluded to one degree of satisfaction or another. One or two of them were grim indeed, and none without a unique development. Yet, as we approach the Yule season, I think back on the affair of the ‘Canaries in the Dark’ as a singularly appropriate tale for the holiday, inasmuch as it gave me a sense of hope, when all around me seemed bleak despair.

“To begin with, surely you have heard of the Strangways Mine Disaster? It was in all the news only a fortnight ago – one of the largest coal mines to collapse in the present century! The strange thing about the disaster is that not ... but, no, I’m getting ahead of myself! The Strangways Mines had had a long history of use, being exploited by the Celtic Silurian tribes before the Romans came, and kept in more or less continual use since at least the time of Elizabeth. The seams were deep and wide, and, as far as anyone knew, ran under the whole length of the brooding mountain overlooking the valley of the river Llwyr. Yet there was an equally long tradition of odd little stories about the Strangways, under a dozen names and over at least as many centuries. I have read that in the time of Charles II, it had been called “The Pit That Sings” ... rendered into some barbaric phrase in Welsh, which, naturally, no civilized person can pronounce.

“It was named thus because of the miners’ practice of taking numbers of caged canaries down into the pit with them. The birds were not taken down with them to sing, though sing they did, of course. Their purpose was to *stop* singing. Their frail nature was such that they were far more sensitive to the accumulation of coal damp ... carbon monoxide or inflammable methane, as we know it today. Long before the miners were aware of the presence of dangerous levels of invisible, odorless, lethal gasses, the canaries would faint and stop singing. At the first failed note, the anxious miners would look up from their work, and watch. If the song did not resume in short order, the mine would be evacuated. The canaries were an ingenious, and rather endearing safety precaution, you see.

“Around the turn of the century, however, we became too ‘modern’ for that. For all that canaries were perfect alarms for the presence of coal damp, and a reassuring reminder of the upside world in

that endless, pitch black hole in the Earth, canaries were not ‘scientific.’ The mine had passed from the previous owners into the hands of the Strangways family in 1902, and among the first of many changes in the mine was to give the rows of caged canaries to the miners’ wives to look after, and to adopt a mechanical device to warn of inflammable or suffocating gasses. I have not examined one myself, but have been led to believe it involves a small shielded flame or spark that reacts to the air. No matter. It was enough that the owners believed it superior to the birds, so the substitution was made.

“Straightaway, the miners began to speak of hearing canaries sing in the tunnels. The stories spread among the miners to the nearby town; to the pubs and small stores and the church. When the stories reached the gang foremen, they reported it to the pit manager, then the manager reported them to the head office, which duly informed the owners ... in fact, the senior Mr. Strangways himself came to know of the matter. He chewed his mustache a moment, and said, to this effect at least, ‘That is no concern of ours. So long as the coal comes up out of mine, the miners may believe there are choirs of maidens down in the pit with them, singing Handel’s *Messiah*. Let them be until it costs us money.’ Old Mr. Strangways was considered an enlightened man for his time ... which, unfortunately, had been around 1880.

“So it was that the Strangways Mine came to be known for its benign visitations of immaterial canaries. In fact, the miners more than once claimed that it continued to be the sudden end of the faintly heard, ghostly singing of birds that warned them of a suddenly released pocket of gas ... not the company’s heartless little tinderboxes.

“That was how matters stood for several years under the new owners.”

Carnacki stopped for a moment to light a cigarette with an unsteady hand. It was a new habit, brought back with him from his time with the artillery.

“I didn’t come into the story until only just a few weeks ago, when I received a telegram from a acquaintance, Sir Clarence Frobisher, who had invested heavily in the coal business. When dividends didn’t live up to his expectations, he decided to look into the matter before putting his shares on the market, and booked a train to South Wales. Once arriving in the town below the mine, it was wasn’t long before he heard about the spirit canaries ... or whatever they were that one supposes them to be. He thought the stories mere superstition, and harmless. But then he accidentally overheard another sort of story altogether. It went about among the miners in guarded whispers, and they were most reluctant to

tell the story in entirety to a stranger. In the end, it cost Sir Clarence more than one round of drinks ... but at last he heard the entire thing. It was not at all like the poignant tale of dainty yellow spirits that sang for the safety of the miners. There was something altogether more serious afoot.

"The miners of Wales love King and Country no less than any Englishman ... at least, so they do when the Hun has his boot on Europe, and drops bombs from monstrous airships on sleeping London. Many were the Prices and Joneses and Evanses and Owenses who enlisted to fight in the trenches at Arras, Ypres, and the Somme. Inevitably, many of them fell, never to come back.

"The Strangways remained in operation throughout the hostilities, as did every other mine. Coal, like iron, copper and tin, was an invaluable resource in the war effort. Not only must production continue, it was ordered that it must actually increase! The men who remained at home did long, exhausting hours in the pit, often, no doubt, envying their mates on the front line ... who at least saw the sky when they looked up from the mud and blood.

"Imagine their surprise, however, when the remaining miners caught a glimpse of one of their mates, one who was known to have taken the uniform, and was away at the front! One of the miners would see him from the corner of his eye, and then he was gone – ducked around a corner in the tunnel, or cut off from view by a moving ore car, and nowhere to be seen again. This happened any number of times, usually after some big battle on the Continent, and then the news would come that David, Morgan, Lloyd, or William would not be coming home, that he had fallen at Lys or Mont Sorrel or at any of a hundred other tiny hamlets or crossroads. It was a terrible time," Carnacki said with a shaky voice. "But ... we all know that. We were there, too, were we not?"

"Sir Clarence telegraphed me, as I said, and asked if I would like to investigate a very queer situation at the mine. He mentioned the canaries, and very little else. Few cases had come to my attention over the last year, so I was eager to be off, and took a train the very next morning. Sir Clarence met me at the station and drove me up to the town in a borrowed automobile. It had an open carriage, so the trip was abominably cold and drafty. I asked Sir Clarence why he did not hire a horse-drawn cab, instead? 'None to be had, really,' he cried into the wind blast. 'All the horses are up at the mine, working the ore cars. Not good country for horses, either. No pasture. All steep up hill and down, as well. Fortunate it is, that the company is modern and has motor vehicles for drayage. I

borrowed this from the owner's house. It seems they are as anxious to get to the bottom of these recent disturbances among the miners as I am.'

"Sir Clarence brought me to the Big House, where he himself was lodged, and the housekeeper showed me to a room next to my friend's. As he usually was, Old Mr. Strangways was away in London, but the House was always staffed to accommodate other family, and the infrequent visitors who, for one reason or another, came to see the mine. Sir Clarence and I stood by the one window in our chamber, looking outward through the gloom to a black sawtooth outline of the mountain above the town. The sky pressing down upon it was heavily overcast and only somewhat less dark. Then the housekeeper turned up a gas light, and we could see no more through the glass.

"While I began to unpack, Sir Clarence took a wing chair facing away from the window, and said, 'I suppose you will want to hear the full story? Can it wait for morning? I think my mind would be more at ease discussing it in the morning. But if you must have the story now, then you must.'

"If you don't mind,' I said, 'It's not yet late, and I would prefer to learn the facts as soon as possible.'

"Very well, then,' he said, and began an account of the events of the previous two weeks.

"When Sir Clarence arrived, the visitations of absent miners had been going on for more than five years. Hardly a month went by without someone stating on oath that he had seen a man whom everyone knew was at the front ... and who was later reported to be dead. In fact, the miners knew in advance of the general public that some disastrous action had finished, because there would be a sudden increase of sightings, rising from one every three or four weeks to as many as three or four in a *single day*.

"The sightings were never definite things. They were always out of the corner of the eye, or through a veil of coal dust that had suddenly billowed up, or were glimpsed among a mass of moving men. Always, the sight of the dead man was but of a moment, then gone. Strangely, no one felt the least threat. There was sadness, of course, since, once seen, there was little doubt that another lad, another old friend, another workmate was gone. The visitations of the dead were even, somehow, comforting. 'Now we know,' the miners thought. 'Alfie has bought it, but we don't have to wait on the news, or to hear a widow or mother cry her grief from the window of her tiny shack when a messenger from the office comes with a telegram.' The miners said the spirits – for to their minds they were *unquestionably* the spirits of their fallen comrades – did not seem marked

in any way by sudden and violent death. Instead, they appeared at peace, perhaps saddened by the gulf between them and the living, but also glad that, for the time being, they had returned to the place they knew as home.

“Inevitably, at the end of the war, sightings of the dead slackened and then finally stopped altogether. Men who had been absent for four years returned from Europe, but now they returned alive. All the while, the birds that were not there in the darkness sang to the living and dead alike.

“The office, of course, had never believed in the ghostly canaries, much less the human apparitions. Throughout the war years, the mines had been run almost ruthlessly, and more than once the warnings from the canaries were disregarded. More than once, too, someone paid for it with his life when the company’s alarms failed to work. Nevertheless, production must continue, must be *increased!* Compared to the wholesale slaughter in the trenches, what matter a few deaths in dark shafts under the mountains of Wales?

“About two months ago, the dead began to be seen again, but this time with a difference. They were no longer at peace; their faces showed alarm and anger. But, as before, they were seen but for a moment, and none of them ever said so much as a word to the living. None of the miners could make anything of it, but rumours of the ghostly reappearances duly emerged from the pit, spread by word of mouth through town, and at last reached the office. Young Mr. Strangways – for his older brother had had a seizure and could not leave London – said it was stuff and nonsense. ‘Keep ‘em to work,’ he told his manager, ‘or I’ll give your job to someone who can.’

“The sightings only grew more frequent, and more definite. The living had time to gaze on the dead long enough to read the inaudible words on their lips – ‘Get out!’ ‘Danger.’ ‘Death!’

“That was when Sir Clarence arrived, anxious about his investment. The apparitions had not stopped. Indeed, it was not long before he had seen one himself.

“‘It was the most uncanny thing,’ he said. ‘One moment I was looking at a rock face, then a lantern flickered and there was a man standing right in front of me. A young lad, 19 or 20. He was dressed as the other miners, but his helmet was army issue, and if I didn’t know better I’d say he had an Enfield slung across his back. But then it was a pick-axe in his hand and the usual sort of miner’s helmet, with a light on the brim. One thing was crystal clear, though. He was terribly anxious about *something*. His face was distorted, a grimace of anger and urgency, and he

gesticulated with his hands. But I had no idea what he might have been trying to tell me. Then he was gone. My heart was pounding, I can tell you, and I didn't wait an instant to turn and make away from the spot. However,' Sir Clarence continued, 'I turned around right into one of the miners who had been with me. His face was white as snow, his mouth slack. Then he said that it was Harry, the Morgan boy, who fell at Wipers in '17! Ypres, I assume he meant. He had seen the Morgan boy once before, but that time the visitor had been at peace, as usual. 'There is sommat that ain't right!' I think is the way the miner put it. Then we both marched out of there in smart fashion!"

"I considered what Sir Clarence told me for perhaps half-a-minute in silence. Clearly, something about the visitations of the dead had changed, not just their appearance to the eye, but their mood and intentions. Gone was their serenity, and in its place something frightening. But what? No one who had seen the grimacing and gesticulating of the ghosts had any notion what the change meant, least of all Sir Clarence, who never knew the men in life. When Sir Clarence telegraphed me, it was in hope that *I* might shed light upon the matter.

"In view of the urgency imparted by the ghostly miners, Sir Clarence and I arranged to descend into the pit the next morning, bringing my flash camera and such of my apparatus as seemed useful. A thousand feet down in the mountain, where we came to rest, we left the safety of the elevator cage and then sent the car back up. The sudden darkness without the light in the cage was like being at the bottom of a sea. The dark was not merely an absence of light, but a heavy, sluggish presence that seemed to eddy around you as you moved. It was like wading through a sea of black paint. After a minute, though, our eyes adjusted to the dim glow from down the elevator shaft. It was enough to make our way to one of several tunnel openings in the far wall, where we perceived faint yellowy sparks. For a moment, I thought I heard the song of canaries carried through the air from some enormous distance, but then it faded into our echoing footsteps.

"We entered one tunnel, and stepped into the glare of naked electric bulbs. They were strung along the tunnel, creating an island chain of blazing yellow lights. Yet, between each, was a well of gloom in which, blinded by glare a moment before, one could barely see one's hand before one's face. You can hardly imagine the relief of drawing near each islet, and then the dismay as it fell swiftly behind. Yet, despite spots in front of our eyes, there was the ever-present need to watch one's feet, so as not to stumble over the rails or ties underfoot. Our guide was accustomed to all this, the alternating glare and gloom, as well as the treacherous footing,

and proceeded with an even pace. Sir Clarence and I, on the other hand, were in constant danger of falling behind, or tripping when we tried to catch up.

“Without any warning, a side-branch in the tunnel might open up to the left or right, between one step and the next. The blackness inside these was always absolute. The effect was disconcerting in the extreme. Although it happened again and again, it was always completely unexpected, and you only glanced into them as though they might open into the Abyss itself ... then averted your eyes. In fact, it might be no more than a niche a few paces deep. There was no way to know, you see. You passed by as quickly and silently as possible, and tried not to think about what might be at the other end. Suddenly, we stopped at one such branch. Our guide flicked a switch set against the wall that I had not seen, and suddenly the mouth of the abyss sprung into light and was seen to be merely another tunnel. Another island chain of yellow bulbs led away into the distance on our left hand.

“There was another branch, to the right, and another. Now and then we came upon men coming up from below, blinding acetylene lights dancing on their helmets. Finally, we came to a room hewn out of the living rock, immense enough to engulf an entire house. By comparison to the tunnels, it was like day, lit by dozens of electric lights all around the room. They were strung across the ceiling in every direction, as though a derelict circus had set up tent and then hastily departed. Some twenty or thirty men were busy at hard labour, or wielding picks or pry bars, digging at thick black seams in the walls, or employing shovels to fill waiting rail cars. I heard for a moment the heavy fire of the machine guns at the Somme, but then I understood that it was only the metallic rattle of pneumatic drills.

“I had been underground before, of course, during my tour with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade, Royal Horse Artillery, when we dug in at the front. But the dug-outs and bomb shelters there were nothing like this. Those were cozy little holes by comparison, a little damp, a little moldy, but made homey by incongruous touches such as a framed portrait of some loved one, or an embroidered cushion from Paris on an up-ended ration crate. The cavern we had entered, however, was a space too big to ever exist underground, with the entire, unimaginable weight of a mountain pressing down upon it, striving to fill the void once more as nature meant. The raw rock all around us gave the cave a hellish appearance, as did the pitch black shadows and clouds of coal dust drifting across the blazing lights. The men themselves, working feverishly at the coal seams, were half naked,

black with dust, streaked with sweat, and seemed like nothing so much as an army of devils at some fiendish endeavor.

“We didn’t stay in the main room. Our guide said that the visitations never occurred where there was so much light, or so many eyes to see. Nor were they to be seen in the perfect darkness either, but rather where the seeing was in-between, just as the visitors themselves seemed to exist in some world that was in-between. He led us into yet another side branch, and then into a secondary chamber, on a far smaller scale than the first, but empty except for a number of stacked crates and various equipment not then in use. He said that the crates contained dynamite, but it was quite safe, as the blasting caps were stored in other crates that he indicated against the far wall. Men went in and out all the time, but rarely was there anyone in the room for long. It was, in fact, in this very room that he and Sir Clarence together had seen the Morgan boy three days ago. The spectral visitant had been seen there twice since, by one or another of the other miners coming for explosives. I said that this place was perfect for my purpose, and began to set up my equipment.

“Of course, you remember my *old* apparatus? The coloured electric lights arranged in concentric pentagles? I had high hopes that different combinations of the colours would produce different effects upon the ab-normal, conferring protection, opening doorways, directing influences and confining manifestations. I had no way of knowing, then, that the colours as such had nothing to do with controlling the forces with which I experimented. The underlying science was lacking at the time, you see. But since then, I have read no small number of fascinating scientific papers which have had direct relevance to my work. It would appear it was not colour, but the specific frequency of electro-magnetic energy, as well as harmonic effects, that control the forces that shape the invisible worlds around us. In fact, it was not even the *visible* frequencies of electromagnetic vibrations that were most effective. Since understanding this, my apparatus has been greatly refined. It no longer consists of large, easily damaged glass bulbs and tangles of wires that were awkward to deploy, but a neat cabinet containing a compact arrangement of components, less fragile and far easier to operate.”

Carnacki loved to show off his new apparatus, and patted its wooden cabinet where it sat on the end table next to him. It was handsomely made, with inlaid wood of two varieties, and was no larger than a military wireless hand set. Like a field wireless, it had a large dial on the face, but also four small dials arranged around the larger one, as well as a number of celluloid knobs in a row at the bottom. The top, we knew from previous evenings, was a hinged lid, which allowed for fine



adjustments inside. The apparatus was oddly heavier than it looked, however, and when Carnacki took it into the field, the cabinet was normally carried by the leather handles riveted to the wood on each end.

After a pause to light another cigarette, Carnacki continued: "The first thing to be done, once the variable frequency apparatus had been placed in the center of the explosives room, was to set up the spring-driven motion picture cameras. The optimum number in an enclosed space such as this one was three; placed equidistant from one another, pointing inward toward the apparatus and the wall on the other side. By these means, every point in the room could be automatically observed except for the ceiling – and, given the nature of our visitors, it seemed unlikely anything of interest would occur above our heads. The cameras were connected by wires to a small squeeze bulb I would keep near me at all times. I also deployed a number of other specialized devices. One was a collapsible tripod, somewhat like a plumb-bob, that was sensitive to vibrations in the floor. Another was a small spindle with vanes, that were free to spin with the slightest breath of moving air. I also had with me various magnetic indicators, and other small instruments, whose nature I need not go into. As it happens, I learned nothing of value about this case from any of them. One never *knows* when one or more such instruments might reveal the vital key, of course, but this was not to be one of those times.

"Once I had my preparations made, there was little to do but wait. When I asked our guide whether or not there was a most likely time when the apparition might appear, or even *if* it would appear again, he merely shrugged. All he would say was that if the Morgan boy or any other of the ghosts were to appear, it would not be while we were looking for it. He would only come while our minds were on something else, and, if we wanted to see anything at all, it was best we do something to distract ourselves. Sir Clarence produced a deck of cards from his pocket and suggested we play.

"We arranged crates of dynamite for the purpose, and played for blasting caps. After several hands, I must say that I was surprised to find that the miner opposite me was more adept at Euchre than I cared for. At the end of an hour, he had most of the blasting caps in his possession, and Sir Clarence most of the rest. I despaired over my cards, and was considering whether or not to raise Sir Clarence by one of my two remaining caps when, suddenly, a movement at the other side of the room caught my eye. Instinctively, my hand went to the bulb that started the cameras. Sir Clarence, and the miner who was our guide, must have seen my hand move, because their eyes came up from the cards. They turned

their heads slowly, so not to make an abrupt movement, and there, behind them, they saw what I saw.

“Against the rock wall behind my two opponents, I saw the most astonishing thing. One moment there had been no one there, and the next moment there was a muscular young man in the prime of life, draped in overalls, blackened by coal dust, hair matted with sweat, and a well-used pick cradled in his brawny arms! He hadn’t simply appeared, you understand. It was as though he been there all along, but I had simply not noticed him. The chiseled stone was visible through the apparition, so I knew at once this was no living person that had slipped into the room unseen. Abruptly, as though aware that he now had our full attention, the visitor’s face twisted into a grimace of apprehension and urgency. He began to strike the floor of the room with the handle of his pick, pounding the end rapidly up and down. Uncannily, there was not a sound. Neither my plumb-bob nor the spinning pinwheel-vanes showed the slightest disturbance. Then, with an expression of despair on his face, the Morgan boy – I assume it was he – was gone. He did not vanish. If was as though he had never been there at all, and I had merely imagined him.

“The experience left me shocked. I have encountered many ghastly manifestations in the past, apparitions of which I have told you, and which filled me with terror, nausea or disgust. But this was the first time I had ever felt quite like *this* ... in the main, confused.

“For the moment, there seemed nothing more to be done. The spring-motors of the cameras had run down, so we covered the lenses, packed up the rest of my equipment and left. As soon as I got to the mine’s main office, I would send the films to be developed. There were no means to develop motion-picture films in the town, of course, so it would have to go to a firm in London.

“That night at the Big House, Sir Clarence and I discussed the events of the day over a simple dinner of sole. I had seen one of the Visitors for myself, and it was unquestionably a genuine manifestation of an ectoplasmic entity. Yet, unlike most, there was no suggestion that it was anything but benign. Far from it, the entity appeared to me to be agitated because it was unable to communicate a message of evident importance. But what could it be trying to tell us? I spent the remainder of the afternoon questioning miners who were off their shift. I quickly learned that we had not been the *only ones* who sensed that the Visitors had been trying to give warning, but warning of what? Visitors had been seen in other shafts and tunnels, not just the explosives room. In one case, four miners had seen the same visitation together. That was unheard of. Worse ... some of the men said that, as usual, they had not been mindful of

the singing of canaries, but then it had abruptly stopped, and *that* gained their attention at once. One man's report I somewhat distrusted, because he was frankly drunk. In his statement, he swore that the silence had fallen only after the chatter of frightened birds and the flutter of wings.

"It was worrisome, but what did it all mean? My practiced eye had seen no disturbance in any of my instruments. My electromagnetic meters showed a weak field had filled the room for a brief while, then vanished. But neither Sir Clarence nor I ever doubted we were in the presence of Something. My apparatus had not been set to shut out such manifestations, but merely to record. However, it had recorded only slight and conflicting data. Clearly there was danger of some nature here, but not from any direction that I could see. I was at a loss to know what step I should logically take next.

"In the end, there seemed only one course. Next day we repeated the same preparations, setting out my cameras and other instruments, but on this occasion adjusting my electromagnetic apparatus not merely to record, but to project a field of its own; one that was strong enough to interact with any extrinsic forces at play in the room. To be certain of sufficient power, I also brought with us a pair of heavy automobile batteries to supply extra current for my apparatus.

"Once again, we played cards for blasting caps. We had only played two hands, however, when Sir Clarence looked up, and indicated the wall behind me with his eyes. I turned and saw the Morgan boy once again. As before, he looked almost like one of the living miners who had only paused from his labours a moment to step into the room with us, but now he was agitated from the first moment. Whatever urgency our Visitor felt was growing. I switched on the cameras, then reached over to my apparatus, turning one of the dials slowly to the right. Along with the increase in power came a deep, barely audible hum from inside. A dim aura gathered around the three of us, so deeply purple-blue that it was almost beyond human vision.

"No sooner than the power of my apparatus reached into the room, than the apparition underwent a remarkable change. The hearty young man of a moment before was suddenly a ragged scarecrow, torn and bleeding from ghastly multiple wounds. His face was a mask of blood, through which an inhuman agony could be plainly read, while his mouth opened in a soundless scream. The apparition collapsed to its knees, then, with a burst of desperation, hurled a broken rifle at our heads. We ducked as one, but there was nothing to duck. Rifle and bloody soldier were gone.

"Just as sudden as the change from miner to shattered rifleman, there was the sound of wings over our heads. We looked upward, yet saw

nothing. Under the rock ceiling was only empty air, but it was filled nonetheless with the fluttering wings and terrified screeches of generations of the gentle yellow canaries that had so long protected miners' lives.

"The canaries were dying! Dying! Do you understand? We ran for our lives without the least thought. I only just barely caught up my apparatus, and Sir Clarence providently seized the one camera that mattered most – the one that had filmed the Morgan boy's transformation.

"The panic was general throughout the mine. When we arrived at the base of the elevator shaft, the entire chamber was full of frightened, agitated men, almost every one of whom had dropped pick or shovel and left his post immediately upon hearing the death throes of the canaries. Could you blame them? You had not heard it yourself, and cannot imagine the sense of impending disaster that electrified the air.

"The mine had been half-way evacuated when Young Mr. Strangways arrived. He put an end to the evacuation with an admirable show of authority ... but perhaps with less wisdom than the situation demanded. At any event, the miners no longer fled the pit, and began to return underground, at first by reluctant ones and twos, then as a grumbling mass. Sir Clarence and I fought our way through the milling men to Strangways, and protested. It was not safe, I insisted. Sir Clarence backed me up, fully, but Strangways huffed and demanded to know by what means I knew any such thing. Had the alarms sounded for gas? Had there been a rock fall? Had timbers split or was there the groan of rock under stress? We had to admit that, to the best of our knowledge, there had been no such thing.

"Perhaps the miners must return to the pit and take up their work, but neither Sir Clarence nor I were under any such compulsion. No sum of money, nor any authority on Earth, could have compelled me to go underground again that day. I marvel again at the courage and determination of ordinary men who work in such hellish mines all over Great Britain. The same men, I might add, as I saw endure the months and years of life in the trenches. My admiration for the British workman is nearly unbounded.

"That night, my sleep was badly disturbed by black dreams. I was in a pit that stretched endlessly through the roots of trackless mountains, that had no opening anywhere to the surface. No benevolent canaries shared the darkness with me, but there was a presence far more sinister. Overhead I heard the rattle of bony wings, unseen hundreds of them, darting in every direction, colliding, smashing into rock walls and falling with the clatter of dry sticks to the cavern floor. I felt the bones crush

under foot with every step. But so intense was the blackness that I saw nothing, not even my own hand in front of my face. Then, suddenly I was awake, sweating with terror, and Sir Clarence leaning over me with a blessed light!

“You felt it down there, didn’t you?” he said. ‘And you were having The Nightmare just now, weren’t you? I had it too! What must we do, Carnacki?’ he asked in an agonized voice. ‘What must we do?’

“It had gone far beyond the matter of Sir Clarence’s investments and dividends. He was a good fellow, and was plainly as concerned for those men underground as was I.

“Next morning, I had a plan. After a quick breakfast of kippers and toast, we descended into the pit a third time, carrying my apparatus with us. As before, I had sent up to London the film from the camera Sir Clarence brought out of the mine. Only days later would I discover that there was nothing to learn from it. Once we were back in the store room underground, I was somewhat nonplussed to see that everything was just as we had left it. We set up the third camera again, connected my apparatus to the two batteries, and took a seat. This time, we would not wait. I turned the apparatus on immediately, and adjusted the dials. As before, I gave it more power, but this time I selected a set of frequencies whose harmonics would *attract* ab-normal manifestations, rather than block or repel them. But there was no result, not even the song of canaries, which seemed to have departed the Strangways Mine once and for all.

“I turned up the power, and the deep-blue glow spread to fill the entire chamber. Still nothing. At that point, I thought perhaps there would be no happy resolution to this puzzle after all. I turned the dial to maximum output, and hoped for the best. As before, nothing happened. But then, the glow filling the room seemed to pulsate. Suddenly, it burst forth, penetrating into the tunnel outside, and – from what I later learned – must have permeated the entire mine from end to end. *Everyone* below ground saw it.

“The fallen soldiers from the Strangways Mine appeared everywhere, and formed up into regiments. Like the Morgan boy, who now appeared in front of Sir Clarence and I, they were in full uniform, splendid in Sam Browne belts, peaked service caps, puttees, all the brass immaculately polished and shining and rifles slung over their backs. In the explosives room, the Morgan boy solemnly smiled at us, and saluted! Then he beckoned us to follow, did a smart about-turn and and marched from the room.

“Like sleepers lost in a dream, we gathered up my equipment and followed. All over the pit, miners were putting down their picks and shovels and drills, and falling in behind their fallen comrades. In orderly ranks, we marched as an army of like-souls, up out of the mine and into the sunshine. All around us, canaries appeared. Seen for the first time, they rose from the shadows like a spray of bright yellow flowers, whirled over our heads at the entrance to the pit and leapt into the sky.

“And then soldiers and songbirds were gone. We, the Earthbound, all stood in semi-orderly ranks and looked uncomprehendingly at each other. Why were we here? What had we done? We weren’t sure, but as one man we were glad of it. And then the ground shuddered beneath our feet like a hungry stomach. A rumble issued from the mouth of the mine shaft, grew in strength, and became a terrible roar just as the Earth seemed to drop several inches beneath our feet. An instant later, an inky plume of coal dust rose from the pit, like a monstrous beast that had, at the very last instant, lost its prey. The Strangways Mine had collapsed.

“Miraculously, not a soul had been lost. It was the best Christmas in that town in anyone’s memory. Even Young Mr. Strangways seemed to think that perhaps it had been alright to down tools and leave work without permission.

“But that’s not all ... I *personally* received an unexpected sort of Christmas gift.

“When I left France in August 1918, I was more or less whole. But I left behind a dear friend, my batman, Billy. The same shell, that left me with a leg that no longer serves me as well as it once did, came whistling over the lip of the dugout entrance just as we were leaving it. He was a brave young man, and must have reacted by instinct when he pushed me back into the dugout a fraction of a second before the blast tore him to shreds. Nothing was left of Billy that could be buried.

“As the survivors of the Strangways Mine wandered away to their homes and families to rejoice, I felt peculiarly empty. I had been as close as I had ever been to the Mystery of that World that exists all around, under and over ours, but is sundered from us until that time when we must pass over to it ourselves. I had just seen it, and heard it, and saw for once that the Beyond could be as benign to humanity as it is sometimes inimical. But it had passed me by in some way that left me untouched and unfulfilled. Unless you have been in my shoes, I doubt you can understand.

“But that afternoon, as I packed my things to be driven by Sir Clarence to the station, there to catch the train to London, I sensed that

Someone had entered the room. I looked up and saw my batman, Billy, seated on the end of my bed! He smiled and waved his hand to me, and was gone. Billy. He left something for me as well."

Carnacki then broke with habit by getting out of his chair and leaving us alone, mystified. A minute later, he came back with a battered rifle. The wooden stock was split, the bolt lever twisted and the magazine missing, but it was at first sight obviously a British Army issue, Lee-Enfield SMLE MkIII, .303 infantry arm. We had all carried, or at least trained, with one like it.

"See this?" Carnacki indicated a carving of a three-masted ship on the side of the broken stock. "Billy was a sailor before the war. He said he learned to hate the sea, and left it once and for all, but he remained fascinated by ships and sea tales. *He* carved this. This is *his* rifle. How it came to lie on my bed, and not be noticed until that moment when I was packing my bags, I am completely unable to explain. But it gives me hope."

Carnacki's face broke into a smile, a rare expression for him, and then he reverted to tradition: "Haynes will have the salt bath for my knee ready. Now *out*, all of you. And Merry Christmas!"

# THE VACANT HOUSE

— *Jeff Baker*

THERE was, when I was growing up, a vacant house in every neighborhood. This was in the days of long summers and swimming pools and time off from school and ice cream trucks and green, fresh-cut yards (by the high-school boy we idolized) which seemed to stretch to the horizon.

The house in question was down the street from ours, and had been built on the same pattern: a box made of light brick with a large window in the front, a driveway with no garage and an overgrown yard with a pile of dried branches to one side. One of the neighbors had taken to parking his car in the driveway, giving it the image of having been lived in, the sign declaring the place as for sale having been long removed, efforts to sell the property abandoned (in what I later found was the prevailing bad economy, something an eight-year-old didn't know about.)

It was Sunday, after dinner, and some of us were playing a game with no rules running through the yards when one of the boys, Joseph, ran onto the porch of the vacant house and stared into the front window, pressing his face to the glass, his hand shading one side of his face from the sun. He stood there for a moment and then ran off the porch and across the street ignoring the rules about stopping and looking for cars. He ignored our cries and ran down the lawns back to his own house. Several of us (there must have been about six that evening) resumed playing but two of us followed Joseph. We walked in with a "hello" to his mother (this was another time, we were under the understood compact of neighborhood boys given free rein to enter our friends homes unobstructed as long as only the screen door was unlocked,) and she indicated upstairs. We found Joseph in his room, huddled on the floor at the front of his bed, in the corner under his window. It didn't take long for him to explain why he'd run away: he had seen something that had scared him. He had looked in the window and seen himself standing in the vacant house.

A reflection, we told him. But he insisted no. He said he'd clearly seen himself, not a reflection in the window, not a mirror in the room, himself standing there in the abandoned living room.

"Was he wearing your clothes?" one of us asked. A good question when you're eight or so.



“He had my shirt on,” Joseph said tonelessly. “And he just stood there and looked at me. Then he started walking up to the window. And then I ran.”

Ordinarily, we wouldn’t have left alone the fact that one of us had run away from something. But we just sat there silently for a few minutes, not knowing what to say. One of us picked up one of Joseph’s toys from the floor and started marching it across the floor. Another looked out the window.

“C’mon,” I finally said, patting Joseph on the foot. “Let’s go back outside.” Another moment and we clomped loudly downstairs and out the screen door, letting it slam behind us in spite of his mother’s protests. Then we were out again on the infinite summer yard, but Joseph steered clear of the vacant house, even as he kept glancing at it. The house sat there like an elderly relative in an overstuffed chair after Thanksgiving dinner. Full of the possibility that it could stir and get up from its lot at any moment.

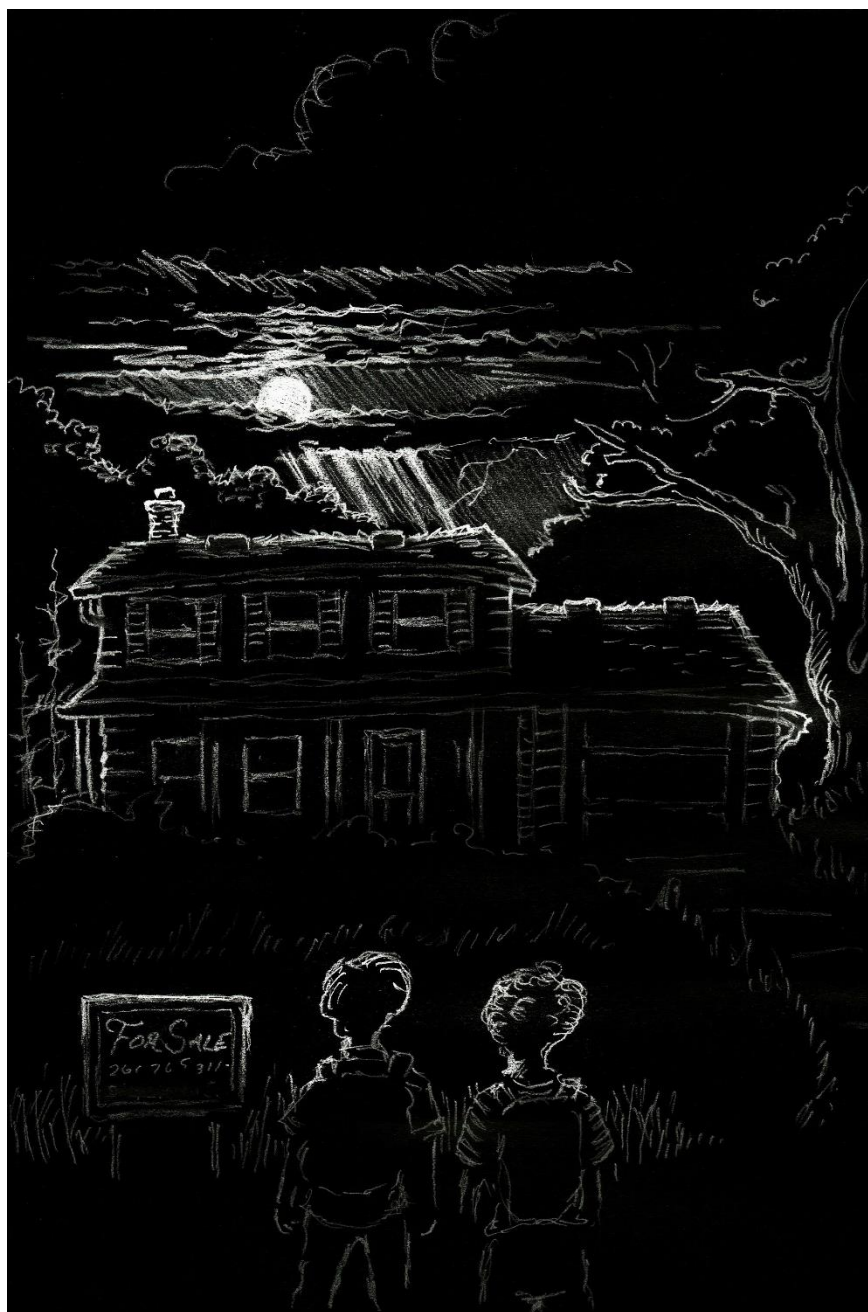
Summer nights weren’t long but they felt like they were. This one was cool enough that we had the windows open with the fans going. Our lone air conditioner was in a wall downstairs. I thought I’d heard a voice calling in my sleep, a voice from outside. Then I heard the doorbell ring and sounds of Mom and Dad talking and my Dad grumbling. Another ring of the doorbell accompanied by a pounding on the door and a woman’s muffled voice.

I was suddenly wide awake. I saw the lights flick on in the hallway and heard Mom & Dad go down the stairs, my Mom’s voice alternating between rushed conversation and a high-pitched squeak, all of it still whispered. My door was, as usual, halfway open and I crawled out of bed and opened the door further so I could hear. I recognized the woman’s voice. Joseph’s mother was at the door, frantically explaining that they’d heard a noise and found Joseph gone and their front door open.

“He never sleepwalks that I know of,” she said. Mom and Dad assured her that he wasn’t here. She kept on rambling and explained that Joseph’s father had gone up the street to look for him and if they couldn’t find Joseph at any of the neighbor’s houses they were going to call the police. My Mom offered to make coffee and suggested she sit down and phone the neighbors instead.

“It might be faster,” she said. “I’m glad I kept this.”

I found out later that she was talking about the booklet the local PTA had put out with all the kids names and phone numbers. It was a more innocent time and our area had only just been incorporated into the city. But just then I heard another voice, Joseph’s father, with Joseph.



Anything he said was drowned out by the relieved squeal from Joseph's mother as she saw her son was all right. I ducked back into my room and stepped on top of my toy chest positioned under the window overlooking the front yard. I could see Joseph and his parents walking past the big tree lit by the yellow rectangle of light from our open front door, Joseph's mother holding him by the hand and stopping to hug him at least once. They walked down the street as I saw the glow from our house narrow to nothing as Mom and Dad shut the front door. Knowing they were going to check on me when they came upstairs. I got back in bed and pretended to be asleep. Moments later I heard my door creak all the way open as one of them must have crept in for a moment. I never found out whether I'd fooled them or not. I could hear them talking in their bedroom in low voices and I was going to open my eyes to see if they'd turned their lights out but instead I suddenly really was asleep.

In my dreams I saw the vacant house and I could tell its windows were watching me.

I didn't see Joseph for the next couple of days and when I did I didn't ask him where he'd been or what had happened. Some of the kids played in the hollowed-out inside of the big prickly hedge that bordered our and the neighbor's yard. We called it "The Batcave." We were okay as long as we wore shoes. Sometimes we pretended we were in the forest. And that was where we were when Joseph told us about the mirror.

He'd gotten up in the middle of the night to use the bathroom and he'd closed the bathroom door before turning on the light so he wouldn't wake his parents. There was a big full-length mirror on the back of the door. When Joseph turned on the light the lights in the reflection in the mirror didn't come on. The mirror just showed a dark room. Joseph had stared for a moment and then he ran back to his bedroom holding his need to pee until the next morning (I don't know how!)

"You dreamed it," I said.

"No," Joseph insisted. When Mom and Dad got up next morning they found the light on in the bathroom."

"Then you made it up," one of the other kids said.

"Did not!" Joseph shot back.

"Hey! That happened to me too!" one of the other kids said.

"Did not!" Joseph said again.

"You saw it on TV, didn't you?" someone else said.

Me, I didn't know what to think. Just that four kids getting into a squabble in the middle of a hedge full of thorns was a good idea. I was backed up as far as I could get waiting for a fight when I heard my mom calling.

“Are you boys all right?”

“Just playing, Mom!” I called out. We sat there quietly for a few minutes staring at one another, and then one of us started rolling one of the small metal cars that was perpetually parked under the hedge all around our cave making “vrooming” noises.

That was the beauty of life in that long-ago summer, we felt so grown-up sometimes but we still made engine noises when we played with cars. It was a conflict that didn’t feel like one in the year of 1966 when summer lasted almost forever.

It was getting to be August and school seemed a million years away. Mom and I had spent the day shopping and then gone to Grandma’s apartment to use her swimming pool. We came back to our house in late afternoon and found my Dad home from work. I was walking up the stairs to wash up for dinner when I heard the tone of Mom and Dad’s conversation shift.

“Oh, no!” she exclaimed. “When?”

I stopped on the stairs and listened.

“Since this morning,” my Dad said. “He didn’t come down for breakfast and they checked his room. No sign of him, and they hadn’t heard him sneak out of the house. That’s the thing; the doors were all locked.”

“What about the windows?” mom asked.

“The ones downstairs were locked tight. The screens on the ones upstairs weren’t disturbed at all. That’s what the police said when they...” My Dad suddenly saw me standing at the top of the stairs and stopped,

“Wash up,” he said. We’re going to have burgers. That sound good?”

“Yeah,” I said enthusiastically, but inside I couldn’t get Joseph out of my head.

My Dad grilled the burgers on our little charcoal grill to one side of the backyard patio and we ate on the picnic table my folks had set up but I kept eying the big hedge almost expecting Joseph to come crawling out of it, laughing and saying something like “Fooled you...”

The next morning one of the neighbors came by to talk to Mom after Dad left for work. I kept quiet and listened. Apparently, Joseph had been found that morning sleeping on the porch of the vacant house. The neighbor kept saying things like; “But he wasn’t there last night. The police looked and his parents looked. We pay their salaries; shouldn’t they do a better job? Honestly, If little Mickey went missing I’d...” And on, and on.

I went up to my room. Joseph was all right at least. And I was sure he'd tell me where he'd been. But that afternoon Joseph's parents took him in for some kind of counseling. At least that's what I found out much later. What happened that afternoon was that Joseph disappeared again, from a play area next to the room where his parents were talking with a child psychologist.

There was uproar. There was no way out of the playroom other than through the room where Joseph's parents and the doctor were. He was just gone. The story was mentioned on the local TV news, more than one neighbor blamed his parents and in the commotion over the next week a neighbor kid said he'd seen Joseph playing in the vacant house on the block. Eventually somebody called the owners of the house and they came down and the police went through the house. No Joseph. The next week when the same kid said he'd seen Joseph in the house, nobody listened.

I was in third grade that school year. The school was big enough that I wasn't in Joseph's classroom but we heard talk about him from the kids for the first few weeks and then he seemed forgotten. Sometime in the year I started thinking about when my Grandfather had opened his fishing tackle box and had shown me a silvery metal thing that looked like a keyring. I had reached for it, and Grandpa had told me not to touch it.

"That's a lure," he'd said. "It dazzles the fish into coming closer, then, ZIP! The hook gets them."

I thought of that memory more and more over the years when I thought about the vacant house and what Joseph had seen in it and what kind of evil had inhabited it. In those days I felt the house was wanting, longing, hungry. I felt, I knew as much as an eight-year-old can know anything that it hungered. In later years I dismissed such thoughts, and almost smiled at the fact that for much of my childhood I did not look or go near the vacant house.

But in that summer that Joseph Othcalt vanished for good, I believed.

When I was grown, years later and had moved to the other side of the city, I rarely thought or saw the houses on my old street. My now-widowed mother lived in a lakeside apartment community and when I visited her it was in a shiny new apartment, not the tri-level house with the big hedge with the hollowed-out center my best friend and I called "The Batcave." One sunlit summer afternoon however, I had been checking on one of our new clients who had a store in the old shopping center where we'd bought groceries in the long-ago sixties. Even though the grocery store was long gone, its space now invaded by a shop that sold

t-shirts, it all put me in a nostalgic mood and I found myself driving down the curving suburban streets that had once been the edge of town. Past the small white building dotted with red and turquoise color bricks that were the entrance to the community swimming pool. Another curve, up a slight hill and there it was.

Except for a few built-on garages and carports as well as the modern cars, my street hadn't changed a lot since I was in high school, I thought as I drove past slowly. The big tree in the front yard was still there but the hedge had been replaced by a tall fence between the two yards. Even though it was the middle of summer there were no kids playing outside, riding their bikes or running through sprinklers. It had become a too-careful era, with the lure of air conditioning and computer games.

I drove a little further then I saw the vacant house. It hadn't changed. Same sun beaten tan brick, same brownish-green lawn, same unwashed front window and a "For Sale" sign in the front yard with weeds growing up its side. It had been there a while.

Probably empty all these years, I thought. I pulled up to the curb and got out, the dinging from the car reminding me to grab my key breaking the hot stillness. As I walked across the lawn I noted that somebody had been mowing the grass, what patches of green grass there were. I smiled. Whoever owned the property was probably shelling out big bucks to some kid to keep the lawn mowed, the city sure wasn't doing it. I walked across the driveway, weeds pushing through the cracks and walked around to the back of the house. The back fence that divided the yard from the neighbors' had a small fence of tall brown grass pressed against it at the base.

I stood in the middle of the backyard and shook my head; when was the last time I'd been back here? And when was I in this house last? Was I ever in this house? I had dim memories of seeing the people who lived here one Fourth of July setting off fireworks but I couldn't remember ever being inside. I walked up close to the house and inspected the windows. There were blinds on the windows and films of grubby gray dirt covering the screens like they'd been dipped in lint. I glanced through the big, sliding back glass door. Inside looked clean and polished and sunny. I could see the backs of the stickers on the front windows, warning that the house was considered abandoned.

Then I saw a shadow move.

For a moment, I thought the shadow was being cast from something just outside my line of sight or from the front window or a ceiling fan, but it was just a shadow, dim but dark that darted from one

end of the room to the other. There was no fan and there was nobody I could see through the front window. The shadow began to blur and firm into a figure I recognized. Joseph. Right down to the shirt I'd seen him in when we played together decades ago. He didn't look up but darted into what I guessed was the bedroom. I rushed to the side of the house to look through the side window. It was high up and I just got a glimpse of the top of a doorway. I ran to the front porch, almost banging my crotch on the metal bannister and stared through the front window. For a moment, there was nothing. Then, the darting image of the young Joseph ran back into the front room. At no point did I believe this was some other kid. I was almost ready to knock on the window or see if I could force the front door when another figure ran in from the side rooms. It took me an instant to recognize, but I did. Me. When I was about eight. Right down to the jeans I'd always worn with the cuffs rolled up a ways because my Mom told me it was the way the high school kids did it. I stared. The two kids laughed and chased each other around the room. And the eerie feeling that filled me told me that there was no doubt about what or who I was seeing.

Then the pair stopped running and moved in unison towards the window where I was looking in. They stared expressionlessly. I turned and ran for my car, remembering Joseph's story of running from the same window nearly fifty years ago. I tried not to peel out as I drove away, staring straight ahead, afraid to glance in any of the mirrors for fear that I would glimpse the house. I turned the corner and headed for the highway.

I'd been driving down the highway for five minutes when I realized it was getting stuffy. I had the windows rolled up in ninety degree temperature. I turned on the air conditioning and started to breathe easier. I reached up to adjust the rear view mirror I'd bumped when I jumped back in the car.

And I saw that in the reflection of the inside of the car and of me it was darkest night.

# THE SERPENT'S CHARM

— *Ash Hartwell*

I stood patiently in the main auditorium of The Raven Club while its esteemed members took their seats amid a low hum of whispered conversations. I checked my pocket watch and noted the appointed hour had arrived; to confirm this, the mighty bell housed high above where I stood began to solemnly strike the hour.

The Bishop of Westminster stepped forward and calmly assumed a position behind the lectern to my left. He'd shed his religious robes for a simple dark suit. At his neck he wore a cravat of the deepest purple, held fast by a gold pin depicting a raven. He raised his hand and the assembled gathering fell silent.

"Dear Lord," the bishop's voice boomed confidently around the auditorium. "We pray thou grant us protection from the horrors revealed in this room, and beseech thee, O' Lord, to give us the strength to fight evil in all its guises, wherever it shall be found. Amen." He nodded to me in the slow solemn way preachers usually reserve for funerals, before taking his seat in the front row.

I surveyed the packed auditorium and noted that the club's members hailed from all walks of life. Nobility rubbed shoulders with commoners, scientists with clerics; even members of the fairer sex were welcome. All were equal within The Raven Club's hallowed walls. Their personal experience of horror beyond the rational experience of mortal men bound them as brothers and sisters.

I cleared my throat and began to recount my tale of fascination. "Ladies and Gentlemen, for those of you who do not know me, my name is Horatio Wolff. I come before you seeking membership of this much revered establishment. I have, as I will endeavour to explain to you, experienced a horror so abominable, so extraordinary, that even now I have trouble believing the nightmares still haunting my sleep." I noticed several of the patrons were gently nodding to themselves, as if they too had suffered the same nocturnal disturbances following their own terrifying experiences.

Taking a few deep breaths to calm my nerves, I began to tell my tale, taking care to choose my words carefully. "I am a man of common valour and even commoner sense. My head is not full of ludicrous notions, nor am I one for flights of fantasy. I believe in the rationality of science, and that, however implausible something may appear, there is always a logical



and rational explanation if one cares to find it. However, I must confess these beliefs were shaken by the events I witnessed in the Far East." I'd walked around the lectern and stood not more than three feet from the front row.

"The tale I wish to recount here tonight concerns the darkest and foulest of evils, namely the use of magic far darker than the mere trickery of mortal man in order to destroy a man's soul." I left my words hanging in the hushed chamber and walked back to the lectern, ready to begin my tale. The collective will of the audience for me to continue was almost palpable, the intensity of the atmosphere causing the hairs on the back of my neck to bristle.

"On the death of my father I, being his sole heir, inherited a not inconsiderable sum of money as well as a flourishing spice business. I know some of you here had the pleasure of my father's acquaintance..." Several of the men sat before me nodded, and I recognised most of them as regular visitors to our London home. "Then you will know the diligence he exercised in visiting the company's offices in India and Singapore, and how well-versed he was in the language and customs of the local populations. I, however, had never travelled to either country, and thought that if I were to run the company with the propriety and respect it deserved then I should, and with some haste, make such a journey."

At this point I paused for a moment to take a much-needed sip of water and, I admit, to add a little dramatic effect. A few in the audience took this opportunity to whisper to the people seated next to them, but when I placed the tumbler back on the dark mahogany table and looked up, ready to resume, they fell politely silent.

"I took with me on this trip my dear friend Mr. George Heath-Wilson, whom I had known since our days at school together." I paused to collect my thoughts and prevent emotion from creeping into my voice. "I trusted George and had always found him to be a gentleman of the utmost integrity; indeed, I planned to make him a junior partner and ask him to spend a year in India learning the spice trade business."

"We took a company clipper to the port of Singapore in early spring of this year. On arrival, we sent our luggage on to the hotel while we set off on foot to sample the intoxicating atmosphere of the port's market. I was pleasantly surprised to find all the cultures of the east rubbing shoulders together, from India, the jewel of Queen Victoria's empire, to the Indo-Chinese peninsula and even as far away as the distant islands of Japan." I was aware that while I was speaking a smile had settled upon my face as I remembered that first care-free day in Singapore, before the horror to come had cast its long shadow over my psyche.

“We strolled among the many street stalls selling ornaments, hand carved from jade and ivory, and clothes of the finest silk embroidery I have ever seen, clothes you would not find in even the finest of London’s dressmakers.”

“The smells of the food stalls, selling all manner of victuals from across the Orient, mixed with the aromas of the spice traders, conspired together to give a pleasant tanginess to the air. This blended with the thicker, heavier scent of the opium poppy which, I must confess, did help us to preserve a jovial mood, to the extent that the darkness of night caught us unawares.” A gentle ripple of laughter spread through the audience, although one or two of the older members looked less than amused.

“Mr. Heath-Wilson and I decided to repair to a small club in the Chinese quarter of the city which, from the outside at least, looked inviting and promised much in the way of sustenance. My companion and I dined well on the most superb cuisine before a waiter escorted us through an arched doorway, elaborately carved with two entwined dragons, into a large room containing a raised central stage. Low tables surrounded by brightly coloured cushions fanned out around the stage, and set further back were several more private booths, each lit by a lavishly carved gas lamp.”

I paused as the auditorium’s double doors opened to admit a man who was in such a hurry he still wore his long black cloak. He nodded his apologies for the disturbance as the attendant pulled the doors closed and I waited a moment while the newcomer removed his cloak and took his seat.

I raised my voice a little, drawing the crowd’s attention back to my story, “We took occupation of one such booth where we sat on large silk cushions. A young woman of Indian appearance, her polished jet-black hair flowing over her shoulders and down to her narrow hips, approached and offered us a cigar — an offer Mr. Heath-Wilson and I were happy to accept. She wore a sari of golden silk that accentuated her natural skin tone and showed off the small ruby situated within her navel. The ruby itself formed the eye of a giant snake tattoo which coiled around her body, the beast’s tail looping over her shoulder to curl around the back of her neck. I noticed the young woman had caught the eye of my companion, his gaze following her as she weaved effortlessly between the tables and booths offering the cigars.” The room, despite its considerable size, had become quite warm and I needed to take another sip of water to ease my parched throat.

“On the stage, a troupe of seven or eight women danced in time to the beguiling sound of xylophones and several barrel-shaped drums. The

elaborate golden headdresses they wore required them to keep their heads still while their bodies whirled in time to the frantic beat. I noticed each of the dancers had fingernails like an eagle's talons. They stretched five inches beyond the tips of their fingers, and between their forefinger and thumb were tiny bells that produced a soft shimmering chime that accompanied the dancer's frenetic movements."

"I now implore you to pay close attention to my words, as the events that occurred next are fundamental in explaining the actions of both myself and Mr. Heath-Wilson. The dancers reached the climax of their intriguing routine and left the stage, to be replaced by a man who must have been not a day less than a hundred years old. He was dark of complexion, his skin standing in stark contrast to the whiteness of his hair, which, although thin in volume, reached midway down his back. A few straggling hairs clung defiantly to his chin to form the remnants of what was once an impressive beard. Save for a cloth of brilliant orange wrapped around his loins, the man was naked." I paused my narrative, aware my next words would shatter the image I had just created in the mind's eye of my captivated audience.

"The old man had begun by sitting cross-legged on the floor then, rolling forward, he pushed his arms down and lifted his body into the air. He then walked around the stage on his hands, soaking up the applause of the crowd, before uncrossing his legs and arching his back so his feet returned to the floor and he slowly pulled his body upright." I looked around the auditorium at the incredulous expressions on my audience's faces before continuing. "This withered old man then lay on what I can only describe as a bed, although it had no mattress. Instead it had a board containing several hundred nails set point upwards, and it was on these the man lay. I swear before God the old man did not once puncture his skin."

Hushed murmurs rippled around the assembled crowd, and I paused briefly before proceeding. "The young woman who'd previously served us cigars appeared on stage carrying a large wicker basket. She placed it in the centre of the stage before handing the old man a long wooden instrument. He sat with it in front of him and began to play the most wonderfully enchanting music."

At this point I hesitated and just stood looking at my feet for a brief moment. If I continued, the good character and reputation of my oldest friend would lie in tatters, a state of affairs that is wholly unfair as he can no longer offer a defence for his actions.

I took a moment to look around the chamber then continued. "The old man then began to play the instrument, his body moving gently with each

sweet note. His rhythmic swaying had a captivating charm and I found myself becoming intensely focused on the bulbous end of the wooden instrument. Indeed, so captivated was I that at first I did not notice the giant serpent rising from the depths of the basket.”

“The giant beast’s broad head swayed in time to the old man’s music. Occasionally a long forked tongue flicked out with a barely audible hiss and its neck fanned out forming a giant hood; on the back of this hood were markings which looked like the eyes of a demon.”

“It was then, and without any discernible warning, that Mr. Heath-Wilson began to laugh. Then, totally out of character, he began heckling the old man, calling him a charlatan, and I realised, with much embarrassment might I add, that the wine and ambient opium had got the better of my companion’s senses. He was struggling to get to his feet, seemingly intent on hurling more abuse at the elderly man, when the snake charmer’s assistant enters our booth.”

“My companion, who had taken on a character unrecognisable from his normal self, then made an undignified lunge towards her. It was only his intoxication and my quick reactions which prevented him knocking her to the floor. Shocked, I looked back at the stage to see the mighty serpent turning its head in our direction, fixing its dark, lifeless eyes on us. I felt a chill pass through my body which froze me to the core. I sensed I’d just stared into an abyss, and that something had stared back.”

“The old man’s magical music stopped and the snake abruptly coiled down into the basket, allowing him to replace the lid. He then spoke to the woman in their native tongue. She looked shocked and began trying to argue with him, but he became sharp of tongue and she fell respectfully silent, averting her eyes from his angry glare.”

“At this point I became aware that the room had fallen silent with everybody looking in our direction. I had been restraining Mr. Heath-Wilson by holding onto him around his chest, but he’d calmed and so, tentatively, I released my grip. Unsupported, he slumped on the cushions, to the obvious amusement of a few of the locals.”

“The young woman had by now recovered her composure; she bowed respectfully to the old man, who still sat on the stage. Then, turning towards my companion and me, she bowed again. Now, Ladies and Gentlemen, I cannot recall the exact wording of our conversations due to the passage of time and the sheer bizarreness of events which have simply defied reason and confused logic, but please indulge my memory.”

“She explained in near perfect English that her grandfather was not used to being insulted by a man with the grace of a drunken elephant and the charm of a hog. She went on, that if Mr. Heath-Wilson believed him to

be a simple magician who deceived the watchful eye with mere trickery, then maybe he would be so good as to join the old charlatan on stage.”

“I must state I was against such an idea, believing it would inevitably result in my companion disgracing himself further. However, he gave me certain assurances to his future conduct and therefore, with reluctance, I agreed to him joining the old man on the stage. The magician’s granddaughter led him towards the stage with a sinuous grace, which mesmerised my old friend to the extent that he was unable to divert his gaze above her narrow waist. Even when the old snake charmer greeted him with a toothless grin, my companion’s eyes remained focused on the young woman’s lithe body.”

“She directed Mr. Heath-Wilson to sit on a hastily produced chair. The old man stood before him staring, deeply into his eyes. Then, without warning, he merely snapped his fingers, and Mr. Heath-Wilson’s head lolled forward so his chin rested on his chest. The old man turned to the audience and acknowledged the small ripple of applause by raising his hand before requesting our silence. The most extraordinary thing now occurred. The old man pointed a gnarled finger towards Mr. Heath-Wilson, who, in a deep trance, stood up. As the man began to move his finger, Mr. Heath-Wilson started to gyrate and sway as if some inaudible melody gripped his soul, his body bending this way and that, his feet remaining rooted to the stage.”

“I must confess that I laughed as heartily as the next person at the sight of such a proper English gentleman swaying like a common drunk, but events then took on a more sinister tone. Mr. Heath-Wilson, with no physical prompting save the dismissive swish of the old man’s finger, fell prostrate on the floor, where he began to writhe about in some obvious distress. Then, defying the natural laws of physics, his upper body rose into the air like the body of the snake rising from the basket. His head, swaying back and forth, was face-to-face with the tattooed snake image on the woman’s belly, his now open eyes staring transfixed at the jewelled eye of the beast.”

I took another sip of water and looked around the packed auditorium. No one took this opportunity to indulge in idle chatter, so I continued. “At this point the old man freed my friend from his trance with another snap of his bony fingers. Mr. Heath-Wilson fell face first onto the floor, much to the amusement of the crowd who cheered heartily, before climbing to his feet, a vexed expression etched on his face. He obviously didn’t have a clue about how he’d become the butt of the joke and he didn’t like it one bit. He was about to leave the stage when the magician stayed him with an outstretched hand. The young woman translated her grandfather’s words,

explaining that as he had now experienced life as a snake, then maybe he would have greater respect for those who cared for them. Then the old man disappeared in a cloud of blue smoke, leaving Mr. Heath-Wilson to re-join me in the audience.”

“By this point I was in no mood to continue our jovial celebration and persuaded my somewhat confused and angered companion that it was time to leave. We commandeered a rickshaw and gave instruction for it to transport us to our hotel. There, we parted company on less than cordial terms. I believed Mr. Heath-Wilson had behaved with inexcusable rudeness and in a manner unbefitting a gentleman of his status. Furthermore, I believed it would be necessary to re-evaluate my plans regarding his future position within my firm, and I resolved to speak urgently with him in the morning.”

“Now, I must tell of an occurrence which I thought little of at the time, but which has since taken on considerable significance since. The next morning, after a hearty breakfast, my friend and I went for a short walk and I broached the subject of his behaviour at the club. Mr. Heath-Wilson was apologetic, yet defiant in his stance regarding the old man’s validity. He was also preoccupied with lustful and inappropriate thoughts about the snake charmer’s granddaughter and so, with a heavy heart, I concluded he was not of the calibre required to represent the company my Father had founded.”

“While we talked we strolled past a common street beggar sitting next to a basket not unlike that of the old man, only smaller. Just as we passed him, and, to be honest, paying him little attention, he began to play an identical wooden instrument.” The auditorium was silent, engrossed in my account of the incident with the old street beggar.

“As soon as that light, captivating music drifted through the still morning air, Mr. Heath-Wilson began swaying and instantly complained of feeling disorientated and unwell. I naturally helped my friend to bench a few yards farther down the dusty street where, after a couple of minutes’ rest, he signalled his willingness to continue our walk and we returned to the hotel without further incident.”

“At dinner that evening I noticed Mr. Heath-Wilson had caught the sun and the skin on his forehead had begun to peel. I mentioned this, but he appeared unconcerned, shrugging away any suggestion for him to visit the hotel doctor for some lotion. I didn’t push my concern further — he was old enough to know his own mind. However, when we bade each other goodnight on that second day, my companion’s temper was shorter than usual. I also noticed on closer inspection that his eyes had become dull and cloudy, as if a translucent skin had been drawn across them.”

I lowered my head, struggling to find the correct words to describe the events that followed. Finally I went on, "Ladies and Gentlemen, as I mentioned at the start of this discourse, I am a man who believes in the facts, in what I can see and touch. I have no time for idle ramblings or elaborate gossip, so when I was disturbed in the early hours of the morning by a woman screaming, I naturally assumed she'd discovered a spider or perhaps a mouse in her room. As the screaming continued, reaching the point of hysterics, I thought I should offer my assistance, and, to that end, I left my room in search of the scream's source."

"It did not take me long to find the woman concerned. She was standing in the corridor surrounded by a small group of fellow guests and the hotel's night porter. They were trying to calm the woman, her screams having now given way to a gentle sobbing, it being obvious she had experienced some terror far larger than any mouse. Her complexion was an ashen grey, the blood having drained from her face, while her hands shook in response to the fear still coursing through her veins. Speaking in French, she rambled disjointedly about a giant snake, which, she claimed, had been standing upright in her room when she'd awoken. On hearing this the hotel porter, an elderly man of local extraction, began backing away before turning and running with surprising haste for a man of his years, towards the stairs."

I paused my monologue for a moment to take another sip of water. "I was naturally sceptical of her claim, but did offer to escort her back to her room in search of the culprit. She explained that when she had screamed the snake had run from her room. I must admit I had to stifle a laugh at this point, believing I had misunderstood her French, but she was adamant. The snake had *run* from her room."

"I conducted a brief search of her room and, finding nothing out of the ordinary, decided I needed help if I were to conduct a more thorough search. I knocked with some urgency on Mr. Heath-Wilson's door and, receiving no answer, turned the doorknob. Finding it unlocked, I entered my companion's room. Turning on the gas lamp, I discovered the bedroom to be unoccupied, although the bed was unmade. Lying on top of the rumpled sheets was an empty translucent skin, six feet long, in the shape of a human form."

"I must admit that at that point I had begun to reach a conclusion so terrifying my blood ran cold. I have enough knowledge of serpents to know they shed their skin when they have outgrown it. This, coupled with the peeling skin, the clouded eyes of my companion, and his obvious disappearance gave me cause to believe the unbelievable. Mr. Heath-

Wilson had become a snake, or at least snake-like; I could fathom no other explanation.”

“As I left the room I encountered the snake charmer and his granddaughter standing in the shadows, their unexpected presence momentarily confusing me. This must have been evident in my expression, as they immediately rushed forward with a little bow. The young woman had on a large hooded cape which partially obscured her face although she made no attempt to remove it when she spoke, explaining that her grandfather was a priest who worshipped Monasa – the snake queen. She continued by saying that he’d been commanded to punish my companion for his conduct towards a Nagi by making him live his life as a serpent, crawling on his belly — a condition befitting his behaviour. She explained it was the snake which controlled the charmer, not the other way around.”

At this point I nodded to the man who’d entered the auditorium later than everyone else. He rose from his seat and exited through the chamber’s double doors. Once the doors closed, I resumed my tale to the silent audience. “She explained that my companion’s predicament saddened them greatly, as the old man had known my father for over forty years and was eagerly awaiting my arrival. He feared Mr. Heath-Wilson’s situation would damage the close bond between my father’s firm and the Monasa culture.”

Unsure of how to continue, I paused and looked around at the assembled members of The Raven Club. Many were acquaintances of my late father, and I was about to reveal facts which he’d taken great pains to keep secret, even from his family. After a brief moment to gather my thoughts, I took a deep breath and carried on with my story. “The young woman went on to quickly explain that my father had embraced the Eastern cultures, especially those of India, and had become a respected member of their community. He understood the way these people lived, their customs, even their beliefs, and acknowledged the importance of the serpent in our culture. He even took a Nagi as his wife.”

A hushed whisper rippled around the packed room and the Bishop’s face darkened. I was unsure as to the exact reason for this. Was it my father’s indiscretion, his bigamous marriage, or the fact he’d abandoned his faith in favour of Monasa that so upset the reserved man of the cloth?

I raised my hand, signalling for silence so that I might go on with my narration, “While she spoke to me in her accented, but perfect English, her grandfather had begun to play his wooden pipe. The soft music floated down the corridor without causing a disturbance to the other still sleeping hotel guests. After a minute or so, a figure emerged from the darkness at



the far end of the hallway. It swayed in time to the music as if performing some ancient dance and, as it drew closer, I heard a gentle hissing sound which almost resembled human speech. Then the figure emerged into the light and for the first time I faced the terrifying reality of what I had previously struggled to comprehend. My friend from those care-free days at school was gone, replaced by the oldest of God's creatures."

A door at the side of the stage opened and the man who'd left the auditorium a few minutes earlier nodded to me from the darkened room beyond. I prepared to deliver the horrific conclusion to my tale of corruption and betrayal. "Ladies and gentlemen, I do not possess the words to describe to you what my friend has become, and so, may I introduce to you Mr. George Heath-Wilson."

Two men carried a large wicker basket onto the stage, placing it in front of the Bishop seated in the middle of the front row. The assembled dignitaries and other members of The Raven Club remained silent, their eyes transfixed by the basket.

"I am afraid Mr. Heath-Wilson has become rather self-conscious about his looks and now needs a little persuasion before venturing out." I turned towards the side door again and raised my arm in greeting. "May I introduce to you Wolff Spice's new Head of Far Eastern Trading, and my half-sister, Nagashree Mishra-Wolff?" A young woman walked confidently onto the stage, her orange sari partially covered by her flowing hooded cape, the serpent tattoo clearly visible on her bare midriff. She smiled at me before offering a little bow towards the audience, after which she began to play the same haunting tune her grandfather had played in that club six months previously.

The music echoed around the auditorium as people craned their necks to get a better view of the basket. Slowly, a scaly human head appeared from its dark recesses. Smooth, rounded shoulders followed, although the arms themselves had disappeared, fusing as one with the beast's body. A long black forked tongue flicked out from the expressionless mouth, sampling the air with a loud hiss which visibly disturbed the watching crowd.

The huge serpent had no ears and the nose was no more than two small holes in the centre of its largely featureless face. When it opened its mouth to reveal a pair of sharp fangs the audience drew back, a few of the women emitting shocked screams. The giant limbless serpent swayed in time to Nagashree's music, the thick muscular body twisting back and forth as it fixed the members of The Raven Club with a sad, cold-eyed stare.

I watched my former friend with detached indifference. I had no time for warm-blooded sentiment; his crass cultural ignorance had been an embarrassment I could not tolerate. Nagashree was a Nagi, the eyes on the back of her cloak mimicking the markings on her hood when she was in her snake form, and he deserved his punishment.

I stepped from the stage confident of my acceptance into The Club's exclusive membership. I doubted anyone present had ever witnessed a more terrifying event than the one they'd viewed this evening. I reflected, for a brief moment, on the possibility that the story foretold of the destruction of my soul, but then the cold-blooded determination returned, banishing such thoughts from my mind.

# THE CALLING OF SIMON HEYLT

— *Matthew E. Barks*

IT was a sunny day and I sat outside on the balcony, enjoying the heat on my aching limbs. There came a knock at my door, and my wife entered.

“How are you feeling today?”

“Not too bad. I thought I may take a stroll down past ‘The Witches’, this afternoon.”

“Are you up to such a walk?”

“I think so! My chest and legs don’t ache so much now.”

My wife sat down next to me.

“Listen Simon, I don’t think you should go down there. Those horrid trees should have been pulled down years ago. It’s an evil place, just like the cove.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Remember what happened to you there before. . . What if they try again? What will happen then?”

“Julia, darling, I am the Parish Priest and I have a duty to stamp out this evil. It should never have been allowed to ferment for so long. Those poor innocent women ... My Great Grandfather has a lot to answer for. “

“You are a good man, and I will not allow you to endanger yourself. Have we not lost enough in our life?”

“Yes, yes we have,” I sighed.

Concern filled her eyes, so I gave a warm smile.

“I’m fine. My mind just wandered. That’s all.”

“You know, I will never allow them to take you from me. I love you too much.”

Bitterness filled her voice. She blamed my father for the loss of our children. If he hadn’t accidentally taken too much of his medicine and died, then perhaps this terrible curse would have ended.

“Simon! Justice has been done. Have they not taken three lives to make up for their own loss! What more do they want! We’ve been together for so long now I cannot bear to face my remaining years alone.”

Yes, three lives, I thought. Our three beautiful children. Mark was born first, then April and finally Marie.

The wind got stronger, the sun vanished, and it started to rain.

April was taken first. Was that really seven years ago? She was so beautiful and full of life. I remember it was a humid day in August and my

wife had gone to check on the children. I heard her scream and went running, only to find April's bedroom empty, the bed sheets neatly pulled back and the bedroom window ajar. I ran around the house calling out her name, but not a sign of her was seen. She could not have left the house as the doors down stairs were locked and her bedroom was on the second floor.

Then I got the stable boy to go and fetch help from our neighbours, and a search was undertaken, nothing was found either at the cove or in the woods. Two days later April's body was found floating in a pool in the middle of the wood, despite the search finding nothing. I cannot even begin to express how I felt and still feel.

How many times can a heart break? They took my son and heir next. It was six months to the day that April was taken. We were having a dinner party for some friends, when we heard the shattering of glass from upstairs. I cannot remember much after entering my son's room, for the horror made me blackout. The coroner called it a visitation by God. God played no part in my son's death...

"We'd better go inside, or you'll catch your death. You know what the doctor told you."

I stirred, picked up my walking stick and rose from my seat. My wife hurried through the doors.

"Come on Simon," she called.

I followed, closing the French doors behind me. Outside the storm grew worse.

As I reached the bottom of the stairs, my wife came out of the parlour.

"Dinner will be ready in an hour. I'm going to my room. Will you be alright?"

"Yes, I think I'll go to my study and read."

The fire was blazing in the hearth. I wandered over to my desk, took out a bible and began to read. After a while my head began to throb, my chest ached and I put the book down, exhausted.

The grandfather clock in the hall struck four o' clock, and I fear I must have fallen into a doze, for what happened next was so frighteningly real, that I'm still not sure it was a dream.

I was young and in a crowd of people that I didn't recognize. They were all jeering at three scrawny, dirty women, who were tied to a large stake. Sticks and bracken surrounded their feet. It seemed inevitable that they were going to be burnt, yet they remained aloof, refusing to cry.

Out from the crowd stepped forth a tall regal man. As he held up his hands the crowd grew quiet. Then he spoke.

"Margaret Wilson, Julia Alcock, Samantha Smith, you have been found guilty of witchcraft, and are sentenced to be burnt. Do you have anything to say before sentence is carried out? Do you repent?"

Only the old woman spoke.

"Jonathan Heylt you know the crime we stand accused of is false. You have abused your position, and to escape your crime, we are to be sacrificed. Listen well Jonathan Heylt, we will be avenged. Your children, your children's children, and so forth, will suffer our sufferings, until your line no longer exists. This is our curse. . . . "

"Burn them, burn them all."

Flames licked at their flesh, yet not a scream was heard.

"Watch the shadows, Jonathan Heylt; your children will pay in blood . . . "

The voice faded and I awoke with a start. My wife was shaking me.

"Simon, what's wrong? I couldn't wake you. Are you all right?"

"I'm all right. Please don't fuss me so."

"You're so pale. Shall I get a doctor?"

"No. I'm fine, really."

My head felt light and the room spun. A strange notion dawned upon me, as the dream returned to my mind. Suddenly pieces of a jigsaw began to fall into place. Julia Alcock had been a witch burnt at the stake in 1704. My wife's maiden name was Alcock. The thoughts which began to fill my aching head were those of horror. Surely it was too much of a coincidence?

"Listen, I'm alright. Now please leave me, I have work to do."

"But dinner is ready."

"I'll have it later."

"Are you sure you're alright?"

"Yes, yes. Now please leave me."

Reluctantly my wife turned to leave the room. But I thought I noticed something else. My God, did she realise what I was thinking! As she closed the door, I forced a smile. The door closed. I waited a minute, then got up and locked it. Then taking a deep breath, I went over to the bookcase, and took out a leather bound diary. I don't know why I bothered as I know the story like I know The Lord's Prayer. In 1704, my great grandfather, Jonathan Heylt, took advantage of a young mute girl. When she fell pregnant, he denied all knowledge of his crime, and put the blame onto the village idiot. This caused an outcry, for he accused the idiot of raping the girl. The girl was too distressed to reveal who the real villain was. So the villagers took a terrible revenge on the idiot and stoned him to death.

Margaret Wilson and Samantha Smith were the two women who helped Julia Alcock at the birth.

When the child was born, it was an abomination. Yet strangely there is no record of what happened to the child. There were whispers of witchcraft and devilry and Heylt used this to cover up his crime. He knew that both Margaret Wilson and Samantha Smith knew the truth and so three innocent women were brutally murdered, after failing the dunking test that Matthew Hopkins had introduced. My Grandfather took great pleasure in dunking those accused of witchcraft.

I opened the book and read. After a while I got up and threw the accursed book onto the fire, and felt weary as for a hundred and ten years my family has lived with this dark secret. At least my mind was now clear. The description of the three women had been detailed and none bore any resemblance to my wife.

Hunger reminded me that I hadn't eaten. I unlocked my door, and went into the parlour. My wife was busy over the stove.

"Hungry?" she asked.

"Very."

She turned around, and I could see that she had been crying. I went over to her and she began to sob into my chest.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I feel like I'm losing you."

"I know that I haven't been feeling well today, but it'll be alright."

We talked for a while, and then we both looked at each other. We heard it again, a small knock on the back door. I got up, went over to the door and opened it. There was no-one there. I stepped outside looking both left and right. As I stepped back into the room, I almost tripped over something. I picked the object up, and as I staggered back, I heard a voice screaming, "No."

The back door slammed shut as I sank to my knees. Realisation dawned that the voice I was hearing was my own. My wife came across to me, and I held my hand out to her. In my hand was Marie's once missing shoe. My wife wrapped her arms around me and long deep sobs shook her body, echoing my own despair.

Marie had been in the kitchen with the maid, helping her with the potatoes. I was away on parish business and my wife was taking a rest. The maid went into the parlour, and according to her was only away for a minute, but when she came back Marie had gone. All that was ever found of her was her little shoe on the door mat outside the back door. A door that had been locked by my wife when she had gone for her rest.

The back door ripped open and the wind howled around us carrying a small child's voice. It was a lost soul - our daughter's soul, calling out to us.

"Mother, Father, where are you? I can't see you."

"Enough," I yelled out, "Be gone."

I stood up, helping my wife up at the same time. She looked at me.

"It's time to finish this ordeal, once and for all," I said. "I'm going to exorcise 'The Witches'. I'm going to destroy this evil forever."

"No. Don't leave me."

"It has to be done."

"But . . ."

"No buts. We've lived in agony for years and if we're going to spend our remaining years together, then this curse must end."

Before my wife could say anything more, I made my way to my study. As I entered, I grabbed one of my walking sticks. Leaning heavily on the stick, I took several deep breaths as pain shot down my legs. After a while I started to prepare. After getting all I needed, I went into the kitchen.

I'm ready now," I said.

"You must do what you must do, and I must do what I must!"

I went over to her and kissed her.

"I love you," I whispered.

"And I love you."

I turned and walked out into the storm.

"Be careful," she called out.

It normally took twenty minutes to walk to 'The Witches', but now it seemed to take twice as long. The pain in my legs got worse and my chest ached. The nearer I got, the brighter it got! I realised that there was a fire, burning brightly and fiercely in the woods. Were the woods on fire? Surely that was too much to hope for! From my coat pocket I took a prayer book, and in my loudest voice I began to recite the prayers for exorcism. In to the fire, I tossed a piece of Holy wafer. As the flames wrapped themselves around the wafer, laughter filled the air.

"Oh, Jonathan Heylt, do you think you can escape by such a trivial act? Only your death will appease us."

"Show yourselves" I cried.

From within the fire, three figures materialised. They weren't the three dirty scrawny women from my dream, but three attractive women, yet the same women.

"Yes, look. This is what we were like, before you murdered us, Jonathan Heylt."

"I am not Jonathan Heylt," I yelled out.

"Not Jonathan Heylt?" questioned the youngest witch, "Then who?"

In the flames, a small figure appeared. Marie.

"Is this not a child of Jonathan Heylt?"

"No." I cried.

"A descendent then?"

"Yes."

"Then you must die."

"Release my daughter and I will join you."

"All must die."

"You foul evil creatures, have you not stolen the lives of my three innocent children, to make up for your own loss! How many must die before you're satisfied?"

"All descendants until your line no longer exists."

I sank to my knees, crying.

"Daddy, where are you? I can't see you. Daddy."

"STOP," I screamed out.

"Daddy, it's cold and dark. I'm scared. Daddy"

The witches started to laugh.

"Pity him, the fool."

"Daddy, I can hear you, but I cannot see you. Daddy please, I'm so scared."

"Pity him, the idiot."

Marie slowly dissolved back into the flames.

"Daddy..."

"Pity him, th. . ."

The chant cut off abruptly. I turned and saw my wife holding three rag dolls.

"Who are you to interfere?" hissed the witches.

"I am Julia Alcock, daughter of Helen Alcock, direct descendent of Julia Alcock. In my hand I hold three dolls made in your image . . . made from your rags, ashes and bone. You have stolen my children. You shall not have my husband. I will not allow it."

"You cannot stop us," hissed the witches.

In one swift movement, my wife threw the dolls into the fire and as she chanted the Heavens roared with thunder and the flames turned from red - orange to purple to blue. The three witches twisted and turned, but couldn't escape. It reached a crescendo. Then abruptly stopped. The silence that followed was deafening.

Then I heard a bird sing. My wife helped me to my feet. Where the fire had been was a large hole. Taking the crucifix from around my neck, I said



a prayer over it, and dropped it into the hole. As the ground began to rumble, screams erupted from it. It closed, cutting short the screams.

More birds began to sing.

"Come on Simon, it's finally over. Let's go back to the house."

I let my wife lead me away from 'The Witches'. As we made our way back, I caught sight of a figure out of the corner of my eye, but when I turned to look directly at it, it had vanished.

"What's wrong Simon?"

"Nothing. I just thought I saw something. It was nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"I think that the excursion of today has taken a strain on me, that's all."

"Some food and then rest will do you good, Simon."

The welcoming lights of Morvella house were a joy to behold, and yet I had the distinct impression that we were not alone on our walk back from the Witches.

"It is finally over isn't it?" I said aloud, as though trying to confirm it to myself. My wife looked at me strangely and then said in her soft voice, "Yes Simon, it is finally over."

We went into the house and sat in the parlour and ate. There was a strange silence between us and we could hardly look at each other. I think that we both knew that something else was going to happen, yet neither of us knew what.

Finally I said, "I'm going to my study," and left the parlour.

The fire was still blazing away in the hearth and the room was lovely and warm. I wandered over to the bay windows and looked down towards the Witches. The sky was turning a dark grey and a misty rain had started to fall. As I turned to make my way back to my desk, I caught sight of something. I turned and looked. At the far end, where the lawn melted into the woods, seeming to stare right at me, was a cowed figure. I rubbed my eyes and when I looked again, it was gone. The strain of the day must have been too much for me and I began to believe that I was hallucinating. I sat behind my desk and let sleep take me.

When I awoke, it was dark. The pain in my legs was horrendous, and using my stick to hold my weight, I made my way to the parlour. There was no sign of my wife and the house was silent. I knocked on her door, but there was no reply, so I tried the handle. The door swung open to reveal that the room was empty. I closed it and struggled to the bottom of the stairs.

"Julia, darling, are you up there?"

I could see the gas lights flickering in the hallway as I slowly and painfully ascended the stairs. I called out again, but there was no reply. I

started to feel panic and a dreadful fear rise up in my chest. I made my way down the corridor to my wife's bedroom. The door was open and I could feel a breeze. I knew that she never opened her windows at night time and the fear took a hold of me. All I could think of was Julia ... the love of my life ... the witches could not have got her ... we had destroyed their evil.

I pushed the door open and my legs gave way. The once vibrant summery room was dripping red, a dark rose red ...

I heard a voice scream, "No" and realised that it was my voice. I crawled into the room to find my wife, but she was not there. As I made to crawl back out, I saw some writing, dripping in the same red, that I knew came from Julia ...

*ista habere contractus de meus I voluntas capissivi de ista \**

I tried to stand, but my legs would not hold me. So I crawled to the stairs and I could hear something moving around down stairs. In desperation I called out to my wife, but got no response. I thought that I could hear voices whispering, laughing, mockingly. Tears fell from my eyes, my chest burned and there was a shooting pain in my left arm. I managed to make my way down the stairs. With every couple of stairs that I took, a gas light behind me flickered and went out, so by the time I reached the final stair, I was in complete darkness. As I stepped off the last stair, it was like the whispering was right by my ear. The darkness enveloped me ...

The next day was bright and glorious. A carriage pulled up to the house and two people got out. They knocked on the front door, which opened under the weight of the knock.

"Reverend Heylt, are you there?"

"Bishop White, are you sure that we were expected today?"

"Yes ... It has been arranged for a while. Reverend Heylt was meant to be showing me around the parish today and tomorrow."

They called out again, but not receiving no response entered the house. They found no trace of any living thing in Morvella House.

*(\*that of yours have stolen away from of me I will take away that of yours)*

# MORVELLA HOUSE

— *Matthew E. Banks*

## PROLOGUE

NICOLA stirred, dimly aware of the drumming in her head. Drowsily, still heavy with sleep, she stretched out a thin arm, but feeling the emptiness beside her, she opened her eyes, blinking against the dim light of morning, seeping through the half drawn curtains. Suddenly, she withdrew her arm from the cold, and realised that she was stretched out on the floor. A sudden pain in her side, as though someone had stepped on her, made her yep. She slowly got up and looked around, but there was no-one there. Her throat felt dry, and her tired body trembled, and she was not sure where she was or why she was there.

“Charles?” she muttered aloud, as if expecting a reply.

Nicola managed to sit on the edge of the bed. She shivered involuntarily, and again felt the dull throbbing in her head.

“Why aren’t you here...?”

The words came slowly, deliberately, fighting against the throbbing in her head, as she desperately tried to concentrate. She was cold now and the constant drumming in her head was getting worse. Mechanically, she pushed her feet into her slippers, and shrugged herself into the old dressing gown, which lay on the bed. Carefully, she made her way down to the kitchen, and put the kettle on. The sun shone brightly into the room, as Nicola drew back the curtains. She put a tea bag into a cup and poured over it, the now boiling water. She carried the cup to the table, and sat down. An open bottle of milk stood on the table, and she poured some into the cup, and sipped, slowly. Gradually, she began to feel warmer.

The birds were in full voice now or was it the sound of children playing in the overgrown garden, yet Nicola was only aware of the constant, insistent throbbing in her head, and the emptiness around her.

“Charles,” she spoke across the table. “Philip’s coming home!”

She put her cup on the draining board, and went back to the bedroom.

“I must go to the shop. He’ll be hungry and it’s a long way...” her voice trailed off, as she became confused.

The old jumper and skirt lay on the bedside chair, where she had put them the night before. They were creased and spotted with dirty rusty marks, but she didn’t see them. Taking off the dressing gown and soiled nightdress, she pulled on the jumper over the under clothes, and then with some difficulty, the skirt. The zip had broken, but a large safety pin

held the skirt round her frail body.

Nicola sat down on the bed, the exertion of dressing had made her feel weak, and she pressed a hand over her forehead, in an endeavour to brush away the throbbing, but it persisted. She eased her feet into the slip on shoes, by the bed, and walked out of her bedroom, into the corridor and down the main staircase and into the hallway, to put on her overcoat. Once a fine warm camel hair, it too was now dirty and faded, but the pockets were deep and kept her hands warm.

From the drawer in the hall stand, she took out her shopping bag, and her purse, and opened the front door. Automatically, she slipped back the catch, so that she could get in again, without having to bother with the key. Walking down the drive, she felt the warmth of the sun on her lined face, and the light breeze ruffling her hair. The shop was in the centre of the village, and as she walked, no one paid her any attention.

As she opened the shop door, Mrs Hartman appeared behind the counter.

“Good morning, Mrs Heylt” she said, trying to cover the surprise in her voice. “We haven’t seen you in a long while. Have you been away and are you keeping well?”

Nicola smiled and nodded.

“What can I get you? Bread was it? I’ve got a small brown, if that’s alright?”

Nicola stood uncertainly at the counter, as if trying to remember why she was there. Mrs Hartman called to the back of the shop.

“Elaine...there’s a small brown loaf out there, get it for Mrs Heylt. It’s on that shelf...the top one.”

Nicola suddenly spoke, the words tumbling out.

“I’ve had a letter...from my boy, he’s coming home. Philip’s coming home. From Eton.”

Mrs Hartman turned to look at her, and then spoke in a controlled, gentle voice.

“Oh, that’s nice dear. How lovely for you.”

She came around the counter, bringing a chair with her.

“Why don’t you have a rest on this chair for a minute, and I’ll get you a nice cup of tea and a fresh iced bun.”

Nicola sat down.

“I mustn’t be too long,” she said anxiously. “He’ll be here soon.”

“No dear, alright.” Mrs Hartman went through to the back of the shop. “Elaine, get a tray and two iced buns. Mrs Heylt’s on about her son, and that means she’s in for one of her turns.”

“What son?” asked Elaine.

She had only been at the shop for a month, and not living in the village, she always kept her ears flapping for a bit of gossip. She never realised that for the older ones she was the centre of gossip with what she got up to with the young men of the village, even the married ones. She looked at Mrs Hartman, and her mothers words darted into her mind, "If you don't keep your ears open, you won't ever 'ear nothin'"

"Mrs Heylt's son! Oh come on Elaine, get the tray will you."

The urgency of Mrs Hartman's tone roused Elaine into action, which meant taking a tray from the dresser, putting it on the table, going back to the dresser for a cup and saucer, putting them onto the tray, by which time Mrs Hartman had made the tea, put two iced buns on a plate, on the tray, while Elaine was making her third trek to the dresser, for a plate.

Carrying the tray through to the shop, Mrs Hartman put it onto the counter.

"Now, there we are dear. I'll pour your tea for you, and you sip it carefully because it's very hot."

Nicola raised a worried face to Mrs Hartman.

"My head hurts a bit this morning...I mustn't be long...they'll be wondering where I am."

She took one of the buns as Mrs Hartman returned to the back room. Elaine was preparing to wash the shelves and she turned her head saying, "What was you on about then...about a son?"

Mrs Hartman sighed, not really aware of Elaine at that moment.

"Oh, poor soul...I'm surprised that they haven't put her into a home...but then it's only occasionally she has these bad turns. She was such a pretty little woman, always so neatly dressed. You wouldn't know it was the same person now."

Then looking directly at Elaine, she went on.

"A really happy couple they were – she and her hubby. Their son, Philip his name was, a nice boy, very good looking, always polite and he was at Eton."

"Yeah, but what about him?" persisted Elaine, more interested in the gossip, than the history.

"Oh, yes! Well, I suppose it all began with that letter. She came in with it one day, oh about four or five years ago now – yes, my goodness, it was five years ago...and she said, 'He's coming home, my boy's coming home for Christmas.' Come to think of it, she used almost the same words just now...how strange! Anyway, then she went on to say that he was coming home for three months. Oh, she was so excited! They both were. He was such a lovely man, Mr Heylt, a real gentleman. Captain in the Air Force, he was. Their son hadn't been home for quite awhile, and both of them were

looking forward to seeing him. They were buying presents, and getting the garden nice and old Edwin Taylor went in to do a bit of wallpapering and painting for them, in the house. It was all go up there. George was going to drive them up in his taxi. I remember that Wednesday...My God, do I. They were to go to the train station on the Thursday, and Mrs Heylt came in here on the Wednesday to show me the dress and jacket that she'd bought to travel in. It was a lovely blue, and I remember saying to her, 'You'll look really nice in that, Mrs Heylt, and she chuckled and said, 'We'll see.' Oh, how she was happy that day..."

Mrs Hartman paused, remembering.

"Well, anyway," she continued, "As it was half day closing, I went to my sisters' as usual. I caught the nine thirty bus back like I always do. When I got back here, George was hammering on the door. I called out to him and when he turned around, I could see by his face that something was terribly wrong, but trying to joke a bit, I said, 'What's the matter George? Don't tell me the taxi's broken down.'

'Myra,' he said, very quiet he was. 'I've got some bad news. Can I come in for a minute?'

In all the years I've known George, I'd never seen him look so ...so sort of...err peculiar. As soon as we got inside, I poured him a large whiskey. 'Here,' I said, 'Drink this. You look as though you need it'

'I do,' he said, 'And you'd better pour one for yourself an' all. You're gonna need it too.'

So I poured out another, and then he said, 'It's the Heylts', the young Mr Heylt. He's dead."

Even Elaine could not suppress a gasp.

"I heard the words he said, but they didn't seem to make sense. I remember I said, 'I can't believe it' and George said, 'I know girl, I couldn't at first either.'

We sat on the settee as he went on to say that he'd had a visit from the police that afternoon, a Sergeant Jones, who asked if George would go with him to help him break some sad news to the Heylts. Three days earlier, he told George, a train in which the boy had been travelling had de-railed on a journey to Newquay. Three coaches were completely wrecked and burnt out, and in one of these coaches had been young Mr Heylt."

Mrs Hartman walked over to the sink, filled a glass of water and drank slowly.

"Oh dear!"

She turned back to Elaine.

"It's a long time ago now, but talking about it hurts. You see, we all

knew them. Well not really knew them, I suppose, but we felt we did, because of the photos and the chats we used to have with them. Anyway George went with the Sergeant, to the house, as he'd been going to take the Heylts to the train station. He told me how they just sat there, listening, while the Sergeant explained that it had taken quite awhile to get the information as there was such a lot of confusion, they had to find out which hospitals the dead and the injured had been taken too, and all that, and that some of the victims had been cremated in the fire and they had to go through all the lists of passengers that were on the train. There was no body and it was presumed that he'd been cremated and poor Mrs Heylt had what they called delayed shock. She had to go into hospital, actually they took them both in, but Mr Heylt came home later on and I kept a check on him, but they kept her in for observation, to calm her nerves, and to get her eating and sleeping properly. It was a year, I suppose, before she was really her old self again. I say herself – she'd lost the old happiness, and there was a sort of strange look about her, as if part of her had died. But Mr Heylt kept her going, I think. He was so good with her. He did the shopping, sometimes with her, or he'd come on his own, and if she was a little sharp with him here in the shop, he'd just give me the wink, as if to say 'She doesn't mean it,' and she didn't.

They really were a lovely couple. They were always together, little walks through the village, or a bus ride. Then one day, when he was on his own, here in the shop, he said to me, 'It's very strange, but Mrs Heylt keeps talking about Philip coming home. Sometimes I think she believes that he's still going to come home,'

I could see that he was worried, so I tried to make light of it. Yet I cannot remember now what I said, but it put a smile on his face.'

"Mind you," Mrs Hartman went on, "I've been worried because that was four years ago now – a year after the accident. Trouble is, you see, she became very reclusive and Mr Heylt held a party for her, to try and bring her old self back...and..." her voice trailed off.

Elaine broke in, "What! You mean she's a loony?"

"Elaine! Keep your voice down."

Mrs Hartman's voice was curt and cold. She walked towards the shop, but satisfying herself that Mrs Heylt was still sitting over her tea, she breathed a sigh of relief, and returned to Elaine.

"Don't you ever speak about Mrs Heylt like that again, not in my shop."

Elaine mumbled an apology, "I'm sorry Mrs Hartman, but she is a bit, well sort of...you know, funny like, isn't she?"

Mrs Hartman gave Elaine a long hard look, trying to control the emotions which had been roused in her. Then she spoke quietly, "Mrs

Heylt is a lady, who has had very tragic experiences in life. Not only was her son killed, but her daughter vanished just before the accident, and despite extensive searches, she was never found. April, she was called. Beautiful girl, like one of those Victorian dolls with blonde curly hair and big blue eyes. It was believed that she went off with some gypsies that had passed through, and that is why that poor lady out there, that you call, 'funny like', is the way she is now."

Mrs Hartman could see that Elaine wanted to ask her more about April, but the shop door bell sent Mrs Hartman into the shop, thus avoiding any further questions, just in time to see Mrs Heylt disappear from view.

"There, she's gone without her bread."

"What about her husband?" Elaine suddenly questioned.

Turning around slowly, Mrs Hartman looked at her employee with surprise.

"This is the first time that I've seen either of them in four years."

## 1

Reaching the house, Nicola pushed open the front door, and walking wearily into the kitchen, sank down into a chair. She lay back and closed her eyes. Somewhere beyond the haze in her mind, she heard a voice...the words struggling for recognition...

"Mummy."

Slowly raising her head from her hands, and wiping away a stray tear, she tried to smile despite the pain in her head.

"Yes darling," her voice quiet, restrained.

"Are you happy?"

The words floated across the pain and struck a chord. Was she happy? She didn't know the answer. Her eyes were heavy, her head ached, and more than anything else she wanted to break something.

"Mummy."

Slowly turning around, Nicola found the room behind, empty. Delicately, she shook her head as the pain worsened.

"April," she thought aloud.

How long she had been sitting in the kitchen, again she was not sure. She was no longer sure of anything. The greyness of the light seeping in through the window just made her feel alone and everything felt strange. The cup trembled on its saucer as she pushed it away, its contents cold. She placed her head in her hands again as the pain became more violent.

Slowly, she began to speak as though there were someone with her.



"We were young when we met. Your father was so devilishly handsome, so charming and attentive. I think I fell in love with him when I first laid my eyes upon him. He was an officer in the Air Force and when he proposed I said yes in an instant. I was sixteen, but my parents gave their permission. After six months we were married..." She paused, as if collecting her thoughts.

A creaking on the stairs made her look up.

"Charles?"

Another creak, but no response.

"Charles, is that you?" she called.

Nothing, so she slowly raised herself out of her chair and made her way into the long hallway. It was gloomy and she could see no one. As she turned a bend, she saw that the front door was open. Frowning, she closed it. The sound of footsteps behind her, made her turn around, but there was no-one there.

"Charles, is that you?" she called, a little more irritated now.

Suddenly, bouncing down the stairs, a small rubber ball which stopped by her feet.

"Philip, is that you?" she called crossly. "Are you home from Eton?" She was a little annoyed with herself now for allowing her imagination to run away with itself. The house was quiet and no sound replied to her question. Stooping, she picked up the ball and then mounted the stairs, one by one, with great effort.

"Philip! I'm not happy if you are playing around. You scared me," she scolded.

Reaching the top of the stairs, she looked down the long corridor. It reminded her of her first view of Morvella House. The car had stopped outside the two granite pillars that held the iron gates, and she could see the long drive that lead to the house, the white stones glistening with the morning dew. She remembered how small and neat the trees were on either side of the drive. Now it was all over grown and weeds grew between the stones. Charles had been ecstatic over his inheritance. He had slowly driven up the drive to maintain the surprise for her, and when she first glimpsed the house, she hated it. It looked vile, set back into the hills, looking down upon the village like some Olympian god or goddess. It looked as though it were staring back at her. She shuddered at that thought. And she remembered the pyramid-shaped mausoleum that dominated the sky-line, looking down on both the house and the village below. Charles had told her that that was where his ancestor Tobias Heylt was buried.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Charles had said in hushed tones. He had turned to her to see her expression. She remembered that she had feigned delight – more for his benefit, for she would never want him disappointed in her. She remembered that all she could think was, 'Oh God, Oh God, Oh my God!' They parked outside the house and got out. "This is where I grew up," he'd said.

She had smiled that sweet smile of hers. "It's been empty for a while," he'd told her. Somewhere inside she had thought, 'I can be mistress of this.' How wrong she had been. She should have known. It had been Charles's mother's home and there could be only one Mistress. Her presence was felt in every room, from the carpets through to the wallpaper and painting. Charles had refused to allow her to change anything. She was glad that his mother was dead. She remembered the old couch in the lounge. She had thought it would be comfortable, but its big arms and cushions were cold, hard and uninviting to her, but Charles thought that it was comfortable. Then when she had come to clean it one day, she had found the tiny skeletons of at least twenty mice, yet there had been no evidence of how they had got in there; and the smell was awful... she had got so upset that Charles had begrudgingly burnt the couch. The memory of the smell reminded her of the dank damp smell that she had smelt in her bedroom and she was sure that she had seen a dark shape at the end of the bed. She had turned to wake Charles, but he hadn't been there, yet he had gone to bed with her. She also remembered the metal clanging sound that had awakened her at 3.15am, every morning - but Charles never once heard it, even when she had woken him. He thought that she had just dreamt it.

She walked along the corridor and as she did so, a door to her right slowly opened. She spun around to see who was there... there was no one. She pushed the door open wide to look into the room. The curtains were drawn, and she could see that it was the nursery, and a flood of memories washed over her with such force that she had to gasp for breath. She was sure that the nursery was further down the corridor. She didn't remember it being this room. This was the room which both Philip, and later his sister, April, had had as young children. The cot was still in the centre of the room with the yellow stars and moon mobile hanging above, and the brown teddies were on the red toy box by the window. As she turned to walk out, she noticed the Victorian china doll in its flowery dress and blonde curly hair sitting on a rocking chair. It had been made in April's image and had been a present from... she couldn't remember. Its dark empty eyes seemed to be staring at her, and the crack from temple to cheek in its porcelain... she had to leave. She walked out of the room and

pulled the door tightly behind her. As the door shut, she was sure that the doll had looked away. Opening it quickly, she saw that the doll was in the same position, watching to see whoever came into the room.

Pulling the door to again, Nicola continued to make her way down the corridor, her feet unsteady due to the pain that she was in. At the end of the corridor was another door, with a wooden sign simply saying 'Philip's room.' She opened the door to see grey light seeping through the windows.

"Philip" she called, her patience finally running out, due to the constant throbbing in her temple. "Are you there?"

Silence. Nicola entered and walked across to the large blue toy box that was at the end of the bed and opened the lid. She placed the ball inside and closed the lid. She looked around the vibrant room with its colourful animal prints once more and then left. She made her way back to the kitchen and made herself another Earl Grey tea. Nicola liked her tea in a china cup and so she delicately emptied and washed her cup and saucer. Once made, she sat back down. The pain was getting worse, and she struggled to get her thoughts into some form of order. She remembered vaguely that Philip was boarding at Eton and would not be home until Christmas, and that Charles was at work. Yet, she could not remember where April was! She should be here, yet the house was silent and she was nowhere to be found. She grimaced as she thought of April, not because she didn't love her, but because Charles didn't. Philip was the first born and a male, which was always what she and Charles wanted, and he had made that abundantly clear. Anything after that was down to Nicola, even though she hadn't wanted anymore children. Philip had had a nanny, early private tuition and then was whisked off to Eton at seven. April had been born five years after Philip and was totally different from her brother. She was beautiful in every way yet for some reason she had repulsed Charles, and he kept away from her as often as possible. 'I had no choice in the matter,' she thought bitterly. Nicola hated Charles' mother, for she never invited her to the house, and said nasty things to both the children and Charles about her, which she knew because she'd heard the children talking. She hadn't liked the way that his mother had favoured April over her brother... Philip was the first born and should have been favoured. Nicola was glad Charles' mother was dead. But Philip had loved his sister... 'Well someone had to' she thought, then instantly regretted it.

'I want to break something!' The thought took her unawares. What was wrong with her she wondered through the continuing pain?

"April" she said aloud. She remembered that at the same moment that April had been born, her cat had given birth to six still born kittens, and

that was when the local servants had started to leave, and she was shunned by the people in the village. Charles had said that that was all in her head too. Oh they were always polite, but they never stopped to speak for long and none ventured up to the house to visit her socially. Gradually all her friends stopped visiting and she had felt truly alone. In the end Charles had arranged a party for her, thinking that it would ease her melancholy. She smiled at that memory... it had been a good party with most of his friends from the base being there as well as a few of the locals. A lot of alcohol had been drunk, she remembered that well. Then another memory flooded her mind – someone at the party suggested that they try a séance and that it would be a fun thing to do. Yet she hadn't been so sure. Setting up a home made Ouija board on the dining table, she remembered being a little out of her depth. Charles had put her at the head of the table, making her the thirteenth person. She hadn't wanted to place her delicate finger on the glass, but she couldn't let Charles look bad for the sake of her hesitancy, she had to be the perfect wife. Everyone had been laughing and joking and drinking more. She had slowly begun to relax, and then the glass had slowly started to move, from letter to letter...she couldn't remember much once the glass had started to move and she couldn't remember what it had said, although she knew it was important. Charles had jumped up and knocked the glass and cards to the floor, shouting, 'End this.' Everyone had stared at him, shocked, and her head had begun to throb. And that had ended the party. The guests had made a hasty exit, and not one spoke to her as they left. They had just looked at her strangely. Her hand trembled at that memory. Charles had been so cross, although she didn't understand why, and he had refused to answer her questions after the guests had left. She couldn't remember if he had even come to bed that night...

How long she had been sitting in the kitchen, again she was not sure. The cup trembled on its saucer as she pushed it away, its contents lukewarm. The house was cold, still and silent and she was cold. She placed her head in her hands as the pain became more violent. Then, she thought she heard a muffled scream.

"April" she called out again, "Where are you my darling girl?"

Her eyes were heavy, her head ached, she was no longer sure of anything, and more than anything else she wanted to break something. She didn't understand why she was feeling like this. Hadn't she had the perfect life up until the party? Now she wasn't so sure. She played with the golden ring on her finger. Another memory came to the fore. After the party, Charles spent more and more time away from her, Philip rarely came home from Eton during the holidays and April...

“Mummy.”

Slowly raising her head from her hands, Nicola tried to smile despite the pain. “April?” her voice quiet, restrained. “Where are you?”

The words floated across the pain and struck a chord. Where was she? She didn’t know and yet... Her eyes were heavy, her head ached, and more than anything else she wanted to break something.

“Mummy.”

Slowly turning around, Nicola found the room behind, empty, though she was sure she heard the sound of feet walking on the wooden floor. Then realisation slowly dawned on her... Charles was away and not coming back... Philip was away and not coming back... and...and...April was gone...

“April, oh April my darling girl where are you? Mummy loves you... April” her voice broke through her restraint. Something had happened... something that should never have happened... Yet she could not quite remember what it was. She got up from the table and made her way down the corridor to the stairs. The front door was open. Looking out to see if there was anyone there, she could see no-one. As she turned to close the door, she thought that she saw someone in the garden, heading towards the summerhouse, then it was gone. ‘What’s wrong with me?’ she thought as she closed the door and frowned. She was sure that she had closed it... now she wasn’t. Taking more effort than before she made her way up. She walked past the nursery and as she did so the door opened slightly... she walked past Philip’s room and the door opened slightly...she finally came to a stop in front of a door on the left hand side and she took a deep breath. The notice on the door seemed to stare back at her. Square in shape and decorated with flowers and fairies, it was the gothic lettering that made her tremble – April’s room... her hand shook as she reached for the door handle. It felt cold under her touch, and she hesitated.

“Mummy.”

The voice seemed to come from behind the door. She turned the handle and opened the door. The room was cast in grey light and the colours seemed to have been bleached out of the fairy prints on the walls and the bedspread, once white, now a dirty grey speckled with faded rust splattering spots. There were no toys strewn on the floor and no dolls upon the shelves. It wasn’t how she remembered it, the room had been bright and colourful, like Philip’s room, and it was so cold in here, and there was a strange smell as though of alcohol and cigar smoke. She didn’t like it. Memories came flooding back of the night of the séance...

“April...I’m so sorry... so very sorry...”her voice no more than a whisper, her frail body lowering itself onto the bed. She pulled a pillow to her and buried her face in the softness of the fabric. April’s face came to the fore.

Her golden locks twirling around as she played and her green eyes full of mischief, full of love. How she had loved to be cuddled and told stories. Charles may not have loved his daughter, but he did give her something... Philip loved his sister and he gave her something...but Nicola had failed to give her daughter anything and it was this realisation that took a hold of her now.

Everything had changed after that night... she remembered her scream at what she had seen... a confirmation of what she had suspected... she remembered going down into the study and getting something... she remembered three explosions, one after another... she wanted to break something. She slowly got up off the bed, made her way down the corridor, down the stairs and into the study, Charles' study, where he kept his war memorabilia and his guns. Outside, as though carried by the wind she heard voices of children seemingly laughing and joking, but glancing out of the window, she could see that the garden was empty. The summerhouse glowed red with the vibrancy of the roses... she didn't like it... it reminded her of... Opening the desk drawer... she took something out, it was heavy and it was cold. The house felt expectant and mysterious, as if it were waiting for something to happen. Using the last of her energy, she made her way back to April's room.

On a shelf, sat the china doll, its dress covered in rust coloured spots and its dark, empty eyes seemed to be watching her, accusing her. She stopped. Hadn't it been in the nursery? She wasn't sure. She looked around the room and again her eyes caught sight of the rust coloured splattering of spots on the bedspread. For one second they appeared red. She struggled with the pain, she struggled with trying to remember... then realisation dawned...

"Daddy, I love you."

"April..."

Voices in a haunted room, the light bleaching the colour, the memories washing over her, like the sea over the shore... in the silence there was an explosion of sound, a thud... something was broken...

## II

*Her foot fell down onto the damp pine needles, as she ran - but from what was she running? All she could remember were the words that had haunted her all day:*

*"She wanted to break something."*

*But what was it she wanted to break and why was she running from it. Sweat poured down her forehead. She was close to tears. A sudden thought struck her...maybe she had been dreaming again. She stopped, paused and*

*thought. Looking down at her plump figure, she realised that she was wearing her night - gown. A small polite laugh erupted from her lips. Yes, she had been dreaming. What a stupid girl she had been. An owl hooted and the girl took stock as to where she was. She gasped as she took in the tall trees that shut out the sunlight. It was almost like being in a cathedral. Noises in the dark reminded her of hushed voices, and she found herself taking a step back and whispering the word, "Daddy. "*

*The girl realised with mounting fear that she was in Olcome woods! Hadn't her father told her never to venture into the woods unsupervised, as she could easily get lost! And weren't there many strange stories about the woods being haunted by elves, fairies and such like? Was it not drummed into every child not to play any games in the woods especially hide and seek - for the only good hiding places were the ones where the bad things lived. Hadn't a family vanished near the woods? She tried not to dwell on such things.*

*The moon rose and hit the trees at such an angle that they lit up a well-worn path. She tried to see into the gloom, but couldn't, and her mounting fear made her hesitate to go back through the blackness that lay behind her, like a beast waiting to pounce. Her fear pushed her feet forward, leaving behind impressions that were wet. After running several yards, she stopped again. Something was wrong. The moonlight had vanished and the air had become chillier. Then it struck her like a slap in the face - there was no noise. No birds hooting...no crickets chirping - there was nothing. She found the silence very oppressive. A sudden thought struck her again... that maybe she was the only living thing in the whole of the wood, and that any noises she heard came not from the living, but from the dead...the ghosts! She shivered. But had not father always said that there was no such thing as ghosts. Yes, he had. She wished that she were with him now. Damn this sleepwalking.*

*"Now stop being silly," said the voice in her mind. "The silence can't hurt you."*

*She forced herself forward, following the path the best she could, unaware that she was now running on tiptoe. Her hands touched her sides and hurriedly pulled back. She paused and looked at them. Her nightgown was wet ... not just wet, but soaking wet! A sudden pang of melancholy overcame her, and, as she took in her surroundings again, she noticed that nothing grew about the base of the trees - no weeds, no flowers - nothing except the damp soil. The branches were so closely entwined that no*

*sunlight could penetrate and without the sun there could be no life? Is this a place for the dead? "Yes "said the voice in her head. She shivered again and wondered how the moonlight had been able to penetrate this awful gloom! Had it been moonlight?*

*She came upon the pool so suddenly that she almost fell into it. Luckily she managed to catch onto a low branch, which helped to steady her. The moon shone down onto the murky, still water that was barely two feet away from her. The expanse of the water was too wide for the surrounding trees to meet in the middle. She slowly took in every detail. An old mine pit, the opposite wall towering out of the few trees that grew out of a small outcrop at its base. In fact the trees looked as though they were growing out of the pool itself. The water was black and evil smelling and did not reflect the moonlight. It was a lot colder and damper here than in the woods. Nothing stirred in the pool - no ripples because the wind never touched it. It was as still as the grave!*

*"Fancy a swim in it?" said the voice in her mind. She reckoned that she could easily reach the other side and back - but you just never knew what might be lurking in its black depths. Some hideous monstrosity that took young children for its dinner. She shivered again and made her mind up to go back home. She was tired and scared and wanted Father. He would be so cross that she'd gone out to the woods and even more cross that she was soaking wet. A sudden compulsion to look into the pool to see if she could make out the bottom gripped her. She held on even more tightly to the low branches and lent forward, careful not to fall into the black depths. The water seemed to ripple, but there was no wind. Maybe she'd knocked something in ...or could it be a monster stirring, taking notice of this little plump girl who'd gone out sleep walking and now had woken up, lost and frightened! Her mouth was dry and tasted horrid, her eyes wide. She suddenly didn't care what had disturbed the water...she just wanted to go home. Just wanted Daddy. She'd never come back to this horrid place - never, never, never. Then a face appeared. A blur at first, and her fear made her wait until the ripples had gone. She gave a moan of fear, and almost lost her balance, almost fell into the black depths of the pool. The face was that of a child - but not just any child - it was her own reflection. But the eyes were dark and the face was gaunt - it had lost its puppy fat. The hair was swimming around like snakes. A scream built up inside her throat as she realised that this face was a thin version of herself. The mouth moved, but she wasn't sure of the words. Then the voice in her mind said, "We are one."*

*Her scream found a voice and she dropped to her knees, sobbing. Suddenly the water rippled again, sending out shock waves that reached to the other side. Was the monster rising...were hands reaching out of the*





*black depths for her? She jumped up and ran. Ran away from whatever the face had meant, from whatever had caused the ripples and from her own fear. The branches suddenly seemed to come alive, reaching out for her, trying to haul her back to the pool and whatever lurked within its depths, but she fought them off as tears filled her wide frightened eyes. The silence was gone, replaced by noises that sounded like whispering voices. Stumbling, breathless. Falling, picking herself up and ignoring the pain in her side. Her wet nightgown flapped as she ran, making a noise like a panting dog at her heels, and there was a roaring sound in her ears as though some unnameable monster had joined in the pursuit. She came to a fork in the path. She hadn't noticed that before. Ennie Meanie Minie Moe - she took the left path and prayed that it was the right one. The one thought that dominated her mind was of HOME.*

*A twisted, blackened oak reared out of the darkness, its knotted trunk looked like a devilish face, leering out at her. Trees that seemed to move of their own accord! No, that was Wizard of Oz stuff. But if it was true, then where was the Wicked Witch? She felt she was going to faint. The blackness before her eyes was speckled with red, and it seemed to be darker than the earlier gloom, she'd become accustomed too. She daren't clutch at the branches for support in case they seized her and dragged her back to be cast into those black unfathomable depths. Suddenly there was moonlight, a blinding aura that offered sanctuary. She rushed forward with her remaining strength, felt the damp air on her face and the soft rain in her hair. She fell to the floor, sobbing, and had just enough energy to take a quick glance behind her, to check that nothing was in pursuit. Only the darkness looked back, and seemed to mock her. She retched.*

*After a few minutes, she got up and hurried towards the house. The main reception room was in full light, and sobbing could be heard coming from the slightly open window. She entered the house and made her way to the main reception room and entered. Her father stood by the fire, which was roaring in the grate, and her mother was bent over something, sobbing deep, soul wrenching sobs.*

*"Father, I'm sorry. I've been sleep..."She noticed that her father took no notice of her at all. So she went across to her mother and pulled at her sleeves. But nothing. Father said something and mother turned to him, moving forward, and she could see clearly now what her mother had been crying over...*

***"April."***

The voice seemed distant, far away. There appeared to be no urgency and her eyes remained closed. Her head ached on the right side, and she raised her hand to her temple. It was wet. Her eyes opened and she sat bolt upright. She knew that she had had that dream again and for one moment, she thought that it had come true! Looking around, her eyes seemed dim, as if there were a mist over them. Her room seemed to be drained of all colour. She tried to understand. As she shook her head gently from side to side, some bracken fell onto the floor, but she took no notice of it as her room became more vibrant and colourful. The 'mist' seemed to lift from her eyes but the throbbing continued.

"Mummy?" her voice, tired, replied.

Slowly rising off the bed, she stumbled over something on the floor. But there was nothing there. Her head throbbed more violently now. 'Where's Dolly' she thought. Dolly was her best friend and they played for hours together. It had been made in her image, a perfect replica of her, and was a present from her Grandmother after she had been ill. Was she ill again? She did not know, all she did know was that she wanted her dolly.

Leaving her bedroom, she made her way along the corridor and down the wide staircase. She saw that her Father's study door was open and she peeked inside, the room was empty so she went in. It was her first time in this room as no-one was allowed into the study; her Daddy had been very strict on that. She saw three walls covered in books, and his desk by the window. She smiled as she often caught him at work behind the desk as she played in the garden. Glancing out of the window, she saw a man heading towards the summerhouse. He was too far away to make out clearly, but there was something about him that she did not like and knew that she had to find mummy or Daddy and tell them that there was a stranger in their garden, in her summerhouse. She hurried out of the study and down the passageway to the kitchen. The door was open and she could see a cup on its saucer on the table.

"Mummy," she called out, but got no response. She walked back down the passageway, and looked in the parlour. The chairs were pulled back from the table in the centre of the room, there was a broken glass on the floor, and there were pieces of paper scattered around the floor, with letters on them. Vague memories came back to her. She did not like them and so tried to dispel them from her mind. The more that she did so, the more her head throbbed with pain.

'April,' a voice called.

"Dolly," she said aloud.

A scraping sound on the floor above caught her attention, and she made her way back upstairs. The nursery door was open and she could see her cot was in the centre of the room with the yellow stars and moon mobile hanging above, and the soft brown teddies were on the red toy box by the window, but her dolly was not there. She frowned with displeasure. As she turned to leave, she saw a red ball on the floor, and she kicked it. It bounced out of the room, hit the wall and rolled towards the stairs. April made her way down the corridor towards her bedroom. The door was closed and yet she was sure that she had left it open. The first thing that she saw when she opened the door was her Dolly, lying on the bed as though waiting for her to cuddle her, as she did every night. She rushed across and picked it up and cuddled it.

"Oh Dolly, there you are. I missed you."

*'I missed you too,' said a voice. 'Where have you been?'*

"I've been looking for you!"

*'I've been here all along, just waiting to cuddle you.'*

Knowing that Dolly loved her as much as she loved Dolly filled her with a tingling feeling and she felt complete. Holding the doll seemed to take the pain away.

"You're my best friend" she said as though expecting a reply. Then she sat on the floor, holding the doll as close as she could and told her about having the dream again and about the man that she had seen in the garden, *'Don't go into the summerhouse'* said a voice. "Why" she questioned. *'You know why.'*

After pausing for a moment she continued by telling that she had been in her Daddy's study for the first time. Outside the light faded, and she realised that she hadn't seen her mother for the day. Holding her doll, she made her way back down to the kitchen. The house was quiet, and she didn't like that.

"Mummy."

She walked along the corridor towards the kitchen. The chair at the table was pulled out as though someone was sitting on it, and there was the china cup and saucer on the table. Grey light seeped through the window, casting shadows around the room. There was a strange smell as though of perfume mixed with cigar and she didn't like it. It reminded her of... *'Don't think about it,'* said the voice. She liked the voice it was kind and soothing and reminded her of Grandmother. She loved her Grandmother and her Grandmother always said that she was her special little girl. Her Daddy had told her that she had been named after her, and although her mother had never accompanied them, she had had lovely visits and holidays there. She thought about her mother... *'She's not a good*

person' said the voice. 'Why not?' she replied. '*Don't you remember that she shaved your hair off in a fit of anger?*' She thought about this, a vague memory lost within the confines of her mind, but slowly it came back to her. "Yes, I remember," she replied, sadly. Daddy had been so cross that he'd taken her to her Grandmothers, with the cut off hair, and she had stayed there for a long time. Dolly had her hair now. Dolly was her friend. As she turned to leave, she said aloud, 'Mummy, are you happy?' Then shaking her head, wondering why she had said that, she turned and made her way back up to her room.

The greyness was seeping in through the window, and she suddenly felt tired. Curling up on her bed, she drew dolly closer to her, and she started to name the fairies upon the prints on the wall, 'That's Abella the beautiful and that's Aurelia the immortal and that's Niamh – she of eternal youth...' she went on until she fell asleep.

The next morning she awoke and felt happy. Dolly was entangled in her arms as though it had been cuddling her, and she felt safe. Getting up off the bed, she noticed a couple of leaves on the pillow. Frowning, she picked them up and put them in the bin and then she pulled the doll to her and started to sing, 'Dolly, you are my best friend, I love you Dolly.' As she played with her doll, she seemed to fall into a trance, because the next thing that she knew was that there was a hard rapping on her door. The door swung open, but there was no-one there. Surprised that no-one came in, she managed to quietly say a 'Hello.' Yet, there was no response. Maybe it was Philip playing a prank on her, she thought. Then, she wondered who Philip was...she couldn't remember. As she sat on the floor she felt a cold breeze around her. She didn't like it and so picking up dolly, she left, taking a quick glance behind her to see if she could see anything. Her room was empty. Sighing, she thought about going outside into the garden to play. She liked to play, and she liked to help Grandmother in her garden. Walking down the corridor, a door opened slightly. She paused, waiting for someone to come out, but no-one did, so she pushed it open, gently.

The room was dirty, there was no colour in the animal prints on the walls, and some seemed to be peeling. The bed was unkempt and the sheets were grey and dirty looking. She noticed a grubby blue toy box at the end of the bed, its lid ajar. Temptation overtook her and she looked inside, and found that there were broken toys, toy soldiers with no heads or legs, trains with no wheels, teddy bears with their eyes missing. She slammed the lid down and hurried out of the room. She didn't like it in here and she didn't know why. Her bedroom was beautiful, vibrant with colour, her fairy prints were almost alive, and this room was in complete

contrast to hers. Holding her doll tighter to her, she hurried down the stairs and out of the front door and into the garden.

The garden was cool and shady. By a side gate, she entered the garden. The perfume of wild flowers and cultivated blooms warmed by the morning sunlight filled the air. Looking around the wildness of the garden, she felt her Grandmothers' presence, for the smell of the wild roses reminded her of her Grandmother's perfume that she smelt when she was gathered to her and she felt secure. Running in and around the garden, she played. *'Don't go in the summerhouse.'* She stopped. Looking towards the summerhouse, she started to tremble as she saw in the distance, a man, heading towards it. There was something familiar about him and she didn't like it. *'I'd better get Daddy'* she said to Dolly, and turned, hurrying towards the house. The front door opened as she neared it, and thinking that there was someone there, entered, closing the door behind her. There was no-one there. Frowning, she headed towards the kitchen, but other than a cup and saucer, in a different place, there was no one there. *'Mummy'* she called out. On getting no response she made her way back down the corridor, pausing only to note the muddy footprints on the wooden floor. From somewhere upstairs she heard the voices of people seemingly arguing and shouting. *'Daddy'* she called up. On getting no response, she made her way up the stairs. As she neared the top stairs, the voices faded away. She paused.

From below her she heard the front door open and shut and she felt a draft of warm air rush past her. *'Don't worry my darling'* said the voice and it seemed to calm her immediately. She made her way down the corridor, towards her room. The door was shut and yet she was sure that she had left it open and there was the faint aroma of her Grandmother's perfume hanging in the air. She smiled and walked across the room and looked out of the window. Looking straight up at her was the man that she had seen in the garden. His face was the one from her nightmare, the one when she felt that she couldn't move, that something was on top of her. She quickly moved away from the window. *'Hide'* said the voice. Looking around the room, she couldn't see a safe place in which to hide. She hurriedly left her room and ran to the nursery. Inside, she made her way to the cupboard on the far wall and climbed inside. As she closed the door, she realised that she didn't have her Doll with her and her fear grew. She needed her doll. Listening intently, wondering whether to risk running to get her doll, she heard footsteps coming down the corridor. She held her breath as she heard the door open. She heard someone shuffling around the room and then leave... then the door opened and closed again just as quickly. Not daring to breathe she saw flickers of red and black specks

float in front of her eyes and the throbbing got worse. Nausea took hold of her, but she was able to keep it down. *'It's safe now my darling'* said the calming voice, and she carefully opened the cupboard door a crack to verify that it was safe. There was no-one in the room, so she carefully climbed out. She shut the door behind her, and as she turned around, she smiled with joy, for there on the rocking chair, was dolly. She rushed over to it and scooped it into her arms, holding it tightly. 'How did you get here?' she asked as though expecting a reply. 'I see' she continued as though replying to some answered reply. 'I love you too.'

*"April."*

The voice seemed distant, far away. There appeared to be some urgency, some fear in the voice and her eyes snapped open. Her head ached on the right side, and she didn't remember going to bed. 'Daddy' she said.

*'April, where are you?'*

*'Daddy, I'm here.'*

Silence fell heavy and she began to feel butterflies in her stomach. Then panic set in as she realised that her doll was not with her. Looking around the room, fear gripping her tighter, she knew that she just needed her doll. The throbbing worsened until she saw her doll on a shelf, not looking at her, but towards the door. For a brief moment, she thought the doll had an expression of something on its face. Then it was gone. She rubbed her eyes and saw the doll was looking at her, its arms in a beckoning posture towards her. She jumped out of bed, hurried across and took the doll into her arms. Then she remembered that her Daddy had called to her and that there was something strange in his voice. Frowning and with her doll in her arms, she went out into the corridor. The scent of lavender hung in the air. She paused as she recognised her mother's perfume and then she felt confused. She'd been dreaming about her mother, but she couldn't recall her mother actually being at the house, yet she knew that she had to be here... she didn't understand why she was feeling like this.

Sighing, she made her way down the corridor. The door to the 'dirty' bedroom was open, and she looked inside. It still held the same revulsion for her, but she noticed that some of the furniture had moved. In front of the window was a sturdy wooden table with a typewriter upon it. There were balls of screwed up paper on it and on the floor... they reminded her of the scattered paper in the parlour. She closed the door and went downstairs.

The front door was open, and the smells of the flowers were beckoning for her to come and play. Looking down the corridor she could see that

there was no one in the kitchen and her Father's study door was shut. 'Daddy' she called out, but again she received no response, so she went outside. Shutting the door behind her, she made her way to the garden. The sun shone down, she could hear the buzzing of bees and there was an air of peacefulness. She walked around the garden, pointing out different flowers and telling her doll the names of them. She had learnt their names from Grandmother, and she wished that she were here now. She slowly came to a halt as she felt the hairs on the back of her neck begin to rise, and she knew that she shouldn't look behind her, but nature took over and she looked. There was the man that she had seen in the garden, her garden, standing by the gate, watching her, smiling at her, it was a smile that she had seen before and she knew that she had to get away... she ran further into the garden. Trailing branches, like grabbing hands snatched at her clothes as though trying to stop her escape, as she pushed through the spreading foliage, and she instinctively knew that he was following her. Stumbling into a little bit of a clearing, she stopped in front of the summerhouse.

She saw the climbing roses that she and Grandmother had planted, ruby red under the sunshine, the entrance dark and uninviting to her. Behind, she could hear the steady crunching of footfalls. Looking around, she didn't know in which direction to run, where to hide. All she did know was that if she went into the summerhouse, there would be no escape. Yet there was no other option as the bushes were a lot thicker here and she didn't want to rip her dress. 'Sorry Dolly.' She entered the summerhouse, the air humid with the heat, she screamed.

Outside, the sky was grey. Her eyes opened slowly and she found herself in her bed. Had she been dreaming? She wasn't sure. Yet she knew that there was something wrong, but couldn't understand why she thought this. Her room was just the way that she remembered it. She sat up and listened. There was no other sound. Normally she could hear the steady daily routine of the house. Now she couldn't hear a thing. Getting out of bed, she saw that her feet were covered in grass and mud and her dress was dirty. Frowning she wiped them on the rug by her bed, and looked around for her doll.

'Dolly!'

Her eyes swam around and she felt herself fall.

It was dark, cold and blackness surrounded her when she opened her eyes. She was lying flat on her back. She tried to sit up, but found that she couldn't – something hard was stopping her. She reached out to her side, feeling for her doll and felt nothing but the cold earth beneath her finger tips, smelt the earthy stench around her, mingled in with the scent of



roses and slowly she realised where she was... 'Dolly'... then there was nothing... From the bedroom window looking down at the summerhouse was the doll... then it was gone.

### III

The carriage pulled up outside two stone pillars, holding iron gates. The driver carefully placed two cases onto the ground and climbed back up. A tall broad man, with a shock of auburn hair stepped out of the carriage.

"Why have you stopped here, my good man?"

"You know why that be, Sir" replied the driver as the carriage pulled away. "Locals?" he thought, shaking his head. Picking up his cases, he walked up the overgrown driveway. Turning a bend he saw the house and took in the faded Victorian splendour, that was impressive in spite of the peeling walls and ill fitting windows. It reminded him of a painting from the past untouched by the frantic madness of the nearby city. The house, serenely graceful in design, shadowed by trees grown tall and lush across the years, and set back into the hills, over looking the small village of Gull Cove, suddenly felt like a return home for him. How long he had been away, he couldn't remember, but he felt good to be home at last.

He climbed the wide stone steps towards the crumbling front door. In spite of the rotting woodwork the brass fittings were highly polished and gleaming, the stone steps well scrubbed and clean. He knocked on the door, the heavy brass knocker under his touch, felt familiar. The door was opened by an elderly lady, her face lined like splintered glass. Her grey blonde hair was tied back in a pony tail, held there by a scarlet ribbon. She looked enquiringly at him, her sharp blue eyes taking him in.

"Good afternoon. I'm Charles Heylt. You are?"

"That's right, you are expected, please come inside. I'll show you to your room, it's upstairs."

She moved easily ahead of him, despite her age, his luggage making him clumsy and slow. The front door closed behind him, and as he turned to see who had closed it, he saw no-one. Catching up with the old lady, he saw that she had stopped outside a door. She opened it and motioned for him to go inside.

"Here you are Mr Heylt, this is your room."

The room was light and airy, high ceiling and spacious, with colourful animal prints on the walls, and a blue toy box at the end of the double bed. A large bay window looked down upon a wild garden. It felt strangely familiar to him, like a long lost memory.

He smiled and nodded approval.

"It's just right – it reminds me of..."

Handing him the key to the room, the old lady interrupted him.

"The bathroom and lavatory are down the hall, but you know that. I live...just off the kitchen. I am this houses' keeper and I welcome you home"

Then she was gone, with a whisper of a smile on her face. "What a strange old fashioned creature she is," he thought, "And she reminds me of someone." Pausing, he tried to remember who he thought she reminded him of, but he couldn't remember.

He walked across to the window and looked out. The trees were gently swaying, there were exuberant clusters of flowers and weeds in a garden which someone had once carefully designed. He could see a gently decaying summer house at the end of the garden almost consumed by an abundance of climbing roses, and a pond with a statue of an angel set in the middle. He stood at the window watching as the sun splashed the sky with pink and gold. Somewhere voices shouted greetings and footsteps ran up the stairs. Sighing, he made his way over to the bed and opened his luggage. He placed his clothes into the large wardrobe and chest of drawers. Looking into what he perceived to be a toy box, he found extra bedding within. Suddenly feeling tired, he lay on the bed and let his mind drift across the years, like moving pictures, dreams and dramas filled his mind until sleep changed day dreaming into nightmare. He awoke with a start, his heart pumping, fear gripping his stomach, breath gasping in his throat. Somewhere someone was crying – maybe a child, there was a whimpering quality to the sound that indicated immaturity. He lay there listening to voices, somehow full of menace, guttural and demanding.

Outside, the wind was rising, rattling the windows. A storm - tossed bird, black and squawking hit the glass, making him jump. Sitting up he watched the shadows passing in the moonlight, and feeling uneasy he got up and crossed to the window. There was someone down in the garden, kneeling by the pond, but looking straight up at his window. The shadows made it difficult to see, so he moved the nets to get a better view of the nocturnal visitor. Leaning closer to the window, he still couldn't see clearly, the image was indistinct. Veils of mist seemed to cloak his eyes. He rubbed them roughly with his knuckles and looked again. There was something strangely familiar about the crouching person, seemingly staring back up at him, but he was unsure what it was. The window rattled against the wind, and he took a step back. Moving to look again, the visitor had gone, and Charles suddenly felt as though he had seen something that he shouldn't have. Shaking his head, he went back to bed.

The following morning, he was determined to work. Firstly he decided to re-arrange the furniture. He moved a sturdy wooden table over to the window where the light was better for him to work in. Then he placed his typewriter upon it and tried to write, yet nothing would come. After an hour, and surrounded by balls of screwed up paper, he decided to try again later. It didn't help that there was music seemingly coming from another room, and that he had put up with it for over three hours. Over the music came a laugh and he snapped.

He walked along the corridor and hammered on the door. It wasn't locked and swung open easily beneath his fist. He stepped into the room expecting confrontation, but it was empty. The room was cast in grey light and the colours seemed to have been bleached out of the fairy prints on the walls and a bed throw, once white, now a dirty grey speckled with faded rust splattering spots. There were no toys strewn on the floor and no dolls upon the shelves, and yet evidently it was a child's bedroom. Yet Charles was sure that this was the room where the music originated from. Breathing intently, he suddenly realised that the music had stopped. Glancing out of the window and seeing the sunshine on the garden, he decided that he needed some air. 'I've been working too hard,' he thought.

The garden looked cool and shady. He ran down the stairs, paused as he thought he heard someone else following him, saw that there was no one there and went out of the front door. By a side gate, he entered the garden. The perfume of wild flowers and cultivated blooms warmed by the morning sunlight filled the air. Looking around the wildness of the garden, Charles saw in the distance, a tall man, in what looked like ragged military clothing. He called out a 'hello', but getting no response, decided to go over to the stranger. Trailing branches snatched at his clothes as he pushed between the spreading foliage. Yet the closer he thought that he was getting, the further away he seemed. The stranger seemed to be heading towards the summerhouse, so he deviated and followed. When he got there, there was no-one there. He noticed the crumbling shape of the rustic woodwork, softened by its covering of climbing roses. The woodwork snapped beneath his feet as he stood on the first step, he tested the second, stepping inside onto the creaking floor, and crossed to the carved wooden benches lining the walls.

He sat there looking down the garden towards the house. The silence was regenerating, the peacefulness, soothing. Only the rustlings of insects broke the silence. From the summerhouse, he could see no evidence of the decline in the structure of the house. It looked alive, and he even fancied that he could hear laughter and see vague figures running in and out of the trees and bushes. It reminded him of his childhood. He

stared harder, imagination he thought was an amazing quality of the human mind. He thought that he was glad that he hadn't gone to war, but his wealth had made sure that he had stayed safe. He could only see an empty garden now.

Walking back towards the house he thought about the peacefulness of the summerhouse. He had spent many a happy hour there...a long time ago, or so it seemed. He found the front door of the house was closed and felt in his pocket for his key. He looked up at the empty windows, not a sign of life anywhere, then out of the corner of his eye he saw a young girl up against one of the windows, her hands palm flat against the glass, her pale face, distressed, her red lips mouthing silent words to him. Violently she was pulled away from the window by some unseen hand, looking back over her shoulder; her eyes begged him for help. Then for a second there was another face at the window, cold, hard and triumphant. The face was his own. Then it was gone.

Fumbling with his key, his temper rising, Charles finally opened the door and ran up the stairs two at a time, towards the room, where he had seen the girl. He banged with his fist, finally his temper got the better of him and he gave it an almighty kick. It didn't budge.

"What's going on in there? Open this door immediately."

He could hear scuffling sounds, furniture falling, crockery breaking and whimpering.

"Open this door" he shouted again.

He hit his fists hard against the wood, voices shouted, someone sobbed.

"Open this door or I'll break it down."

There was no response. He backed away and ran at the door, hitting it with his shoulder, falling forward as the door opened easily beneath his full weight. The room was empty except for a chair with a Victorian china doll, with its porcelain face cracked from the temple to cheek, and flowery dress and blonde curly hair. Its dark empty eyes seemed to be staring accusingly at him. He frowned for he was sure that had heard the voices and movements. The side of his head started to throb.

The house felt expectant and mysterious, as if it were waiting for something to happen. Charles walked along the corridor, listening out intently for any sound. He didn't like the silence and he began to wonder whether he'd seen what he thought he had. One door was open and he walked into yet another empty room, or was it? On the floor was a long tattered Air Force coat. He picked it up, and dropped it back down just as quickly. Then over against the wall, faint movements like shadow pictures

on a screen, indistinct. He walked towards them, stretching out his hand to touch the wall. He gasped in pain as his fingers felt the icy coldness, which had the adhesive quality of ice cubes clinging to his skin. The shadows were getting clearer, coming closer. Clearly defined, a face emerged – his face, smiling sadly. Charles felt himself being sucked in towards the shadows, his whole body being emptied of life.

“We cannot escape,” he heard his voice say over and over.

Charles pulled away, willing himself to fight against this reality, and backed towards the door. The coat that was on the floor rose up and filled out until Charles saw the figure of himself in full Air Force uniform. Eyes scrutinising him, knowing him, tracking him across the room, repeating the same words over and over. Slamming the door shut, Charles ran a long the corridor, nearly collapsing down the stairs and out of the front door. Gasping for breath, he remembered the tranquillity of the summer house. He ran through the garden, stepping too hastily onto the rotting woodwork, the summerhouse floor collapsed as his foot pushed through it. Splinters penetrated through his shoe and into his skin. Swearing, he pulled his foot from the hole. The smell of rotten wood held another odour, ancient and identifiable. He knelt down and looked under the rotting floor, pulling back in horror as he saw the badly decomposed body lying there.

His fear followed him as he ran out of the garden, ignoring the branches that seemed to try and hold him back, down the driveway, through the stone pillars that held the gates and found himself back in the corridor where his room was. He looked around, confused.

“You cannot escape,” he heard his voice say.

Looking around, he saw himself, looking sad.

“Who are you?” Charles hissed. His head began to swim, confusion blinding any sense. His head ached and he felt sick.

“This is not happening this is not happening...” he repeated to himself, as though trying to exorcise what was happening to him. He felt himself gag, but stopped at being sick. His legs felt weak, and he leaned against the wall, and slowly slid down. Darkness descended and he blacked out.

Dawn was just breaking when he awoke to three loud bangs that echoed along the corridor. Sluggishly, he rose and made his way down the stairs towards the kitchen. His head ached and he felt strange. He was tingling all over and he just wanted a glass of water. The smell of Earl Grey hung in the air as he made his way towards the sink. He noticed a china cup and saucer on the table, its contents mildewed with age. He frowned. Was what he saw, heard and felt all but a dream? He was not sure; he

couldn't gather his thoughts as his head pounded. Silence hung heavy in the air.

"Hello," he called out, "Is there anyone here?"

Somewhere a clock chimed, and the cup rattled upon its saucer as though it were being pushed away. Charles made his way out of the kitchen and down the corridor until he came to a stop outside an oak door. There was a brass sign upon it saying 'private'. He tried the handle and the door swung open under his touch. He could see that it was a study. Three walls contained shelf upon shelf of books, deteriorating with age. The fourth wall held a bay window, that he hadn't noticed before, with a large desk in front of it. It looked like it was in use, for there was paperwork scattered across it. Looking around the room, Charles noticed that a lot of the books were about various wars, and there was a frame holding some medals within. Walking around the desk, his eyes fell upon a photograph. His eyes opened wide, for the picture was of a family. The wife looked in her mid to late thirties, of the two children the boy looked to be about sixteen, but the girl was the girl he had seen at the window, and the father...

A low moan erupted from his lips, and he rushed out of the room, out of the front door, stumbling down the steps and down the drive towards the stone pillars, but as he crossed the threshold to the outside world, he found himself back in the corridor where his room was. Shaking his head in disbelief, he opened the bedroom door, and went inside. There was no trace of his belongings inside. He hunted high and low but there was nothing. Then his image in a mirror caught his eye, tall, handsome and dressed in full uniform and the long blue coat...the nocturnal visitor in the garden, the man he had seen in the garden, heading for the summerhouse, the entity that had confronted him, taunted him...realisation dawned... they were the same...he screamed...

### **EPILOGUE**

Mrs Hartman had a busy day at the shop, with the main topic of conversation being the appearance of Mrs Heylt, after a period of four years. True, people had gone up to the house, but the gates had always remained firmly shut and in the end people thought that Charles had put his wife into a sanatorium, and that he'd been posted overseas. It was strange to Mrs Hartman that he hadn't come to see her before going though, not after all that had happened between them. She smiled to herself over her little 'in-joke' that Elaine, who loved gossip, had failed to pick up – that it was she, herself that had been the 'light relief' for him,

whilst his wife hid herself away. Mrs Hartman had never really liked her; she had found her aloof and self-centred. Charles, on the other hand, was always the centre of attention, with his jokes and conversation. Yes, he was extremely handsome and any woman would be willing...

"Do you need me anymore today?" Elaine's voice cut through the memories and brought Mrs Hartman sharply back to the present.

"No, Elaine. You can go now and I'll see you tomorrow morning, bright and early."

It was late afternoon when Mrs Hartman made her way up to the house with the bread. She was slightly annoyed that Elaine's trivial questions had got in the way of the questions that she'd wanted to ask Mrs Heylt, that and the fact that she'd mentioned the letter. It had taken her completely by surprise. She thought about how old Mrs Heylt looked and yet she could be no more than forty, if that, and no matter how hard she tried she could find no remorse in her heart for how badly she thought of her. After all she was promised to Charles, and yet when he came back he was married. The sun was at its' height as she reached the top of the winding hill. Shielding her eyes from the Suns' glare, Mrs Hartman was surprised to see the gates to Morvella House, open and inviting.

"Well, I'll be," she muttered to herself.

She walked across the road and through the stone pillars that held the iron gates. She noticed that the two stone birds that sat upon the pillars were weather worn and one had lost its' wings. She knew that they were phoenixes as Charles had told her that they were part of his family's coat of arms. She'd tried not to think of Charles, of his arms around her, his soft lips upon her, and his wife coming into the shop today had brought it all back to her, and now here she was being a good Samaritan to a woman that she didn't even like!

As she made her way up the drive, she remembered that as a little girl she'd dreamed of one day living at Morvella House. The only two things that had scared her were the woods that surrounded the house, and the pyramidesque mausoleum of the Morvella/Heylt family that not only dominated the skyline, but the house and village below. Remembering these things made her have an involuntary shiver. Fear, she thought, was a funny thing – some of your childhood fears are passed down from generation to generation. She didn't know of one child that would play in Olcome Woods, nor of any that would venture on to Gull Cove beach at night, but then, as Elaine had once said, 'You villagers are a superstitious lot and haven't moved with the times.' On remembering that, Mrs Hartman gave a little laugh and thought Elaine was a silly girl, more interested in boys than listening to her elders.

She remembered Old Mrs Heylt, Charles's mother. She had liked her and had always made her feel welcome when her Grandmother had delivered to the house, and as young children, Old Mrs Heylt had allowed her to play with her son and the perfume of wild flowers and cultivated blooms warmed by the sunlight filled the air, and brought a remembrance of happier times to her.

Turning a bend she saw the house and took in the faded Victorian splendour, that was impressive in spite of the peeling walls and ill fitting windows. Not quite as she remembered it, yet somehow the same. As she climbed the wide stone steps, the front door opened – yet there was no-one there. Pushing the door wider, she called, “Hello,” but on receiving no response, she crossed the threshold. A shiver ran through her as she felt the cold in the passage. Again she called out, “hello.” Again she received no response, so she made her way towards the kitchen. The door to her left was open, and she looked inside. She recognised the parlour and she was shocked to see that it was in stasis, from when Charles held a party for his wife. The chairs were pulled back from the table in the centre of the room, there was broken glass on the floor from when Charles had thrown it off the table, and there were the pieces of paper that had made up the impromptu Ouija board. She remembered that night well... although she couldn't quite remember why Charles had lost his temper... what she did remember was Charles taking her home. She smiled at that memory. Then she made her way to the kitchen. There was no-one there, though she was sure that she could hear the laughter and voices of children playing outside in the garden, but when she looked through the window, she could see no-one out there. Sighing, she took in the kitchen, again as she remembered it. Then she noticed the cup and saucer on the table, its contents covered in mildew and she began to worry. Somewhere a clock chimed and she heard a dull thud come from upstairs. She made her way back down the corridor, to the bottom of the wide staircase.

“Hello, Mrs Heylt are you there?”

Silence. So she started to climb the stairs, each step giving her a slight chill. Upon reaching the top of the stairs, she looked down the long corridor and called out again. Pulling herself together, she walked down the corridor. All the doors were shut and she found the silence worrying. She knew that Mrs Heylt should be here, but couldn't understand as to why she wasn't responding to her calls. At the end of the corridor was the master bedroom, which she knew well. She knocked on the door and called out again, but on getting no response, she opened the door and let out a moan of shock and surprise.



Lying on the floor were the perfectly preserved mummified bodies of Nicola, Charles and Philip Heylt, a single gun shot wound to the side of their heads.

## THE INVINCIBLE LOVE OF READING

— *Douglas Kemp*

RICHARD'S two main concerns in life were to decide what to read and then to find enough time to indulge this passion. Since he had naturally come to accept that books offered him more than the mostly tedious companionship of other people, it was essential for him to choose the right books. Of course, the problem was that there were just so many he wanted to read, as well as so many more that he did not yet know that he wanted to read. It was a perplexing task to establish a manageable reading arrangement. As a child in his parent's un-bookish house in Earl's Court, Richard had vaguely aspired to read every book and every journal that had been published. Back in those days, life seemed infinite and he assumed he would have the time to read everything. He even had vague ambitions of learning other European languages, so to be able to read all that which hadn't been translated into English. It was only as he left childhood did he slowly begin to understand just how many millions of books had been, and were being written.

His job as a clerical officer in the Home Office was undemanding, but still consumed too much reading time. Richard's father had died three years ago, and as the only child of his parent's seemingly distant marriage, his mother relied on him now for a dull companionship in the evening and at weekends. She routinely sat in front of the old television set watching a never-ending succession of trite and brash programmes that she would certainly not have tolerated when she was younger. He was now made to feel guilty if he did not spend this time with her, as she complained about being left alone for most of the day while he was at work. Frequently now, he felt ashamed to look forward to a time when he would be alone after inheriting the rather large and draughty house. It could not be described as a home containing happy, wistful memories of a warm and cosy childhood, and the prospect of living the rest of life within the confines of the vaguely distasteful furniture of his youth was not at all appealing. Richard lacked any ambition to create and enjoy wealth; he just wanted to be reasonably comfortable and avoid difficult and stressful situations. He planned to sell the house and live off the proceeds, which he calculated would allow him to resign from his job and live in modest comfort in a small flat, until his equally meagre civil service pension would be available.

This would allow so much more solitary reading time and he then estimated how much he could read without the demands of work or those

of his mother. But Richard was not a quick reader; he was unable to skim through a large Victorian novel as others could. Instead, he wanted to study the words, look at the structure of the sentences and flavour the rhythm of the prose in his head, as he mentally spoke aloud the conversations and interpolations by the author. In this way, a novelist like Anthony Trollope was such a challenging and rather fatiguing writer. He inhabited his world while reading one of his novels, and after no more than an hour of this inner three-way dialogue between himself, the characters and Trollope, he needed to rest and reflect upon the drama just unfolded and analysed.

Richard used his membership of the London Library to borrow the books of writers he wanted to read that were often only otherwise available in expensive online bookshops. In addition to the convenience of having such a splendid collection on hand, he now saw the Library as a literary sanctuary to escape from work and home. A place where he could be comfortable amongst the stacks of old books and he could hold and savour the unique flavour of the volumes in the building on St James's Square.

On one of his visits to the Library on a Saturday afternoon in early October, Richard made his way through the entrance hall, returning his books on the desk to one of the tall and engaging young women. He always wanted to appear both inconspicuous and studious whilst there. Despite that welcoming pervasive milieu of books and time and intellectual introspection, Richard still felt somehow that he was an impostor amongst the academic members and those he saw as having a legitimate reason to use the Library, whereas for him it was more a way of fulfilling what anyone else might see as a rather curious interest. He strode the familiar stairs to find the next Disraeli he wanted, and then to wander around the fiction shelves.

At certain times, Richard had felt a rush of irresistible enthusiasm to reach out and read all that the Library contained and on this visit, he once more walked between the stacks and felt a frustration that there were so many authors and many more books that he had not read and perhaps would not ever be prompted to read unless he could find some way of alighting upon the author and his or her books. And in this way, he first formed the idea of reading through all the fiction collection in some structured way. This appealed to his sense of order, and would allow him to discover new authors and retain a sense of excitement and anticipation about what lay ahead. But as soon as he made this resolution, many more problems became apparent, to cause him to think about all the options open to him. The simplest way would be to read from A to Z, starting with

A and working his way through the alphabet. But this left him feeling somehow guilty that all those writers unfortunate enough to have names that started with letters like W or Y would be unfairly treated. He was sure that there were many Smiths and Wilsons, apart from the prolific Trollope family that he would wish to read, yet it would be unlikely that he would ever reach them. There was no other way but he needed to perform some sort of calculation or estimate to see if he did have any realistic prospect of making acceptable progress through the fiction shelves.

And so Richard shambled around the stacks counting each individual row of books and making a rough estimate as to the number of books each contained. This took much longer than he could have anticipated, not helped by the occasional split shelving and then the problem of how to account for the oversized quarto fiction towards the rear of the floor. He also felt self-conscious about counting shelves and hoped that the fellow Library members he encountered would assume he was a librarian, engaged in the important matter of deciding space allocations. But then again, it was not exactly unusual to see other members muttering to themselves and scribbling on notebooks as they browsed the shelves.

After around two hours, Richard had calculated that there were about 1900 fiction shelves, and if he expected that it would take him a month to read each shelf, allowing for many books having multiple copies and the prospect that he would have much more time to read after he was no longer in work, then he would need around 160 years to read all the fiction. Given that he was now forty-three, it would be unlikely, even with advances in scientific ability to prolong human longevity to around 200 years, that he would achieve this. He was not prepared to get around this by trying to read quicker or skim books, and so one other way would be not to read the stories of any writer that he did not like. Indeed, the prospect of having to struggle on with some modern but fertile author whom he could not abide, probably writing in a flood of present-tense stream-of-consciousness, was not exactly enticing, but then how could he claim to be thorough and fair in his choices if the option of missing out books would perhaps influence him too much to making his way systematically through the shelves?

In the next few days, he twice returned to the Library, hoping somehow that the fiction stacks, the very arena where this mental battle was centred, might somehow offer up a neat and assuring answer. In one of those rare moments of decisiveness, as he needed to come to a resolution, even though it would not tie up all the loose ends, and would not by any means be ideal, he had to stop prevaricating and make a start. He would follow his first inclination and read alphabetically, and it was

just unfortunate for those writers who would thus be ignored, though he mentally assured them that it was not a deliberate act of deception or treachery on his part.

Once this had been decided, Richard was keen to start the new syllabus, as he justified it to himself, and headed to the start of the A's on the fiction floor. He needed to ensure that he did not allow his eye to roam over the next few titles along the shelf, thus spoiling the surprise of what lay ahead for him. But then, on reflection, he saw had to do this to some extent, just in case an author had been misplaced on the shelf and was out of the correct order. This would be awkward, and even if a writer was in their correct position, should he read the author's books either alphabetically or chronologically in the order they were published?

Busy with such thoughts, he headed towards A, intent upon the task, and was unable to avoid briefly colliding with a woman in the act of taking down a book from a shelf.

"Oh, sorry", he mumbled and then saw with a stab of sharp frustration that she was standing just in the area that he wished to start his great reading scheme. He felt awkward and sloped off a few feet, pretending to be looking at another shelf until she had finished her browsing. She seemed to take an unnecessarily long time in taking down books one at a time and examining each one, flicking through the first few pages and then replacing it. She was younger than Richard, probably in her thirties, and of medium height. Her hair was black and long, and she wore those long, unflattering shapeless clothes that effectively masked the shape of the woman within. She turned around and looked at him with an intent but assuring look. "I won't be long", she said, "and then you can make a start on your little mission".

"Sorry?" he said again. "Err, what mission?". This was awful.

"Your plan to read through this entire wonderful place". She smiled and despite his bafflement at how she could possibly have known anything about this, he felt a degree of assurance and complicity that somehow she was on his side.

"How, err,... I'm somewhat puzzled", he lamely offered.

"Please don't be alarmed. I think this is a fine idea and I'm going to help you out". And she pointed out the first book awaiting him. "Now, this is an intriguing volume by someone called Angus Evan Abbott. I suggest you take the next five as well and see how you progress".

And with a small chest-high wave and what he thought was an affable and complicit smile, she moved behind the stack and was gone.

Richard was astounded. This was the most unaccountable thing. He took the first five books down from the shelf and wandered downstairs to

the Issue Desk in a daze, thinking about his bizarre meeting with that female and trying to make some sense of it. He usually avoided conversation with women, as he was invariably awkward and inarticulate. But he felt secure and at ease with her, even though he could not understand how she could possibly know about his reading plans when he had certainly not spoken about them to anyone else.

He returned to his house and made a start on the first of the books borrowed from the library. But he soon realised that, unlike his usual ability to focus on the text, he was not remembering much of the pages he read. His thoughts diverted frequently to the female in the library and the unaccountable conundrum. Indeed, this unknown woman played an increasing part in his conscious thoughts. Back at work, he often found himself drifting off to think about her, and even in his dreams, she made an appearance. It was vaguely arousing and comfortably pleasant – emotions that were largely alien to Richard.

He did begin to wonder about his own mental stability. Well enough he knew that solitary people like himself, wrapped up in their own world, showed signs of eccentricity and singular behaviour. Was all this the result of his cloistered life. Did she exist? Well, yes, it was a definite presence that he had seen and spoken to in the library. Not some ethereal vision or dream. Given that she then undoubtedly did exist, how was it possible that she had become privy to his reading plans? He wondered if he had started to mutter aloud and had thus unwittingly divulged his ideas to her while she lurked behind one of the stacks. It all seemed highly unlikely, though.

He decided on his next visit to the London Library, he would ask a member of staff at the front desk about her. Maybe she worked there, or was familiar figure? He did need to find out.

And so that evening, he returned to the Library. Confronted with the staff behind the Issue Desk, his nerve failed him, and the prospect of trying to articulate and stammer his speech about the female was just too difficult to do when he was there. Thus, he made his way up the stairs to the fiction shelves and to the alphabetical start. He did not really need to borrow more volumes, but he had to attempt to assuage his curiosity.

He made his way, somewhat tentatively to the place where he had first met the woman. He looked up at the shelf where he had borrowed the volumes, and on being aware of a movement to the left of his field of vision, he turned and to his astonishment, the female who had inhabited his thoughts for the past few days was there. She appeared to be wearing the same clothes as on the previous occasion they had spoke.

“Hello, I thought you’d soon be back”. She smiled widely and it seemed that it was with a genuine pleasure, which made Richard feel an odd

sensation of both distant unease and yet a sort of comforting oneness. "I will be interested to hear what you think about the books. I'll see you soon and we can discuss them then". She drifted away behind the stacks and Richard realised that he had said nothing; that somewhat he did not need to speak at all. He just could not understand it, and left the floor forgetting all about his intention to borrow further volumes. Indeed, such was the degree of his preoccupation that he did not think to look as he headed toward the gardens in St James's Square and stepped out onto the road and was immediately and terrifyingly aware of a large mass instantly upon him.

He woke in what he came to believe was a hospital and then the returning moment of that stab of utter fear as the white van was upon, and then hit him, came back. He wandered around the periphery of consciousness. There were no visitors and indeed, in the small room, he had heard no voices. Was he deaf, or did no-one attempt to speak to him? There were also no blue-uniformed nurses bustling about, but somehow on the edge of his awareness and understanding he did not feel concern or any pain.

At some point after what seemed to him a very long time of inactivity, he became aware that there was a person sitting in a chair next to his bed. His turned his head and without any sensation of surprise or concern, saw it was the girl from the Library.

"Hello", she said. "Glad to see you back with us. You had a nasty disagreement with that van, you know. Now, you're going to be here for quite some time yet. I know you are not quite up to reading for yourself, so I've taken the liberty of bringing those books you had just borrowed, and I will start reading them to you. There's no rush, we've got all the time we need. Yes, I think we will be able to complete your project. In fact let's start at the beginning shall we?" She picked up a green covered book that was on the bedside table, riffled the pages until she had found the starting place, and said 'The Gods Give My Donkey Wings' by our friend Mr Abbott. Published in 1895. Chapter One...."

## PROFESSOR PARKINS RETURNS TO BURNSTOW

*A Sequel to "Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad"*

— *Douglas Kemp*

IT had been somewhat more than twenty-five years since those distressing events when I determined that I needed to go back to Burnstow. And so, two weeks ago, I made a brief visit to the village on the East coast, and now that I am back in St James's College, I feel that I must record my thoughts and conjectures. I am not in good health and I begin to fear that my condition is one that will not allow me to make an eventual recovery. I doubt that I will ever truly understand what happened. Do I wish that I had not gone back to Burnstow? Certainly, I now desire I had not unravelled those old memories, but it is my intention that in attempting to put down these events I may find some understanding and peace.

I can say that very few weeks had passed in the intervening twenty-five years after my stay in the Globe when I did not at some point think about Burnstow. Even a casual reference to the name in a book or newspaper took me straight back to my fears and that helpless sense of amazement I so clearly remember feeling. On occasions when my travels took me in the general direction of the place, I made sure not to approach it too closely.

As a professor at St James's College I had tenaciously defended my scepticism about the existence of supernatural phenomena, and was often the butt of pointed comments in my college when I stoutly and persistently articulated an empirical, materialist philosophy. All of my reading and my experience had invested me with a conviction that there was nothing spiritual beyond this mundane life. I professed serious doubts about the essential truths of the Christian doctrine, the occasional expression of which removed me intellectually even further from most of my more conventional colleagues. With my students, I believe I had the reputation of being rather dry and humourless, and indeed, I did not seem able to establish the easy or friendly relationships with them that other tutors did.

I say all this as a preliminary to indicate just how shaken I was by the phenomena I experienced at Burnstow when I was a much younger man than I am now. I returned to my college a different person; even though I still could not truly accept the implications of those unaccountable events,



there grew within me a core of doubt. More worrying, was the thought that they were the symptoms of a mental disturbance, and I was keen to maintain my written communication with Colonel Wilson, who did at least observe some of what happened and could provide an objective correlation that I was not wholly out of my mind and that something inexplicable did occur.

Colonel Wilson has been dead many years now and I have not picked up a golf club since my last round at Burnstow. Many of my colleagues who were aware of my experiences, or at least had a partial version of events, have either left St James's College or died. It would seem too emotive to state that I am alone in the world, but I have no close relations or friendships. I believed there was nobody who could remember my stay at Burnstow or with whom I would wish to discuss it. The conviction thus grew upon me that I did need to return to the place. It would be too much of a cliché to say that I needed to lay the ghosts of the past, but as Burnstow represented the most intense emotional experience I had hitherto felt, I knew that I wanted now to go back and possibly understand a little more about what had happened to me. If I could come away feeling less possessed, then it would be of much personal benefit.

And so, when I mentioned that I would be taking in a short stay at Burnstow at the end of the Michaelmas term, there was no especial reaction in St James's. I engaged a room in a small hotel, the Ship Inn - the Globe Inn having burned down around five years after my stay there, according to my then correspondent Colonel Wilson.

It would be an exaggeration to say I drove to Burnstow with much trepidation, but I did feel a degree of what I thought of as understandable unease. The Ship Inn is in the centre of the village, not directly on the coast, and a little distance away from the site of the Globe. I was given a small room overlooking the road, and quickly unpacked my few belongings - this time I did not intend to stop long enough to concentrate on my academic studies while I was here. I took lunch in the hotel, and then walked out to the beach. In truth, I had anticipated a more intense experience, to be transported back to my feelings of a generation ago. But it was not to be. Time had softened the rawness of these sensations, as I walked over the deserted, breezy beach that had seemingly not changed in all those years. The wind was keen and the skies a wintry, gently mottled grey; it seemed to discourage the casual walker and I was not surprised to see anyone or anything else notable on the beach apart from a solitary middle-aged woman with her dog. I returned to my room, read my book and then slept for a time.

At dinner, I was able to speak to the landlord, a Mr Thomas. He and his wife had taken over the Ship Inn about five years ago and had come from Bury St Edmunds. I asked him about the village in general, wanting to come around to the subject of the possibility of unaccountable phenomena, without quizzing him direct or raising suspicions that I was some eccentric ghost finder. It seemed there was nothing to be elicited, though I was surprised and rather pleased to learn that the Vicar, Reverend Joseph Benson, was alive and still officiating in the parish.

Having slept a peaceful night with no hint of untoward winds buffeting the windows or any other oddities in the bedroom, the following afternoon I thus walked to the rectory and called upon the Vicar. The rectory is a large, brick-built house of the nineteenth century, showing some signs of neglect, with the driveway somewhat overgrown and weedy, and the shrubberies in need of attention. His housekeeper, in answering my summons, said that the Vicar was not in terribly good health, but when she had given him my name, I was requested to go into a chilly drawing-room, where Reverend Benson sat with a copy of *The Times* in front of a small wood fire. The furniture was of rather shabby brocade and there were some low walnut bookcases behind his chair. The long French windows looked out upon a mossy lawn, covered with leaves and small twigs.

The Vicar, who seemed a man of mature years on my first visit to Burnstow, was now very old and frail. The little of his hair that was left to him was white, and his face was wrinkled, but still maintained that mien of civilisation and graciousness that I recalled from before. I had considerable doubts that he would remember anything of me, but as soon as he saw me, there was a smile of recognition on his part.

"Ah, Mr Parkins", he said, "it has been many years since you were last here. I'm very pleased to see you again."

"Likewise", I replied. "Yes, over twenty-five years, I believe."

"Really, how time does pass", Reverend Benson mused. "But it takes its toll of us, as you can see. I'm just a sadly-reduced old man now. But my parishioners do not expect much from me; the village has not thrived and there has been a falling away of attendance at our church. I imagine it is the same throughout the country."

"Indeed, there is a trend towards increasing secularity in our society".

"Well, from what I can remember of you, unless you have changed your views, then this that must meet with your approval"? I started to dissemble some reply, when he said quite directly,

“But that experience you went through did nothing to alter your materialistic views then?” and he raised a beetling white eyebrow. I smiled and again was about to make some reply when he continued. “You see Mr Parkins, it has been on my conscience that I needed to speak to you about what happened. I had thought of writing to you on the subject after your return to Cambridge, but Mr Simpson at the Globe was adamant that it was best to let sleeping dogs lie, and that I had no sound business in making matters worse for you. I think he was right in that, although I do recall feeling a sense of irritation that he was prepared to oppose my views. Colonel Watson, whom as you recall, held suspicions about my high-church proclivities, did keep in contact with me and from time to time told me the news that he had heard from you. And so the years passed, and I never thus was prompted to tell you what I thought you should know. You may think none of it makes sense anyway.” Here, he seemed to ponder awhile and I waited for him to resume. “Well, now that you’re here so unexpectedly, I presume you have no overriding objection to hearing what I have to say on the subject? I do feel it is something that I should do even after all these years have passed.”

“I would be pleased if you could throw some light on what happened. It has certainly troubled me in my thoughts over the years”. I felt somehow secure with this aged man; that he was on the ‘right side’ and that I could trust his judgment so that he might be able to point the way to some form of resolution.

The housekeeper brought in tea and a plate of homemade cake and when these had been distributed and she left the room, Reverend Benson looked at me and appeared to weigh his words. He then began his story.

“What I am about to say, you may well rubbish or ignore. Indeed, there may be nothing in it whatsoever. I suppose I wish that it is just something wholly inexplicable”. A pause, before he resumed. “In the early years of the eighteenth century there was a man and his wife lived in Burnstow, or Burnstowe, with an “e” as it was known then. This man’s notorious name was William Parkins”. Here I raised an eyebrow. He continued, “yes, Parkins has been a name well known in this area. If you look at the old graveyard, you will see a number of stones with that name on it. Do you or your ancestors come from here?”

“My father’s origins were in Ipswich, with his family having long resided on or near the East coast,” I replied. “But I never was aware of any specific Burnstow connection. Mine is an undistinguished name and one that can be found anywhere”.

“Be that as it may,” the Vicar said, “I have to say this William Parkins was a truly evil man. The extent of his depravity is not fully known and never will be now, but certain it is that he and his wife were involved in the defilement and murder of at least two young females in the village. The killings were part of some form of a widely supposed satanic ritual, odd as that may sound in these more enlightened times. Local histories report that he was thought to have the power to raise evil spirits and was thus greatly feared. When rumours and suspicions became great, one of my predecessors by the name of James Little denounced his ungodly acts from the pulpit one Sunday and the following morning he was found dead in his bed, his body seemingly subject to a dreadful violence and pages from the church bible stuffed into his mouth. This was sufficient to quell the tongues of any other villagers with a conscience or a desire not to find themselves with a similar fate. Eventually, Parkins was brought to justice and hanged in Ipswich, though I am not fully sure how all this came about. However, what is relevant to the story concerns the fate of one of his victims. A young girl - a Scottish lass who came down as a servant to the family at Aldsey Hall, is believed to have been taken by William and his wife and violated upon the ruins of the Templars church, lying close upon the beach. After some form of black magic ritual was performed, William is reported to have summoned a devilish creature, which forced itself upon the unfortunate girl, who subsequently died. Her body was wrapped in a linen sheet and buried on the beach”.

“This young girl’s spirit said to have visited William’s wife who was in prison, and claimed that she would take her revenge upon all the members of the Parkins family. And that she would be summoned by calling up a wind. This all came out when the female Parkins tried to save herself by making a full confession, implicating her husband who forced her into participating in this ungodly profession, and by then showing her true repentance following this spectral visitation. The prison Ordinary is said to have confirmed the essential truth of her confession and his conviction that the girl’s manifestation appeared to be genuine. Mrs Parkins’s neck was saved, and she was transported to Virginia for life, but is said to have died en route to her destination.”

“It was the whistle that Colonel Wilson showed to me before he disposed of it, which first made me wonder about all this. I took a note of the inscription on it and my Latin did indicate the phrase ‘Fur, Flabis, Flebis’ could be interpreted as something like: “O Thief - if you blow this whistle you will be sorry”. I could not but connect this inscription with the history of the lass’s appearance and then your arrival at Burnstow, the shared name and then the, well, haunting I suppose I should call it. You

may think this is all the product of an old and out of touch mind. But I was not sure then and I'm still uncertain what precise conclusions, if indeed there are any, we can draw from this."

He stopped and looked at me with those mild grey eyes. I remained silent, as I endeavoured to marshal my thoughts. Despite all the evidence of my memories of how shocked I had been by the seemingly unexplainable events, I still could not accept that there was some supernatural rationale behind all this; that old and horrifying events could still reverberate down the ages to some form of physical demonstration in this, the twentieth century. But surely, it was an impossibility that the vengeful spirit or whatever you wish to term it, could exist following the death of its living body, no matter how heinous and the attempt to exact retribution upon a distant family member, if indeed that is what I am. It just could not be, and I wanted to say all this to Reverend Benson, but just then I did not feel eloquent enough to state just what I believed. I also did begin to wonder about how mentally agile the Vicar was, incarcerated as he had been for a long time in this rather bleak coastal parish.

"I just do not know what to think", I concluded, somewhat indecisively.

"Indeed", the Vicar replied. "We could talk this over for the rest of the day, yet still reach no understanding. How long do you propose to remain in Burnstow?"

"Just two more days".

"Well, you are welcome to see the papers I have assembled on the subject, and there are some books and an article you may find of interest, too. I will look them up and if you have time to call tomorrow, then I would be pleased to show them to you."

"Thank-you, I would indeed be most interested to look at them".

Aware that I had spent longer than I intended and that Reverend Benson had begun to look grey and fatigued, I rose and shook the seated Vicar's hand. "It has been good to see you again, and thank-you for telling me the history", I said

"I hope it has been instructive for you. Until tomorrow, then."

I took my leave and walking out of the gardens, reflected on what I had just heard. The parish church of St Mary's lay across the lane, and I went under the badly neglected lych-gate and onto the mossy path, which led up the small, squat-towered church, familiar in these parts. It was a gloomy day and dusk was already beginning to gather, obscuring the tree-shadowed areas of the churchyard. I wandered around some of the tombstones, casually looking to see if I could spot my family name. I did not, but then my search could hardly be described as painstaking. Many of

the inscriptions were weathered beyond casual interpretation, and the grass was too wet to encourage me to get closer to investigate. I did not feel I wanted to linger in this damp, dank corner. Graveyards always remind of my own mortality and the lives of all those recorded on the surrounding stones, now extinguished.

I need to be as accurate and objective in describing what I think I saw. At first, I believed it was a sheet draped across a railed tombstone and my first thought was surprise that anyone would want to try to dry a surplice or sheet in this way. And then it seemed to move, more so than the strength of the breeze would seem likely. An abject horror descended, and I felt stuck in the worst nightmare again, when I saw the winding sheet, for that is what I now think of it, skip off the stone and billow towards me. I was aware of a sudden odour of mould and a musty, mildewed, stale stench that filled my mouth and nostrils. I also seemed to be filled with an overpowering emotion of complete hopelessness that was not mine. I could not countenance seeing or being subject to anything else. I turned and stumbled as fast as I was able over the uneven ground with its shapeless mounds, through the gate and down the churchyard lane until I made the main road that led through the village and back to my room in the Ship Inn.

Once my racing heart had slowed, I hurriedly packed and paid off my bill, making an excuse that I needed to return to Cambridge for urgent personal reasons. I knew that I just had to escape this village before dark fully descended and I drove fast through the village and the deserted country lanes away from the coast and Burnstow, and I returned to my almost deserted college.

There I was glad to be left alone in my rooms, to have a chance to weigh up all that I had seen, once again, at Burnstow. Since returning to St James's, my waking hours and my sleep have been badly disturbed. I am not at all well and the only firm conclusion I am able to draw is that I will not go back there again.

*A note from Professor Parkins' executor:*

*This draft was found amongst the papers in the desk of the deceased Professor Parkins at St James's College. On feeling unwell after his return from his stay at Burnstow, he visited his physician and after some further medical tests in London, was informed he had an inoperable cancer. He died no more than seven weeks later. I saw him a few times during his terminal illness and he was distressed and in considerable pain. He believed that the sudden onset of his cancer was somehow caused and his discomfort*

*exacerbated by the events at Burnstow here described and that in his own words, it was a “harsh and unjust affliction”.*

# THE FATE OF YAR-ZAGGOTH

— *Allen J. Gittens*

*(With thanks to H.P.L.)*

## I

HAVING been deemed worthy by virtue of my quick mind and skilful hands, I left behind the Life I had known and for seven years served as Apprentice to Master Xithanxes, the greatest Magician of the Age. Those were hard years for one as young as I, spent as they were attending my Master's every need. I prepared and served his exotically-flavoured meals, learning the Arts of the Kitchen when I longed to be learning the Arts of Magic. Master Xithanxes dined on rare delicacies flavoured with exotic spices, while I, the Apprentice—I had another name in those days—was fed scraps from his plate and the gleanings of the kitchen. I prepared his bath, heating the water to his exact requirements, scenting it with herbs and oils and warming the towels he dried himself upon. As I learned these, the Arts of the Bath, I washed myself in the cold water I pumped by hand into a plain stone cistern, and dried myself on towels themselves barely dry from the day before. I laid out my Master's clothing, his embroidered robes of fine silks and shirts of linen bleached to a pure white, while dressing myself in tunics and leggings of plain-dyed wool, and so I learned the Arts of the Body-servant. I was not beaten, as I had heard was the lot of other Apprentices, but his words of disapproval and his fallen face when I failed to perform my duties acceptably were all the reproof required, and I strove to achieve, if not perfection, then at least acceptability.

In all of those seven hard years, of seven cold winters sleeping beside the hearth for the warmth in the ashes, with my cloak around me for a blanket, while my Master toiled in his library and his laboratory, decyphering ancient texts written on parchment and vellum and papyrus, in inks of gall and vinegar and rust and soot and blood, writing all the time in his own Great Grimoire—in all of those years, the only books permitted me were those related to my duties, and to the study of mathematics and geometry which, he insisted, would improve my mind during those hours when I was not required to serve him. Calculations and cookery, rather than spell books, were my daily lot! And gradually, over the seven years of my Apprenticeship, as I learned the Arts of the Household, I learned the true lessons I had been set to learn. I learned the Arts of Patience and Determination.

After the seven years of my Apprenticeship came the seven years of



Scholarship. I learned about writing materials, about papers and how they are made, preparing rags and wood-pulp and fibrous reeds, beating and stirring and mixing, pouring and spreading, pressing and heating, until I could make the paper I would need when the time came to write my own Great Grimoire. Folding, stitching and cutting, gluing and binding I also learned in preparation for that time. Then I learned to make inks, heating and grinding pigments and salts of copper and iron and other minerals to the finest powder with stone, and pestle and mortar, mixing them with water, or vinegar, or milk, adding gums and other binding agents, until I could mix an ink fine enough to flow from the pen and yet bond to the paper. I had not yet learned to use certain spells and other, more exotic, ingredients to improve the inks, or for the writing down of certain Magics, but I was yet a simple Scholar. Having learned paper and ink—learned, yes, but true Mastery was yet to come—I was to learn about the pen. Simple sticks of chalk and charcoal were my first tools, crushing and grinding the natural chalk for blending with pigment and preparing the moulds to make the sticks, and practicing the skill of charcoal-burning. Of pens, I made styli of wood and iron to impress wax and clay, and to scratch wood and bone and soft stone. With sharp blades of flint and obsidian, of bronze, and iron, and of precious metals, I cut quills from goose, raven and peacock, and exotic fowl from distant lands. I had yet to cut a quill from the tail-feather of a phoenix, using a hand-forged blade of sacred orichalcum, but these were yet the early days of my Scholarship. I hammered nibs from silver and gold, from the hard iron fallen from the skies in the heart of blazing meteors, and from ores dug in distant mines and forged in the crucibles of Master Xithanxes' laboratory. These I shapes with small tools and polished with wool impregnated with the dust of volcanic stone until burnished to a mirror finish. Some nibs, though, were of iron intentionally blackened in the fire, and these were for work which could not be done by the light of Sun or Moon, only by lamp or candle, and of this I will say nothing further.

When I had gained the Arts of Paper, and of Ink, and of Pens, and had accrued a stock of each, then was I put to work at learning the Arts of Penmanship. First must I practice the letters of my own native tongue, forwards and backwards, with the right hand and the left, until my work was deemed "acceptable". Ah, the sorrows of discovering imperfections in laboriously-made paper, of a pen which cut into its surface rather than gliding smoothly, of clots in poorly-blended ink which marred the pristine page with blots and smears, and for which the only remedy is to begin again and manufacture a further supply! Only then, when my work was acceptable to Master Xithanxes, was I permitted to practice the letters—the

shapes and forms—of other tongues: those in which our forebears had written. I was put to learning the letter-shapes—although not yet the languages or histories—of the many races who have walked these ancient lands. Legionnaires in bronze and leather; warrior-poets of the East with their silvered coats of mail and curved swords; bearded and ringletted mystics and philosophers; merchants and traders in silks and spices beyond the distant mountains and across storm-lashed oceans. All of these I practiced, until Master Xithanxes finally allowed me access to a few precious manuscripts, to copy and—yes—to learn the names of words, and begin the process of understanding them.

Eventually, after many years' practice, I was able to translate complex passages in the most ancient of tongues with reasonable accuracy—true fluency was still far ahead—and compose poems in a skilful hand upon the paper or skin or bark, tablet, stone or bone material appropriate to that language using an approximation of ink or pigment and writing tool of that culture or era. Finally, with the faint smile and nod of approval which was the reward for my success, my Master brought me another manuscript—written on everyday paper, with everyday pen and ink, but in letters which I had never seen before. This, he explained to me, was no language created by Man, but the language of the Spirits—those Manifestation of the Elemental and Ætherial Worlds which it is the True Work of the Magician to understand. The original Manuscripts were, he said, too old and precious, too Magically-charged, to be handled, and so careful copies were made by each Magician and carefully studied. My Scholarship was now sufficient, Master Xithanxes informed me, for me to begin the study of these Magical Letters, and the Magical Languages—there was more than one, it seemed—which they represented.

My time as a Scholar was at an end. I now began the serious study of Magic.

## II

Many more years than seven I spent in the study of the letters of that ancient and unworldly tongue, and of the sounds that they represented. I learned the hissing intonation of the Sylphs, the Spirits of the Air, the gurgling flow of the Spirits of Water, the Undines, the roaring, spitting way of the Fiery Salamanders, and the groaning, cracking sounds of the Gnomes who dwell within the Earth. At this time I had yet to see a Spirit of any kind, but I was at least confident that I could address one in the correct form. Thus prepared, Master Xithanxes taught me the simplest of Magics, the symbols necessary for Protection, for Summonings and Banishings, and at last I learned the importance of those early lessons in mathematics and geometry! Circles, squares and triangles, the proper

lettering and their placement, the words to be spoken—these were vital to the successful operations of the Magician. Failure in any of these processes would be either disappointing—having no results whatever—or lethal to the operator, unleashing Elemental forces inimical to fragile Humanity. I learned quickly, thanks to my most complete preparation, and was soon ready to attempt my own first small Summoning. In a properly-prepared chamber, with the correct symbols and objects (I will not detail them—I protect my secrets even now, these many years after my first experiments) my conjuration caused the wick of a heavy wax candle within its Summoning Circle to sputter into flame, and as I gazed into the flame, it grew in size, steadily changed its shape, and I beheld a fiery form—a flame within the flame—as the tiny Elemental manifested into our material world!

Momentarily, miniature eyes of flame gazed into my mortal ones, but I was properly prepared and knew better than to prolong that gaze—liquid orbs would soon become dried husks under such scrutiny, and I uttered the sound of a roaring flame, forming the words of Banishment. With seeming reluctance, unhurriedly, the form softened and melted away until the flame was simply a normal candle flame, and that too faded away to a spark, and then there was a mere wisp of smoke, rising vertically with no suggestion of a tremor in the still air of the chamber.

I had become a Magician! Since my Scholarship I had ceased to be confined to the kitchen hearth, having a bed-chamber of my own. I also had a warm woollen robe to wear over my tunics, which were of finer material and dyed the proper Scholarly black, signifying my improved status. Now, with my successful transition to Magician, I officially became Assistant to the Master Xithanxes and, although I still prepared his meals and baths, I was permitted to bring my own meal to his table and draw my own hot baths, although of course his costly oils and perfumes were still denied me. Being in such close daily contact with my Master, I was able to make certain observations, and not the least of these was the fact that, all through our long association, he had aged not a day. He had seemed a man of early middle-age when I arrived at his house—a strong, stone-built Manor, fortified as in the old style, with a thick, outer wall surrounding an inner courtyard, and with narrow windows stoutly shuttered inside. There was not an extra line around his eyes or mouth, nor a single grey hair which had not been there upon my arrival. His back was straight, although his shoulders stooped slightly as is the way of scholarly men, and the skin of his hands was unblemished. I now wondered just how old Master Xithanxes really was. His house was old, but property can be inherited, although he had never spoken of his ancestry and there were no portraits of

any kind in hall or chamber. His name seemed derived from civilisations long past, but it is a practice of Magicians to adopt an alias, or Worldly name, concealing their birth-names and origins, largely to prevent rival Magicians from gaining Power over them, for names have Power. It is for this reason that I, too, conceal my former identity under my adopted one, as the Sorcerer Yar-Zaggoth. That name, too, is ancient—unbearably ancient—and its adoption has... implications. But I will write more of that in its proper place.

Once my speculations on the true age of this man, my Master and teacher, had begun, I found it easy to imagine in him the look of other days. Despite living the lives of Scholars, seeing little in the way of daylight within our chambers, dwelling as much by lamp or candle, his skin seemed dark, as though his youth or early manhood had been spent in sunnier lands, and his fine cheekbones and long straight nose perhaps hinted of exotic origins. His eyes were slightly elongated, but rather than Earthy hue, as one may have expected, they were of a green as dark and deep as an ancient lake, and had a gleam as of obsidian. His hair, although salted with grey, still showed its original darkness, and was clipped close to his skull. It was easy to imagine that skull shaved, dusted with a suggestion of dark stubble, and the nails of his long, fine fingers grown to points and gilded... A robe of white linen rather than a Scholar's black wool, and the whispers of ceremonies conducted in dark, rock-cut tombs in ages long past... Ah! Imagination! It leads the unwary mind along some wild pathways! But mine had been stimulated, and the curiosity it provoked was to lead me along some very dark ways indeed.

I have already stated that I am an excellent Scholar with a rapid grasp of my subjects, and the practice of Magic came to me as easily as had mathematics and ancient languages. It is due to this requirement of intellect and discipline that true Magicians are rare—there are many Conjurers, who may achieve Magics of the lower kind, but to adopt a headscarf and style oneself a “Gypsy”, a mere Cartomancer, betrays a lack of any real talent. My own skills had been nurtured and developed with patience, and I was benefitting accordingly. For some time I had been recording my researches in my own hand-made and bound books, using my own pens and inks, and in preparation for my first practical experiments I had manufactured what was to become my own Grimoire, a Magician's personal book in which he records his experiments, and makes detailed notes of his Magical work, including diagrams and letter-forms. When written using Everyday paper and inks, these are meaningless to anyone other than their author. However, when inscribed with the appropriate materials—one would not attempt to summon a Fire-daemon

using an Invocation in the language of desert tribesmen, written on wood-pulp paper using oak-gall ink, for example—the combination becomes effective. As the Magician becomes more skilled, his material requirements become ever-more demanding. Vellum of flayed goat-hide from the Eastern Mountains is a scarce commodity, and certain inks require their pigments to be ground from semi-precious stones. Exotic Magics require considerable expenditure, in both material and physical resources, and so the Practitioner employs a variety of disciplines including Divination, Summoning and Binding minor Earth Spirits to reveal the location of the resources he requires, or at least of sufficient value to trade for them. In this way, Master Xithanxes and myself were able to attempt ever-more daring experiments, with ever-more exciting successes. Due largely to these successes, I began to acquire two traits which will lead to the downfall of a Magician—Pride, and Ambition.

At various times in my studies, Master Xithanxes had declared that our Magics were of a more evolved form than those of earlier Ages, having been, as it were, purified and distilled by our more civilised Ethics. The Magicians of Elder Times, he had stated, were less discriminating in their use of Power, and had wreaked great destruction on others, and eventually themselves. This led me to speculate that, perhaps, the Magics of Eld were not so much indiscriminate as simply more powerful than the filtered and purified forms we used today. And perhaps, I further speculated, the secret to those Elder Magics could be found in the ancient Manuscripts written in the language of the Spirits—written BY those very spirits—which my Master had told me about during my years of Scholarship. But where to locate those ancient, and most carefully concealed, Manuscripts? To that end I devoted my Astral Travels.

A Scholar or Magician will customarily meditate upon his lessons in order to gain further and deeper insights, or to prepare himself mentally for any Magical operation that he is about to undertake. During the process, and with the proper Protections in place, a sufficiently skilled Practitioner may loosen the bonds holding his Astral Form—not his Soul, but his consciousness clothed in a more subtle substance than that of the material world—and leave his body. Unrestrained by gravity and limited only by the power of the mind, this Astral Form may float in the air, or across the physical room and through solid walls or ceilings. Even the Earth below may be penetrated, and indeed this technique is used to seek for water or minerals, but it is of vital importance not to become disoriented and lose one's way. Becoming trapped within the Earth, or elsewhere within the Material Sphere, is a sure way to lose contact with one's own material body and be forever lost. Death is the usual result, but there are worse fates than

death. Indeed, I have read speculations that some of the mummified bodies within the ancient tombs so far discovered, are not actually dead, merely entranced and awaiting these long millennia for the return of their Astral Forms from their ghostly existence, whereupon the entombed one may even resume their animate existence, lost out of Time... For this reason, the wary Astral Traveller practices the Return technique, whereon a word spoken mentally will cause his consciousness to leap, from wherever it may be, back to the mind and body of its owner.

What I contemplated was an exceedingly lengthy, and if it succeeded, dangerous plan. I would devote my energies, when not assisting Master Xithanxes, to locating an entombed Ancient, should any still exist—those Magicians who communed directly with beings of Spirit and practiced the powerful Elder Magics which my Master had claimed brought such destruction to their Civilisation—and return them to their Material Forms! For this, my researches needed to be of a deeper level than those so far undertaken. I did not even briefly contemplate entering my Master's rooms while he was working, with his own books opened and unwarded. Even in my Astral Form he would certainly be aware of me, and there would be repercussions for my trespass. Additionally, there would be Protections erected within the room against just such an intrusion—disembodied Forms had much in common with Elemental Spirits, and Defences against the one were equally effective against the other. No, my researches would commence in the House's extensive library, to which I was permitted access as the Master's Assistant. Later, when I had confirmed what I already believed, I would pursue my investigations in my Astral Form, and whether they be atop the highest, most distant mountains or in the depths of the unexplored oceans, I would find those Elder tombs!

Thus did the practice of Deceit become one of my skills as I undertook my daily tasks, which were now twofold—the exploring of the natures of those Spirits of the Elements which my Master and I regularly Summoned, and the location of the tombs of such Ancients who may have survived. My reasoning ran so: if the Undying body of even a single Ancient One survived into my own Age, then that Ancient's Astral will also still exist, ghostly and Timeless, seeking reunion with the material world. If I were able to Summon that Astral, and direct it to the resting-place of its body, then as the agent of such a reunion, the thusly-revived Ancient would be in my service, and could be persuaded to teach me the secrets of the Elder Magics! With such Magics in my hands, I and with my more evolved Ethics, I would bring great Good into the World I could then claim the Title of Master for myself, being the equal—at least!—of the great Xithanxes...

And so my researches continued, and by concealing my purpose from my Master, and contemplating the taking of his Rank and Title, I progressed, little by little, down ever darker paths. I learned all that I could about disembodied Astrals—how they could avoid dissipation by absorbing energies from the Material world, taking breath and vitality from sleeping forms—babes and the very young in preference—and absorbing strength from bodily fluids, such as milk, blood and semen. Water provided refreshment, but fast-running water would carry away and dissolve such a fragile form. (So, if the destroyed lands of the Ancients were at the bottom of the deepest oceans, as Master Xithanxes had said, then their Astral Forms would be incapable of reunion with them.) I contemplated this new knowledge for many hours. These Ancient Magicians, capable of wielding forces able to literally move the Earth itself, and without the Ethics which would forbid their use for destructive purposes—had they not eventually destroyed their own lands?—would certainly be capable of stealing Life-energy to preserve their own existence. I discovered a tale telling how certain sailors, shipwrecked upon an island inhabited by Spirits, called upon them for aid and rescue. In return, the Spirits demanded the sacrifice of an animal, and by consuming its warm blood, were able to take material form and direct the sailors to the resources they required, but were themselves unable to leave the island by crossing the sea. The conclusion was inescapable. If any Ancients still existed, in Spirit or Astral Form, they would be Vampires. Indeed, they may well have been the very origin of the Vampire itself!

As a Magician, I was most familiar with the principle of Vampirism, or life-stealing. Indeed, performing any act of Magic involved a degree of it. To perform Magic requires energy, and the most abundant source of that energy is the Elemental Forces themselves. Preparation for a magical act typically involves lighting candles, setting out dishes of water and salt, and the burning of incense. These of course represent the Forces of Fire, Water, Earth and Air, the smoke of the incense being the Airy component. With these as foci, the Magician's Summoning acts on the Elemental Forces passing through both Magician and summoned Spirit or Elemental. Both gain from the experience, the Magician absorbing some of the Elemental Energies, and the Elementals acquiring some aspect of the material world. In this way the Magician sustains his own existence and adds to his vitality, slowing or even arresting the normal processes of deterioration. By the regular practice of Magic, Master Xithanxes had indeed become ageless, as I had long believed, and my own ageing had ceased—it had been several decades since I had entered my Master's service, and I hoped to continue my researches for centuries to come.

Without such an exchange of energies as I have described, the alternative was for the Magician to power his works with his own life energies, which would soon dissipate and result in his demise. What I was contemplating, however, was the tolerance—and perhaps assisting in—an unequal and unethical act, no less than the theft of Life-energies. This was magic of a darker shade than I was comfortable with... at least, at that stage of my life...

Perhaps it was mere intellectual curiosity, or perhaps it was ambition, which eventually persuaded me to resume my quest for the Material or disembodied Forms of the Ancients. In either case, I began searching volumes of Legend and Lore, often travelling great distances in their pursuit. It was not unknown for my Master and myself, individually or together, to make such journeys, either for additions to the Library or the materials and resources for our experiments. Eventually, after many years—I now had the leisure of indefinitely-prolonged life—I was able to bring together some of the scattered fragments of my quest. Centuries-old legends existed, I had discovered, of strange mummy-cases being brought ashore, or thrown up by the great Oceans, in several lands, widely spaced in time and location. Perhaps coincidentally, and perhaps otherwise, I found records of great civilisations growing up, in the deserts of the east, in the jungles beyond the Western Ocean, and on the icy shores of the far distant south, and beginning to raise vast temples, tombs and altars based upon the same simple geometrical design—a pyramid with a square, rather than triangular, base. Simultaneously with these innovations they had discovered (or rediscovered) the Art of Mummification, the preservation of the body against the destruction brought by Time. Then, as rapidly as they had risen to prominence, those civilisations had vanished, leaving their great structures deserted and shunned, to be reclaimed by Nature. The implications caused my mind to explore some exceedingly deep and dark channels—what if, I persuaded myself, those strange mummy-cases, of a style and construction unknown to their finders, had held the preserved and undying shells of Ancient Magicians, now escaped from their sunken tombs? What if, I further speculated, those cases had been opened, allowing the Astral and Material Forms of their occupants to re-unite? Surely the knowledge and skills of such Ancients had been the basis of those now-lost civilisations, the great pyramidal structures being the architectural features of cities now submerged by the convulsions of the Earth itself? Ah, but had those rapidly-emerging civilisations not just as rapidly vanished, stained by stories of mass sacrifices, the slaughter of their youngest and best, tearing out the very heart of its own culture in streams and rivers of blood, all to



feed the insatiable appetites of their “gods”? It must surely have been the egotism of obsession which allowed me to convince myself that, if I located such a Mummy, I could not merely summon its Astral, but bind it to my beneficial service!

### III

I have, I believe, told sufficient of my history for the reader to predict its next instalment, my transition from Scholar and Magician to the Dark ways of Sorcery—I have no wish to dwell upon its details. In summary, I did, in fact, locate, after decades of searching and in a remote land, a record suggesting the survival of intact and unopened Mummy-case, its inscriptions hinting at the letter-shapes of the Ancients. Its superstitious discoverers, rather than venerating it, had concealed it in a cramped rock-tomb such as was used in that time and by that people. In time, its sealed mouth had become obscured by rock slides, allowing it to remain hidden for these centuries. My investigations, augmented by the Summoning, Binding and Inquisition of an Earth-Spirit of that region, confirmed to me the existence of the coffin and its occupant. Filled with excitement, pride, and the joy of exercising Magic for its own sake, I caused myself to be borne aloft by Airy Sylphs to its distant location, and by means of the same Earth-Spirit bound to my service, excavated the tomb. Expending energies recklessly, knowing that they could be regained to an infinite degree, I had my Sylphs transport my discovery and I to a large cave, where I was in the habit of performing such Summonings and Experimentations of which I had no wish for my Master to be aware. There I had them set down the Sarcophagus, and, inscribing my Circle of Protection, with many powerful Runes and Incantations, I opened the apparently seamless vessel with the simplest of Incantations. The creature within was emaciated, gaunt, and desiccated almost beyond retrieval, but by sending my awareness into the body, I detected the faintest signs of Life. The great reserves of Energies which had preserved it had been reduced by its long imprisonment to the merest ember, but Life remained! It would, perhaps, be sufficient. I took up the scrolls which I had prepared for such a moment, inscribed on the skin of an almost-extinct species of ruminant descended from the most ancient stock, and using ink containing drops of my own blood, to forge a bond with, and call to, the lost Astral.

The Summoning was, without doubt, the most difficult I had performed. The disembodied Form I sought was fragile, almost extinct, and reluctant to attend my call. After several hours, however, the faintest of glows appeared within the Summoning Circle, wavering and unsteady. Knowing what was required, and with the quelling of my remaining shreds

of conscience, I took my iron knife and slit the throat of a black calf, caught its blood in a clay bowl, and hurled the hot fluid over the sputtering Astral and its rigid body! Slowly, but observably, the near-invisible being grew in strength, taking physical form of a pinkish hue, drawing upon the blood for its substance. After a time, following the splashed trail of blood, it was able to drift towards the open Sarcophagus and its contents. Once there, it slowly and simply merged into it.

Taking care to touch nothing, and without crossing the mystical perimeter of my Circle, I poured another bowlful of blood over the mummy's face. It rapidly soaked into the tissues, leaving no trace! I repeated the procedure until the small bovine corpse was exhausted, and I waited. I was rewarded—oh! such a reward!—by witnessing the apparent corpse sit up. No creaking of dried ligaments, no tearing of age-shrivelled bindings, the Vampire (for so I must now call it) sat up as you and I would rise from our beds. Then it turned towards me, and its bindings simply fell away.

That terrible face! Gaunt and hairless, inhumanly high cheekbones threatening to burst the taut parchment skin, nose shrivelled to a mere stump, lips drawn back over ivory-coloured teeth... the skull was narrower and longer than any living man, the limbs longer and the chest deeper—the form of Mankind from its infancy, but subtly altered. Was this the result of the Elder Magic? Or had a lifespan older than the very continent which birthed him wrought such changes?

As I asked myself these questions, the Ancient One licked his dry lips, and spoke...

#### IV

Enough! I will not detail that conversation, nor the very many which followed over the decades. He was as powerful a Magician as I had dared to believe, but it was Magic of the darkest kind, which is defined as Sorcery. In time, and despite the rags of my conscience, in time the lure of Power—Power without responsibility, without Ethics—stilled my last faint resistance.

In every other manner than one, my new Confederate was as normal Men. His lungs inhaled and exhaled the Air, he drank Water, he conversed in the usual manner, albeit in the Tongue of the Ancients, but to sustain his regained existence he required a daily intake of warm, red blood. Further sacrifices, including humans—I had begun to consider Mortals as simply another resource, to be consumed as required—restored the Ancient One (I do not Name him—I will not have him Summoned!) to some semblance of Humanity, although his skin remained sallow and cool unless utterly glutted, and at such time he rested in his lightless cave. Garments of linen

were procured to cover his gaunt form as his musculature renewed itself, and a cloak of the white pelts of the Mountain wolf, although warmth and cold were likewise meaningless to him. It was quickly decided that our cavern, despite its spaciousness and comfort, was an inadequate residence for such powerful sorcerers as ourselves. Together we Bound—enslaved would be the truthful term—such Spirits as we deemed of the most use, and built a Tower of stone upon that mountain, with a mighty curtain wall having no gate or doorway, as we required none, and surmounted by platforms piled with boulders, such as could be cast down upon the heads of intruders. Our Stronghold, lit and warmed by imprisoned Fire-Elementals, provided with water by Spirits of that Element, and our immense wastefulness disposed of by the Spirits of the Earth, we forged a Kingdom from our mountain retreat. Aye, and decimated its populace through the Vampire Sorcerer's need for blood! We became, in truth, Absolute tyrants of the lands surrounding those mountains and forests which sustained us.

In due course my former Master sought out his wayward Assistant, and I battled him with all the Magics of Fire and Air which were mine to Summon. Storms and Lightnings met walls of Flame and sheets of driving Hail as Elemental met Elemental and Master battled Pupil. Back and forth we struggled, and had there been any to witness those Storms they would have become Legend in themselves, casting great waves upon deserted shores and bringing Hail and Snow to lands where no rain had fallen in mortal lifetimes! In due course, though, my Anger, my Fury, and my profligate expenditure of Power—Sylphs, Salamanders, Undines and Gnomes fell away in countless number as Magician and Sorcerer drained and discarded their Elemental Energies as they needed them—proved superior, and I crushed Xithanxes as utterly as I would crush a beetle beneath my sandal! As the Victor, I ransacked his House, stripping it of his books and scrolls, seizing those Manuscripts which I coveted along with his jewels other possessions, and transported them to my own Stronghold. Along with my Service to Xithanxes, I cast off my old name, taking that of an Entity which, the Ancient Sorcerer assured me, had been worshipped as a god in his own Time, and we two became as Dark gods atop our mountain. And so it was for centuries, until our entire World was under our Thrall.

## V

The End came in manner both sudden and unexpected. Our names were feared in the forested Kingdom beyond our mountains. Indeed, the inhabitants named us for devils and demons—and so we were, Enslaving, exhausting and finally consuming its populace save a few wandering tribes

of Gypsies, having sufficient Lore to avoid the Vampire's clutches with simple herbal repellants and protective Circles of water, salt, iron filings and even grains of rice or millet. Expeditions to discover our Stronghold and put an end to us had been sent, and despatched by our armies of Spirit-beings, their blood providing for the needs of my Confederate. The bodies of such Sacrifices, we soon discovered, provided perfect nourishment for a certain fungus, or mould, discovered in the dank tunnels below our Tower, and our translations of the Ancient Scrolls from the Time before Time led us to a mighty Discovery. The essence of this fungus, distilled into a Potion, would open our minds and permit us to travel Astrally, not merely throughout our own World, but through Time and Space itself. In this manner, we discovered and explored countless Worlds, most of them barren and lifeless, others inhabited with strange and wonderful lifeforms such as the crystalline entities which thrived upon a World close to a fierce sun, consuming its deadly rays as we consume Air and Water! On another, the Air itself comprised of a heavy vapour, lethal to such Life as shared our Human Form, and yet inhabited by strange reptilian beings with skins of every colour, as bright as jewels, their great folded gills waving in the currents of the deadly stuff and walking its plains as did the scaly monsters whose bones litter the Earth of our own World!

Consuming ever-greater quantities of our potion -- that, and others which we learned from the Ancient Scrolls which stimulated such dreams as our minds could barely hold, and others which plunged us, deathlike, into comatose sleep -- our searches for Worlds to conquer led us to a World which could not merely sustain Life, but was liberally and indiscriminately sprinkled with human beings exactly like ourselves! Like myself, I must amend, for my Associate-in-Darkness was utterly unlike anything on the World we had discovered... Great Cities scattered its warm lands, great throngs of Humanity such as had once thrived on our World, and which had been devastated by our ever-growing greed. An obscure passage in our Ancient Scrolls led us to conceive our most daring Experiment -- that a sufficient quantity of our Potion, along with other Drugs, would permit us to Translate bodily -- not merely Astrally -- to this new World, which we could then subdue at our leisure!

Thus the day of our Doom came. Requiring a great supply of our fungus, I descended into the tunnels for the final time. A wave of my hand Summoned a tiny enslaved Elemental to light my way. Many flights of steps led into the bowels of our mountain, near-hollowed by our excavations, and it took some considerable time to make the descent -- such was the construction of our tunnels that they followed a near-random, maze-like

path, having grown unplanned from our original excavations, precluding my descent by means of Airy Sylphs. Upon reaching the lowermost steps, from which I could see into the tunnels, I was horrified by what I observed. The invasive threads of the fungus had spread across the floors, walls and ceilings of the tunnel network for as far as I could see, and the corpses upon which they fed had become mere heaps and piles of pale, threadlike tendrils! Worse yet, the very floors of the tunnels were crumbling away, great chunks having already fallen into the gulfs below, leaving black pits from which arose the foulest stench from the decaying masses of refuse and discarded corpses! Either the fungus itself had eroded the floors, and the weight of the growing mass had collapsed the tunnels, or our burrowing Gnomes had taken it upon themselves to weaken the structure, but it was only a matter of time—and very little of it—before our Tower of Stone collapsed into the pits of its own filth!

I reached down and seized handfuls of the fungus in my hands, tearing chunks of the disgusting mass away from the rot which sustained it, then began the long ascent as rapidly as I could. For the first few flights of steps I ran, but soon I was forced to assume a steadier pace as exhaustion overcame me. By the time I reached the lower level of the Tower proper, I was crawling. I fine sight I must have been, filthy and dishevelled, voice hoarse from screaming to the Ancient Vampire with whom I shared the Stronghold! With my bare hands I was forcing the raw fungoid mass into my mouth, biting into it, even as I mumbled “Translate! For your very Existence, Translate to the New World! No time for a Summoning...” And as I spoke, a roaring, crashing sound from the depths below accompanied the first tremors, sufficiently powerful to dislodge the fixtures from the walls themselves! As blocks of stone cracked, crumbled and began to fall, my mind turned itself inside out...

*[The remaining portion of the manuscript is indecipherable due to the deterioration of the handwriting. The final legible words are as follows:]*

I can write no longer. To you who find this book, by all that you hold sacred, beware! My physical body tore through the void between us—There is a rent in Space, and it empties into your World. He follows! Beware...

**Statement by Sgt. — of — Division, Dated May—20—**

Following reports of a possible break-in at a deserted property in — Street, and accompanied by Constable — and Mr. —, an official from the Council, I entered the property at around 10.a.m. The building appeared to have been vacant for some considerable time from the smell of mould and decay apparent on entry. In fact the entire interior of the property seemed to have been overrun by a white thread-like mould or fungus which almost entirely covered the walls and floor of the ground

floor, having reached the ceiling in some places and entirely covering the windows. The smell grew worse as we ventured further inside, seeming to originate at the back of the property. This proved to be the kitchen, although the room, including the ceiling, had become entirely overrun by the same mould or fungus, obstructing both the back door and covering the window to a thickness which allowed no light through. In the middle of the floor was what appeared, at first, to be a heap of the same substance, but which proved, on further examination, to be the badly decayed remains of a body. This was removed to the mortuary at the County Hospital by operatives from the Environmental Health Department and using recommended bio-hazard techniques.

Even with its coating of mould removed, the state of decay of the body meant that no identification has yet been made, although the Chief Medical Officer discovered a number of anomalies unique to the deceased. [Full Autopsy report attached]. Under the body, and presumably protected by its position, was the enclosed hand-written manuscript, labelled [Case Number ———, Evidence Number ——]. The book is bound in a type of leather which has not yet been identified, and the paper and ink are of a manufacture which is entirely unknown, although both are of high quality. The book is remarkably well preserved, even though preliminary tests indicate it to be of considerable age. The handwriting is unusual, being of an “artistic” style, although the final entries deteriorate to be almost illegible. The manuscript itself, from its content, appears to be a work of fiction, although his presence in the property has yet to be explained.

*Additional Notes:*

Constable ---- and Mr. ---- have both been admitted to hospital with respiratory ailments, possibly from inhaling spores of the unknown fungus. The body discovered in the property at ---- Street remains unidentified and unclaimed.

# LIARS POKER

— Edward Moore

*Of all things a civilized society wants most, none has suffered more in recent times than honesty. Lying is no longer something to be scorned; in fact, "everybody lies" is the most common excuse used when someone is actually caught in a lie.*

*-Dinapolese*

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HIS parents wondered what he would be when he grew up. So one day they placed a \$100 bill, a Bible and a whiskey bottle on a table. Choosing whiskey meant he'd be in entertainment, Bible - a man of faith; \$100 bill - a businessman. The boy entered room and picked up the Bible; his mother smiled. Then without hesitation he took a swig of whiskey, put the \$100 bill in his pocket and left. "Well I'll be danged, his father said, he's going to be a politician."

Fiona wondered if that ten year old boy could have been Dominique Qualtrone, a man with the triple affliction of being fat, bald and cross eyed. Whenever angered, his bulbous nose flared like a snorting horse and his olive complexion became redder than roasted chili peppers. A temper often leading to individual's hospitalization, extensive periods of incarceration or permanent coffin naps. Qualtrone didn't believe in dirt naps stating, "Families need closure."

San Francisco's Faustian Grotto décor consisted of burgundy drapes, brass rails, private teak booths and crystal chandeliers hanging from a curved cathedral ceiling. Qualtrone, Mayor of Fresno, California and President of the California Central Regional Firefighters Association, sat in a private booth, flanked by a set of bodyguards who appeared to be as tough as nickel steaks, and as loyal as the English bulldogs they happened to resemble.

Cursing between breadstick bites Qualtrone glanced up when Fiona entered the booth, gave her the hold on signal, and then resumed scolding a thin pale faced man. Excusing herself Fiona waited outside the booth for Qualtrone to finish his business. The thumping of meaty hands striking flesh preceded a painful screech. Moments later, a bodyguard escorted the thin man; now clutching a bloody napkin against a stump that once held his pinkie, out of the restaurant.

Face blank of emotion, Fiona returned to the booth feigning interest as Qualtrone sneered about a grand jury indictment her people secretly initiated.

"All I has is a high school diploma, a driver's license and a pulse. You mean to tell me us good ol' country boys went to the capital of the United States of America and snookered them Homeland geniuses? That's what they're gonna ask a jury to believe."

"Mr. Qualtrone ..."

"Dom, I prefer Dom," he said placing a sweaty hand on her right thigh.

Pinching the fleshy fold above his index knuckle she removed Qualtrone's hand dropping it upon the table with a meaty thunk.

"If I may continue," she said, "with your organizations support, most if not all of your issues could disappear."

"It's there, it's there. How soon..."

"You deliver, we deliver, nothing more, nothing less. *Clear?*"

Combing stubby fingers through his sparse hairline Qualtrone sighed before saying, "Yeeeah, clear."

Agreement acknowledged; Fiona disabled the portable listening scramblers, closed her briefcase, and left the restaurant like someone rushing to use the bathroom.

A highly paid political 'sculptor', the 6'4" Rhodes Scholar had hazel eyes, a lean runner's body and hair blacker than Satan's heart. She strutted Washington's corridors with the grace of a runway model and the confidence of an elite power broker.

Fiona Watson, trusted men like Dominique Qualtrone about as far as farts travel upwind. To her Qualtrone's were the barnacles of a profession she loved. Nothing like her father, John Leonard; a minister as square as a pan of fudge and as honest as a toothache. Toothaches don't lie, but Fiona believed men like Qualtrone lied as easily as they took their next breath.

Halfway across the hotel's marble floor, she removed a secure cell phone from her Prada purse and deftly stabbed a speed dial button. The voice on the other end always annoyed her, too bright, too bubbly, *classic blonde bimbo* she thought.

"Tell him done," she said, and hung up before the voice could reply.

She exited the lobby to enter a white stretch limo. Dealing with Qualtrone had given her a migraine, but figured a quick shot of cognac would set her right. With the limo easing into Market Street traffic, she poured three fingers of Hennessy over cracked ice.



With the glass inches from her lips her cell phone started vibrating, the caller ID identifying someone she shouldn't ignore; not even for a moments sip.

"Yes."

"Great job. Think he'll be useful later on?"

"Strong possibility," she said between cognac sips, "but he'll need some hand holding. Talk's good, home front friendly- bark's not quite good enough for our neck of the woods. Keep him in the *valley* where he'll be useful."

"You'll hold his hand for us," the voice snickered.

"Not without Lysol and rubber gloves," she chuckled.

It came with a bang, an eruption of flashing lights cutting her chuckling short. Over the shrill of emergency sirens she shouted to her driver, "What the ... you hear that? What's happening?"

Exploding reddish green lights blinded her. Lights that flared like holiday sparklers before fading into a silhouette of jagged glass and crumpled metal, her throat tightened, denying her the chance to say "Oh God," before her world went black.

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It wasn't a sound that woke her, nor the harsh light dancing through her eyelids. It was the smell; pungent like the breath of an old man with bad teeth. Fiona's back ached like someone who'd spent the night on a park bench. Pawing sticky film like webs from her eyes she rose on wobbling legs to survey her surroundings; a canvas of broken glass, rusting shopping carts and tattered rags tethered to drooping clotheslines hanging from collapsing brownstones. A sky - pink from pollution haze boiling off the sidewalk, gave heat mirages that made light poles shimmy like belly dancers. Startled to see emaciated dogs with yellow eyes and smoky pus drooling from their mouths chasing cat sized rats. Grayish brown rats with eagle claws and ebony shark like teeth.

*Where am I? What the hell is going on?*

As her heart thumped like a fish tail in a boat's bottom, her ears caught the thread of an ethereal melody. A musical tune - a mixture of fusion jazz interspersed with rhythmic blues. Turning her head toward the source her eyes fixated upon a three story brownstone. It was shifting and moving as if it were building itself by absorbing the surrounding debris. Its walls blackish grey gradually fading to sooty beige. Upon white marble steps sat a light skinned African American with curly grey hair, mid to upper forties she estimated, dangling a black stiletto cigar from the corner of thick pinkish lips. The music source - a blood red harmonica

pressed to those lips. Through fading sunlight obscuring her vision she saw him pocket the harmonica and wave for her to come to him.

"Fiona, come here," his clear baritone voice boomed.

"Youse wondering how's I knows your name," he said with a grin. "Be quick girl, or them dogs or rats gonna use you like a chew toy."

Eyes wide with suspicion and knees trembling, Fiona took hesitant steps toward the stoop man. That made him smile; showing perfect ivory white fanged teeth. Running his tongue along the inside of his lower lip, he stroked chin stubble before reaching into his breast pocket to remove a deck of cards. His softball sized hands raked the cards eliciting a rhythmic cooing noise that paralyzed her thoughts, while tugging at her like a junkie knowing they're about to get their next fix.

Fiona's body movements were sluggish, moving slowly, like strawberry jam oozing through arteries. Still hesitant she saw his eyes flash reddish green before saying, "Come on girl, you're holding things up."

The cards shimmered with a bluish hue as Fiona stood transfixed as they floated above his hands, silently flapping before whizzing through the sticky humid air - snapping to a stop inches from her face. Like a child fearing getting its hand slapped, she reached for the cards, her right hand almost touching one before they began vibrating and spinning. Hearts, diamonds, clubs, spades flashed and twisted before her. Mesmerizing her with a gallery of people crying, smiling, wailing or laughing. Images spun in and out of focus like the opening and closing of a firefly's taillights.

Fiona blinked when the harmonica man shouted, "Girl, Rufus ain't got all day, either git up here or stay with them vermin. Don't make no difference to me."

With those words said the cards blinked away, reappearing between the spaces of Rufus's splayed fingers.

Turning his back to her, Rufus opened a black wrought iron gate. At that moment the sun disappeared, replaced with blackish clouds. With the first droplets kissing her cheeks Fiona heard the sound of jangling keys. After a brief jostling with the lock Rufus cracked open the brownstone's door.

"Last time, you coming or what?"

Scared, shocked, stunned, whatever her feelings or situations she found herself in, Fiona was always pragmatic. Wiping reddish black raindrops from her cheeks, Fiona looked around and sighed, "What the hell," before following Rufus into the brownstone.

\*\*\*\*\*

The entrance was three feet wide, with chipped tan paint and soupy green water dripping from a cracked plaster ceiling. The hallway had blond laminated wood paneled walls and a polished white tiled floor. The ceiling was peppered with thick and sludge like black spots and eely squiggles moved and changed shape as they walked towards a door at the end of the hallway. Fiona was fascinated by the spots and squiggles constantly changing shape, forming pictures of people, places and things she knew of, or about.

When the words, liar, thief, bitch came from a squiggled image of John Leonard her head jerk.

"What the ...," she shouted.

"Consequences. Youse looking at the wall of consequences."

"But my father..."

"Not just him, but the one or ones you love the most. What a life of sinning can lead to."

"Sinning? Where the hell am I?"

Rufus kept walking, strumming his cards while whistling the tune to three blind mice.

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The metal door at the end of the hallway was rust colored and trimmed with purple leather strips. When Rufus grasped the door handle a queasy feeling clutched her stomach, an uncomfortable one - akin to some voyeur staring at secrets they know shouldn't be seen. The door opened to an auditorium, not unlike the O'Farrell Theater near the tenderloin - decadent but not yet sleazy. Its stage had a crystalline floor with a plush red curtain embroidered with gold leaf trimming hanging from the ceiling.

Fiona felt it before she heard it. A low rumble from behind the curtain escalating like something invisible coming towards her. Then she felt it, a sensation of hot needles shoved through the back of her eyes eliciting screams for the mercy of death; while dizziness dragged her to the floor where sewage laced fumes began squeezing air from her lungs. Just as she began to believe her head was about to explode, everything stopped. The pain, noise, sickening stench - all gone.

Rufus, with traces of pity on his face said, "Distilled to their essence, the sounds of lies will drive you mad."

"What are you talking about," she whimpered.

"Consequences, the consequences of lying, of being a liar," he softly replied.

From the corner of her eyes Fiona saw a dark slot open in the curtain, its edges lit from behind. Spotlit was a tiny figure dressed in scarlet and blue, moving oddly, unbalanced - jerky like a five string marionette manipulated with three strings. She first thought it was trying to run or dance, but it wasn't. It was sprinting in place, head forward, legs flashing out behind feet wearing high heeled satyr like boots; boots that pounded the crystalline floor whose colors changed with the sweep of passing stage lights.

Crying and shivering Fiona pushed herself off the floor, not understanding why, but a small twinge of relief came over her when Rufus emerged from offstage shadows to embrace the tiny figure. Completing hugs and holding him at arm's length, Rufus placed a hand on its shoulder, pointed to Fiona and said, "Last one."

He had oily black hair, bronzed toned skin, thick eyebrows and lips oozing with the remembrance of decadence best left unmentioned. Whipping around like a striking asp, he placed a perfectly tanned hand to his lips and blew Fiona a kiss.

Before she could blink the curtains parted and lights illuminated a stage covered with row upon row of folding chairs and green felt table tops. Standing next to the tables were people, heads bowed as if shackled with chains.

Fiona whispered "Oh my God."

"God's not here," shouted Rufus.

His statement startled her, but before she could react Fiona found herself on the stage, next to one of the card tables, standing with head bowed like the others.

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Standing behind an obsidian marbled podium speckled with flakes the color of crushed rose petals; he smiled like someone privy to secrets others yearned to know. He clapped his hands to grasp their attention, then raised them, palms up, like a director instructing a choir to stand at attention. The voice was sandpapery, like someone who had smoked a billion cigarettes before breakfast; but it carried the clarity of someone used to giving unquestioned commands.

His name was Dinapolese.

"You're all wondering why you're here," he cooed. "Basically it's the fact that you're all sinners and liars, but, and let me emphasize the BUT part, mainly liars."

Murmurs and gasps of confusion filled the stage. Dinapolese raised hands silenced the crowd.

“Listen all of you. Today, of all days, is the most important day of your LIFE. That’s because you’re dead and don’t think you misheard what I just said, you... are... dead. BUT... you don’t have to be. This moment, this chance you’re about to receive is an opportunity to mold and shape your destiny as you...”

“You twisted jerk off,” shouted a heavy bellied man wearing a floral green polo shirt with too tight black designer jeans. “What the hell are you talking about? Do you know who I am? Huh, do you? I dooon’t think so. Listen up mister *Dinapolese*, I don’t know what kind of scam you’re running but I don’t have time for it. So just shut your trap and let me the hell out of here.”

“What the...,” Fiona started to say.

“Shut up ‘til he done,” Rufus scolded.

Dinapolese winked at Rufus and continued.

“Hell, did you say Hell? My, my, my, what an appropriate appellation.”

“Do I know who you are? Hmmm, let me think. You’re Michael Qualtrone, son of Dominique Qualtrone. A lying, selfish, ignoramus whose mother would have done humanity a huuuuge favor if she would have said ‘no’ that night.”

With an acrobatic flourish, Dinapolese somersaulted from the stage landing next to a startled Michael Qualtrone. With a speed that defied sight, Dinapolese’s glowing white hand engulfed Qualtrone’s face.

Like a lecturing professor, Dinapolese told his audience that Michael Qualtrone was a product of a lie, his father telling his mother he loved her, all the while “just being a drunk wanting to scratch an itch in his pants.” Dinapolese told Qualtrone he knew he lied to the government about his father misappropriating Homeland Security funds, knowing he was the one who funneled the money to his Grand Cayman account. How he let another man have his pinkie severed for taking the blame for his dishonesty.

“You’re a loser, a fake, a coward,” he sneered. “You feast on the fruits of the lies and deceit you practice to scratch your itches. Sex, drugs, money, power; you do what you ‘need’ to do to get it. That’s why you’re here Michael Qualtrone, here in Hell with the rest of society’s bottom feeders.”

With his face burning Michael Qualtrone’s began sobbing and screaming. Dinapolese’s hand tightened, squeezing Qualtrone’s face until it became a putty like lump slithering between steaming white fingers. He was “alive” but with a head that looked like a bag of blood soaked rice.

Shoving the flopping body to the floor Dinapolese cooed, "You're expendable. Like soiled water waiting to be flushed and unfortunately for you I have my hand on the lever."

"Rufus, if you please."

"My pleasure."

The eight and ace of spades rose from Rufus's breast pocket and floated across the stage, stopping to flutter above the soupy mess that was Michael Qualtrone's head. They began pulsating and smoking, changing color from black and white to a fluorescent red before dissipating into plumes of thick purple smoke. Cobra like, the smoke slid through the crushed orifices of a frightened bully, one who realized too late, that he should have kept his mouth shut.

Qualtrone's skin bubbled like boiling water before releasing spurts of viscous black fluids high above the stage from openings Fiona once assumed were eye sockets. They coalesced like storm clouds before congealing to drip back onto him. No one made a sound as Qualtrone's steaming convulsing body began rising and swelling before stopping as if frozen in a moment of time.

Snap. That's all it was. Just Dinapolese snapping his fingers and with barely a scream to mark his passing, Michael Qualtrone body imploded; staining the stage floor with a crimson puddle no bigger than a gumdrop.

"Guess he's staying," Rufus snickered.

Bowing like a performer who knew he'd just mesmerized his audience Dinapolese continued.

"Now that that's out of the way, let us get down to the business at hand. WHY ARE YOU HERE you ask? Let me tell you. Depending upon the counter, there are 112 words for deception, all with different shades of meaning; collusion, fakery, malingering, self-deception, confabulation, prevarication, exaggeration, denials, lies all lies that are verbal, non-verbal, kind hearted or self-serving, lies of omissions or commissions. Doesn't matter, they're still lies and however you want to slice it, their practitioners are liars. But today, of all days is a day of great significance. A sad, but momentous day, because believe it or not, HELL DOESN'T HAVE ENOUGH ROOM FOR ALL THE LIARS WHO HAVE DIED TODAY."

Going back to her roots Fiona started reciting the Lord's Prayer. Before completing the third verse Rufus interrupted her.

"Girl stop that nonsense and pay attention. What he about to tell you can answer them prayers youse thinking of."

"Thank you, Rufus," Dinapolese said.

"Pay attention folks and learn how Hell's current housing shortage can work to your benefit."

Due to an exponential growth of wickedness and evil in the world, Hell hadn't been able to keep up with the necessary housing requirements to hold all sinners in the manner required by the supreme authority. Consequently it was decided to prioritize sinners by the severity of their transgressions. Lying, depending upon its consequences can be a misdemeanor and subject to possible redemption.

"Today, regardless of the consequences, we are giving you the opportunity to win a onetime get out of Hell pass. One, and only one, of you will be given a second chance, a chance to avoid coming here. It all depends on winning."

"Winning what?" Fiona asked.

"Poker my dear. Liar's Poker to be exact."

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Liar's Poker is a simple game. After the blinds, each player is dealt three cards. Two up one facedown. The player checks their hand – aces high, pairs preferred – then decides whether to stay in the game. Those who stay are dealt another card. Best hand wins.

Players aren't allowed to bid a player out of the game, the player has to either fold or beat the hand of those who stayed.

Hell's version is played with sin chips. White chips for minor lies like those a child may tell a parent to make them proud, red chips for lies of avarice and black chips for lies of consequences. Consequences such as loss of trust or respect – or those instigating chaotic emotional swings, like anger, sorrow or contempt.

Winners and losers both suffer, nausea pummeling the winners' bodies – the result of absorbing the consequences of the sins they've won.

Loser's ears bled from what sounded like shattering glass as a cracking- snapping sensation mangled their bones. Final elimination - accentuated by a pop of light followed by the scent of fresh cut roses mingled with the stench of rotting cabbage.

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As players were eliminated the stage floor shrank, closing upon the remaining players like a shifting fish tank. Fiona was one of three players vying for that ultimate prize; a second chance.

To her left was a tall, solidly built man, with close set brown eyes, a prominent nose, a freckle crowded face and lips that covered his teeth; occasionally giving the impression of missing dentures. Wearing a grey Armani jacket with designer cuffed jeans and Chuck Taylor converse sneakers, Walter Bekker looked like anything but an addict.

As required of new player sets, each player had to give a rundown of their background. Dinapolese cautioned, "Knowing your opponent before battle can give you a winning edge."

While growing up Walter did every drug but heroin stating, "Everyone knows that when it's time for a fix, a junkie will lie to God."

Twenty one and on parole for shoplifting, Walter's issues began with smoking crack. Within a year bosses wondered where his delivery money went, his eighty year old grandfather was amazed at the price of new tires, all his possessions were gone and he'd lost forty pounds.

His parents spent thousands on unsuccessful stints at the San Diego rehab facility, Encounter. Over a ten year period he stole from his parents and girlfriends; from wallets and purses left in LA's trendiest club coatrooms as well as from friends and strangers passed out in skid row drug houses and alleys. One morning, lacking a syringe, he slit his shoulder with a razor blade and rubbed cocaine into the wound.

"I was at my connections house tasting my stash when I heard firecrackers outside. Before I could swallow another tab the door jumps off its hinges and a red light's in my face. Then nothing, no sounds, no lights, just nothing. When the lights came on I'm sitting here, dressed like I'm back in prep school."

"Why am I here? Why now? It's...it's not fair. That...that was going to be my last time I tell you. You see I...I experienced one of them you know, one of them what they call, oh yeah a "psychic shift," No lie 'cause I realized I didn't want to die like some mutt drug addict. Not me. I don't want my epitaph to be 'He had potential.'"

Rufus whistled before saying, "Youse looking for sympathy- you'll find it somewhere between the words shit and syphilis in the dictionary."

Testicular pain jolted Walter's body causing thick syrupy blood to pool from the corner of his mouth.

"Telling more lies get you more chips? Sorry boy all youse get is pain," Rufus said as he shuffled a fresh deck of cards.

Next to Walter sat a short thin man, handsome, Fiona thought, in a rugged sort of way. He wore a loose black suit over an Adonis sculptured body and a tan Stetson. Marco Tedaldi, forty-four, had close cropped brown hair and bluish black eyes that wouldn't have looked out of place on a serial killer.

Gigolo, grifter and con artist, who, at the age of thirty-eight consummated his marriage to seventy-seven year old Mary Carmichael with closed eyes, listening to Ray Charles, sing "God Bless America." Four months later Mary died leaving Marco six million dollars. Three weeks after her funeral he contracted HIV from a petite Brazilian prostitute.



“It’s horrible. You wouldn’t believe it. I live in Phoenix and it was over 90° tonight. Don’t matter. With no insulating fat I’m colder than an anorexic polar bear.”

“Shoulda known something was up. Happened after my nurse finished adjusting my PICC line. After she left I heard the door creak. Some rat bastard shined a light in my face and spat on me. Ripped the line from my wrist, punched my privates, yanked the pillow from beneath my head and smothered me. Like preppy there said, the light was replaced by black nothing. I hate black, always have. Ain’t nothing good about it. But be that as it may I now find myself sitting here with a preppy junkie and some skank who looks like a reject from a diet cola commercial.”

Gleefully rubbing his hands Dinapolese said, “Now that everyone knows each other, let’s get on with the game. I’m a busy man and need to get this game over with ASAP.”

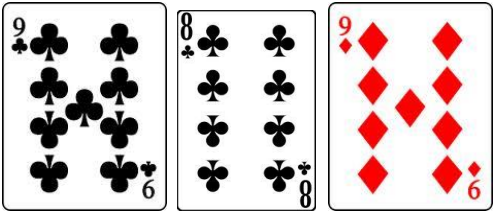
“Deal, Rufus.”

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To be a successful political operative one must be an intuitive people reader. Body language, tonal adjustment, behavioral patterns all clues deciphered and used to dissect an opponent. Early in the tournament Fiona concluded dissecting Dinapolese or Rufus was a waste of time. She wasn’t playing against them. Her focus had to be on her obstacles; Walter Bekker and Marco Tedaldi. She needed to determine their behavioral stress patterns. Once determined; get them to go at each other, and once eliminated, destroy the survivor.

First hand –

Fiona



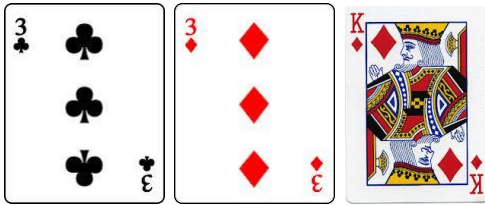
Hole card 9 of diamonds

Marco



Hole card 6 of clubs

Walter



Hole card king of diamonds

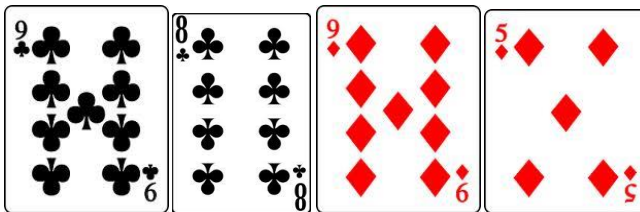
Fiona raised.

Marco folded.

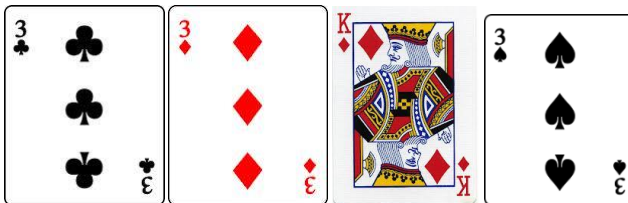
Walter called.

Rufus dealt the second hole card.

Fiona



Walter



Still confident, Fiona raised. Walter called. Fiona exposed her hand. Walter winked, showing her and Marco triple treys. *I'll have to watch that* she thought.

Marco was a distracter making snide remarks during play. Fiona frustrated him by either replying with zingers or ignoring him altogether. Concluding Water was emotionally weaker than Fiona, Marco focused his efforts on Walter. During one hand Marco peeked at his hole card then knuckled rapped the table.

"Walter, yes Walter. I believe we may be related."

"Huh?"

“You smell like some gutter trash I may have soiled. Your mother’s from New York, or maybe Miami? Hmm not sure. Her wares are not outstanding and therefore someone I can easily forget. Today, I’d be hard pressed to recognize her with her legs closed.”

Walter’s cards flew across the table followed by a fist that barely missed Marco’s chin. Dinapolese snapped his fingers jerking Walter back into his chair. Marco snickered before showing his winning hand.

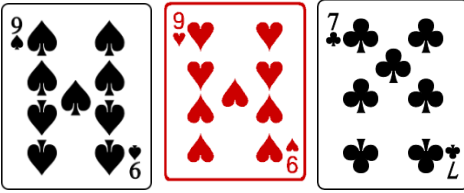
“Fiona, Fiona, bet that rhymes with bone her. How many times you got to flat back a client before you snare him? Your looks, once should do.”

Fiona smiled at Marco before mouthing the words ‘you wish.’

After several dozen hands Fiona was convinced she’d figured out Walter’s tell. Whenever it was his turn to play he always peeked at his hole cards. She timed his peeks. *Two, three seconds; strong hand, four or more, not so strong.*

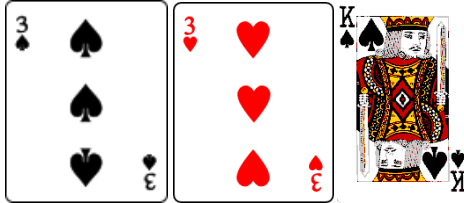
Over time Walter’s pot dwindled to bare blind coverage. If he didn’t win the next hand he would be eliminated.

Fiona



Hole card 7 of clubs

Marco



Hole card king of spades

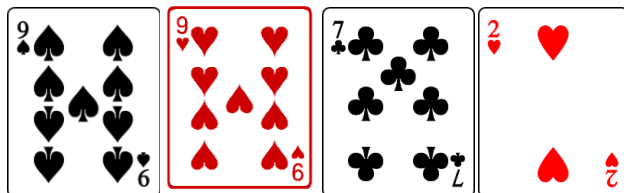
Walter



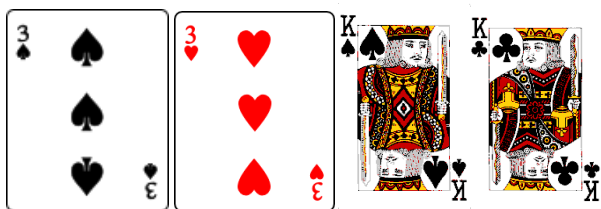
Hole card 10 of hearts

Fiona with a pair of nines opened with a raise, equaling Walter's pot. Marco called as Walter peeked at his cards. Two seconds. Confident, Walter thumped the table and Rufus dealt the next down cards. With every card dealt Walter's breathing became heavy with pools of sweat staining his shirt.

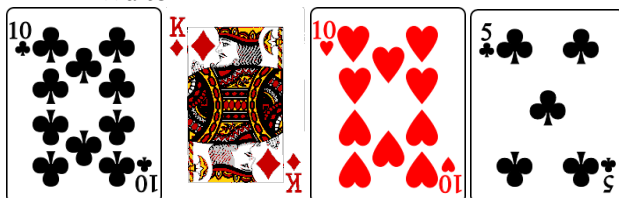
Fiona



Marco



Walter



“Noooo. You bastard,” Walter yelled at Marco.

Marco smugly smiled, “A junkie, no matter how high up the food chain his family may be, is no match for a man like me. A refined man of class and culture, not some pitiful junkie who steals from his mommy.”

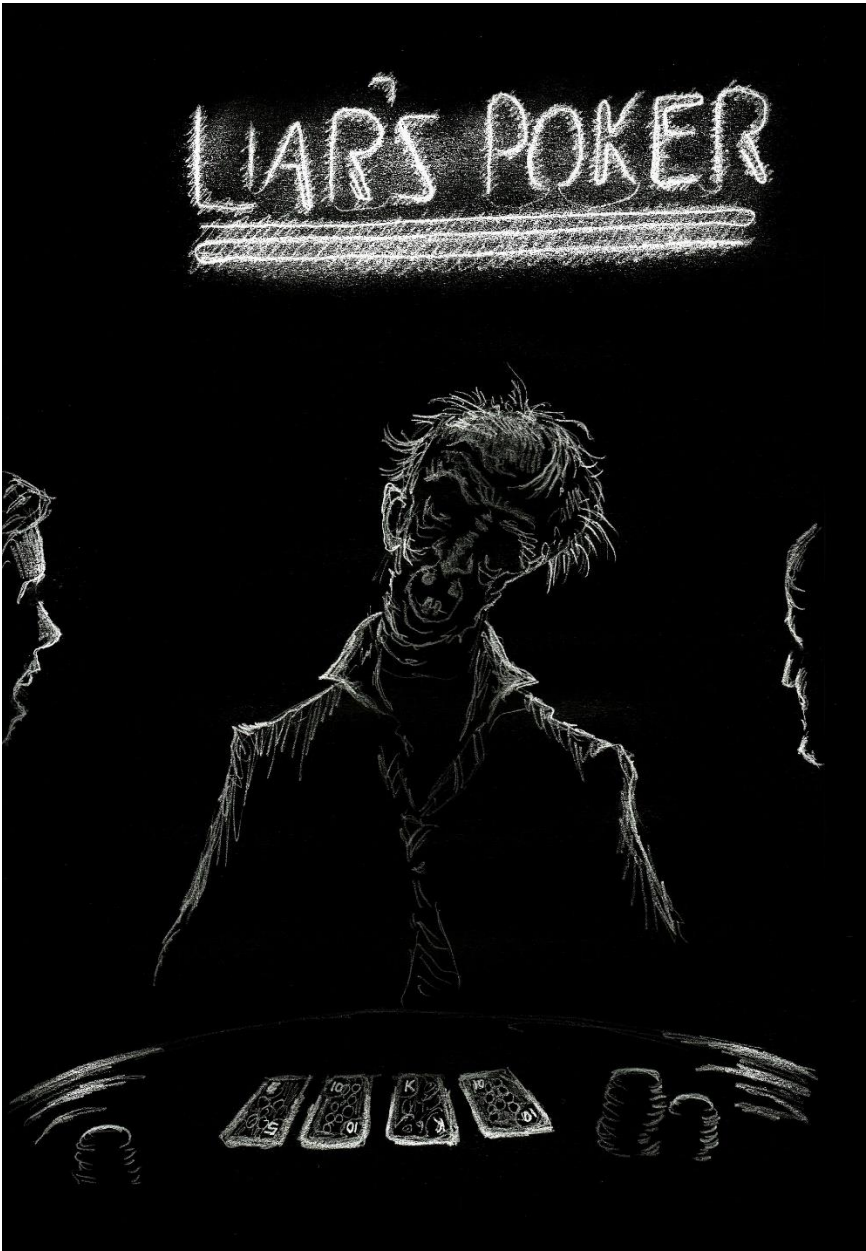
Raking the pot towards him Marco continued, “Guess it’s just me and you skinny minnie.”

Walter sat in his chair, his head rolling from side to side, licking his lips with a sneer of disgust. “Screw you Marco. I hope she kicks your ...”

“That’s enough now,” said Rufus.

“But...”

“But nothing, time to go, bye.”



The crystallized hate in Walter’s eyes unnerved Marco. Not only was he the man who condemned him to Hell, but also the type he despised. Marco started with more red and black chips than anyone he had played. Lying is a con man’s currency and Walter knew Marco’s pockets were always flush.

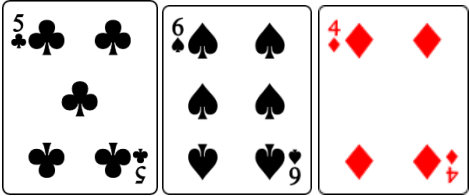
Needle marks appeared around Walter’s eyebrows, his forehead and hands sprouted liver spots as his nose shifted – not quite lining up with the center of his mouth. His clothes sagged as he shrank and clumps of hair started breaking and falling onto the floor. In the end his face was pockmarked with the ravages of a life that made him look like the junkie who’d been shot gunned to death in meth dealer living room. With a small pop of light, he was gone, replaced with the mixed scent of roses and rotten cabbage.

Fiona saw Marco smirk like someone savoring a glass of expensive wine.

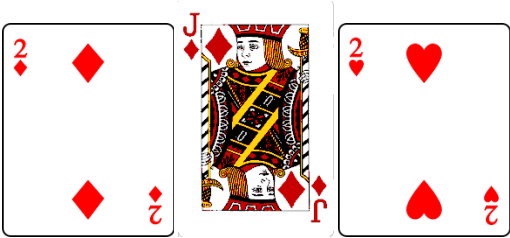
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First hand

Fiona



Marco

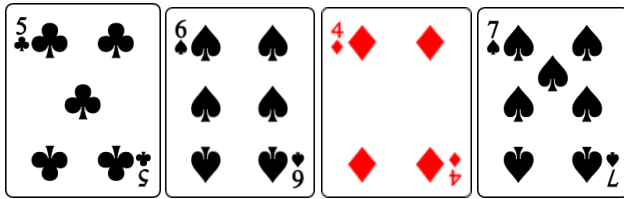


Marco opened by raising the pot with 1000 red chips and 2500 black chips. “Yeaeaaah, Miss Flat backer. I bet you’re real good with the comings and goings of Washington. I bet you specialize in climaxes.” Marco laughed.

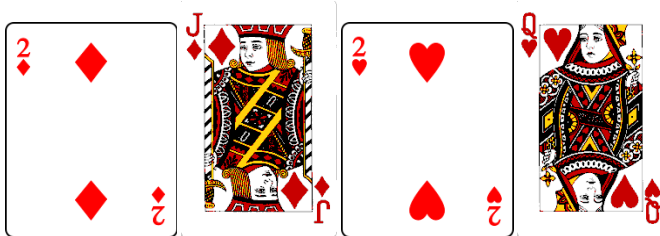
“Your wit is just remarkable. Honestly, you’re so full of it I’m surprised your eyes ain’t brown,” Fiona said as she matched him.

Rufus dealt the next hole cards.

Fiona



Marco



When Marco laid down his hand, he smiled. "What you got flat backer?"

"Straight beats pair, LOSER."

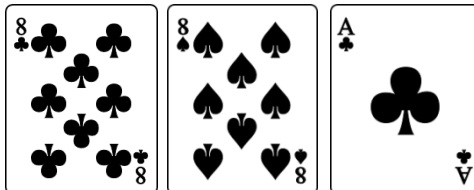
Marco's eyes narrowed into a feral like state; one completely void of any trace of compassion. He was a man Fiona believed shouldn't be allowed to return amongst the living, for his sins would be greater than lying.

Fiona's great uncle reportedly financed his first business venture with money won playing poker in the Navy during World War II. He once told her "people who have the cards are usually the ones who talk the least and softest; those who are bluffing tend to talk loudly and give themselves away."

Talking loudly, being rude, blistering bites of insults, Fiona knew what Marco's tell was. It was the opposite of her uncle's advice.

After hundreds of hands Marco and Fiona's pots were even.

Fiona



Marco

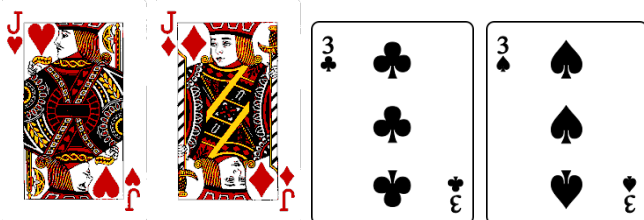


All in Dinapolese ordered.

“Yes. Sweet Jesus ... excuse me, sweet mercy of fate,” Marco whistled as he shoved all his chips into the pot, “You’re toast boney mama san.”

Fiona sat stunned, staring vacantly at Rufus and Dinapolese. Her lips quivered and she felt as if all the blood in her head was crashing like a pile of rock onto the ocean floor.

Marco peeked at his final hole card and started screaming like someone who just busted the casino.



He flung his cards at her and started pumping his fist like a rugby hooligan.

Fiona’s chest sank and her head hung like a broken slinky. Sobbing and bobbing her head side to side as she looked at Marco’s hand. Pinpricks of pain crept through her as she struggled to breath. Not wanting to look Fiona touched her hole card and that’s when she felt it.

It was tsunami like, the kind caused by trouble on the ocean floor, no storm, no atmospheric disturbance, something deeper, more fundamental. Like a wave she once saw on film. Not tall, just a few feet, but unstoppable; covering an island from shore to shore. What stayed with her was the image of all the people on the beach. People who didn’t leave because they didn’t believe it would happen like it did.

Fiona believed. Right then, without doubt – that wave, that power was hers and there was nothing Marco could do about it. Her eyes pinched together as the room lights became squiggly, as if passing through layers of sludgy water. With closed eyes she ran the tip of her tongue along dry cracked lips.



Then it was over. Her tsunami drained, disappearing like a flicker of light in a pitch black room. Her breathing was strong and steady; her skin cool and tingly.

Rufus and Dinapolese eyed each other grinning the grin of the devil who knows the hole card.

Marco Tedaldi didn't notice anything.

Physically and emotionally drained, Fiona knew this was her last play. Eying Marco's cards; jacks over treys, she wiped a hand across her runny nose looking distraught and ready to cry.

Marco eyed her cards and started cooing, "Well Miss Evil Bitch, I hope you find something to warm your cold ass bones in Hell," he crowed as he reached to collect his winnings.

Fiona tapped her right index finger on her whole card and flashed him her phoniest smile, "It ain't over yet," she yelled.

Then she peeked at her hole card.

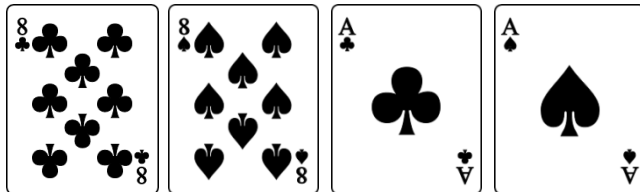
A loud sigh crept from her lips as all color drained from her face. Like a stunned boxer Fiona's eyes rolled up into her head and her body started swaying from side to side. Marco's heart fluttered as he watched rivulets of red tears drizzle down Fiona's cheeks.

Palms pressed into soft green table felt, Fiona bobbed her head from side to side glaring at Marco with a look that told him she believed Hell was too good for him. The words came from deep within, carried by a voice that was raspy like dry leaves crunched beneath winter boots, "I've listened to your bluster, your misogynist crap and jabs of cruelty, but now, now it means nothing, absolutely nothing."

Marco's trembling hands hovered above the sin pot. With a parched throat and eyes widening in fear, he watched her quivering like an epileptic.

"Nothing, it means nothing because I have what I want. I have what I need. I HAVE YOUR BALLS."

Glee shone through blood soaked eyes as Fiona held her hole card above her head. Cackling like someone drowning in a sea of hysteria she twirled the card on her fingertips before slamming it upon the table with a thunderous boom.



*Black aces and eights. The dead man's hand.*

Marco Tedaldi sat stone like in his chair, face transfixed in shock; a loser.

One red and one black chip rose from the sin pile, merged then morphed into the face of Mary Carmichael, a face that whispered something only Marco could hear. He began sobbing like a teenage girl following a breakup with her first serious boyfriend. Finished she licked his lips and spat on him. Mary winked at Fiona and mouthed the words *thank you* before fading away.

Marco's body quivered as if it were a mass of pudding. The once handsome face became soft and doughy as its features misted away. His arms and legs sank into his torso; forming a gelatinous wormy body that crumpled onto the floor.

Faint sounds. Growling and scratching sounds treaded across the stage. After swiveling around to see its origins, her heart froze. The sounds came from the street creatures she saw upon her arrival. They ignored her going straight to the wormy mass that was Marco Tedaldi. Sniffing and poking like prey kneading their next meal they appeared to enjoy watching Marco's new body jiggle like tofu. Eyes blinking with recognition, they nodded their heads at Dinapolese and Rufus. They nodded back. First the dogs - then the rats began slashing and gnawing Marco's new body, tearing and shredding it with loud grunts and satisfying slurping sounds.

\*\*\*\*\*

With the game over and all losers dealt with, Dinapolese and Rufus rose without saying a word and left the stage. The stage lights faded to a smoky yellowish hue and all sin chips rose from the table to hover inches from Fiona's face. The chips fused together until they looked like a glob of thick black licorice. A glob that slammed into her streaming through all her orifices; flooding her body with the accumulated consequences of the lifetime of lies told by every liar that died that day.

Her nauseous body became painfully warm. A pain she understood as the distilled emotional consequence of lying. Anger, shame, fear, betrayal, all the crushing consequences of lies told by her, to her, about her; and others.

She prayed for an end to her suffering, for the suffering of those she hurt and those who had been hurt by the lies of those who sat in Hell's ballroom with her. With her vision fading and a throat heavy from the crushing weight of a liar's lifetime, she continued to pray for forgiveness and redemption.

Then it stopped. No pain, just numbness from a thin silk like film covering her nakedness. Her body; warm and wet, as if massaged with exquisite body oils. As she floated in warm fluids, Fiona continued to pray. Pray that the man, her father, who was her buoy in a dark and treacherous world, would forgive her for the sins of her life.

Then the light came. A warm light, unexpected but pleasant, crept along Fiona's body. It spread from her temple, crossing the curves and dips of her body. As its warmth traversed her body, Fiona felt waves of anguish ebbing away. She was ready. Ready to face whatever was coming. Her mind went blank right before she saw the light. A bright light that made her cry.

\*\*\*\*\*

The midwife entered the living room and extended her hand to congratulate the young father.

"It's a healthy, hardy girl, Reverend Leonard. Mother and child are doing fine."

Reverend John Leonard stood at the bedroom door with his father and brother in-law, looking at his daughter sleeping in her mother's arms.

"What's her name?" Rufus, asked.

"Fiona."

"Fiona, that's a fine name. Good as any I've ever heard," said her grandfather.

"Yeah, I like it," said Rufus, "come on; they're tired and need their rest. Let's go play some cards."

"Play what?" asked Dinapolese.

"Poker Dad, liar's poker," said Reverend Leonard.

## CURSE ON THE SKIN

— *Charles Wilkinson*

THE stone lid on the well was too weighty for one man to lift, Angharad thought. Its design was unusual: neither a hole for a bucket to pass through nor any mark in the ground to show where a windlass formerly stood. Instead an iron handle, which might once have had a chain attached, was riveted to the masonry. Several men leaning backwards, as if they were in a tug of war team, would have been needed to move such a covering.

‘Is it dry?’ she asked.

‘Apparently not. In this part of the world the aquifers are replenished regularly,’ said Huw, glancing at the sodden heavens and the blue-grey cloud wisps scurrying not far above. He wore a green woollen coat with a hood and wellington boots.

The three of them were standing in the wilderness that was Huw’s garden. The wet long grass had turned the soft Italian leather of Quentin’s shoes a darker shade of brown. His expression mingled discomfort, incredulity and metropolitan disdain. Angharad had advised him to bring waterproofs, the Welsh weather, even in late June, seldom being approximate to summer for long. A damp white linen jacket afforded scant protection from the rain-laced wind whipping down from the dark mountains. It had been a mistake to insist he should accompany her any further west than Ealing.

‘Have you ...’

‘Good lord, no. When a well is covered, it’s for a reason.’

Angharad had a momentary vision of the cover being lifted from below: a scraping, the slow raising of the stone and then the appearance of two wrists thicker than tree branches, ancient and inhuman.

‘Which is?’ she said.

But her cousin Huw had become aware of Quentin’s discomfort and censorious silence. ‘I think it might be best to continue the tour another time,’ he said. ‘Your friend is not dressed for an expedition, however minor.’

As they sloshed their way back across the lawn, Angharad reminded herself what had inspired Huw to abandon his art gallery in Bath to restore the wobbling wreck of a longhouse and its ruined annex in a remote part of the Welsh borders. Just eighteen months previously,

Huw's genealogical research had led him to discover that the damp acres attached to the house had been his ancestors' land. *Before the thirteenth century, the Howels of Plas Howel were more than minor Welsh gentry; they were princelings with their own Hall and retinue.*

Behind the longhouse and the half-timbered annex, which might once have been a hayloft, there was an agglomeration of grey stone that Huw claimed was the remains of a fortified manor house. He'd bought a Victorian etching that showed the only wall then standing. Ivy half-covered the crumbling crenellations; one arrow loop was clearly visible.

They were to eat in the kitchen, where an Aga had been installed in advance of the central heating system, which Huw had hopes of installing before November. A lamb stew was bubbling and spitting on the hotplate.

'Almost ready, I should think,' said Huw, who then reached up for a bottle of 'Chateau Self' gooseberry champagne. Angharad had noticed how Quentin winced

when offered a glass of this house wine of the month shortly after their arrival that morning. She had hoped that Quentin, as an interior designer, self-appointed art critic and habitué of the Hoxton Cube, would find some shared aesthetic territory with Huw, but since his departure from Bath her cousin's taste had become more homespun. He had specialised in eighteenth-century watercolours; the wines at the open views were always execrable.

The popping cork galvanised Quentin, who walked over to his rucksack and extricated a bottle of Argentinean Malbec that had attracted good opinions in Shoreditch.

'Quite warming on a rainy day,' he said, before handing it to his host.

'Umm,' said Huw, scrutinising the label. 'What's this ... a drop of Appellation Port

Stanley? Malvinas Merlot?'

'Hardly, it's from one of the best ...'

'Yes, yes, yes. I'm sure I'm very grateful, but there were vineyards in Wales in Roman times. Here we all know of first-rate Welsh wines; of course, we have our own beer and whiskey.' He put the Malbec behind the fruit bowl on the dresser.

Quentin struggled with the lamb and dumplings while Huw poured out three glasses of gooseberry wine.

'You were going to tell me about the well, Huw,' said Angharad.

'Was I?' Huw was staring at Quentin, who was pushing some of the fatter lumps of Welsh lamb to the side of his plate to join a row of rejected carrots.

‘Yes, you were,’ said Angharad.

‘There are stories. None of them properly authenticated. Since I started

my diploma in local history, I’ve become more aware of the importance of evidence.’ Just as he was warming to his theme, Huw coloured and slammed down his knife and fork. ‘Whatever is the man doing now? Are carrots *haram* in Hampstead or wherever it is you hail from?’

‘Quentin is from East London, Huw.’

‘And I’m not a Muslim,’ said Quentin, standing up. ‘Far from it, I very much enjoy a glass of wine provided the vintage is not a recipe for violent indigestion.’ He made his way to the dresser and took out a barman’s pocket corkscrew, with which he proceeded to open the Malbec. ‘Anyone for red?’

~

The wind worsened during the night, waking them well after one. The annex was swaying first one way then the other. Angharad and Quentin had slipped towards the mattress’s central valley, where they huddled together for warmth.

‘I do hope you’ll make an effort with Huw tomorrow. He’s become more difficult since he left Bath, but he’s very ... well meaning ... at heart.’

‘I find the compulsory nature of the hospitality of the Howel pretty hard to take: you will walk round my garden in the rain; you will enjoy this home-brewed, interior organ corroding...’

‘I know it’s not easy, but he’s a lot older than I am and has only one living

relative ... me. He’s already had a dose of cancer, which is why he gave up the gallery.’

One thing was non-negotiable in their relationship: Quentin would never move out of London. Did they really want to rent for the rest of their days?

‘I don’t see any of these wonderful watercolours you were telling me about; in fact, I can’t see any pictures. Not that I’m even very slightly interested in his property.’

‘They’re almost certainly in store.’

Then the noise started. It came from below. For a moment, Angharad thought someone was beating on the front door, demanding admittance. They sat up and listened. The rhythm was irregular, unmatched to the powerful gusts buffeting the annex.

‘What do you think it is?’ asked Quentin.

‘I’m not sure. Perhaps one of the shutters has blown open.’

She flicked a switch and a yellow light dangling from a crossbeam far above them came on. With no lampshade, the bulb must have been moving in the draught - for shadows swooped about the timbers like vast grey wings.

‘I suppose this means I’ll have to check downstairs.’

‘Not necessarily. I’ll go if you want.’

But Quentin was already half way out of bed, although muttering fussily.

‘Be careful. That staircase is very steep,’ she said.

‘I’m aware of that. Your cousin might just as well have inserted a rope ladder.’

As she watched him tread cautiously towards the stairs, his weight evenly distributed, as if he expected the wooden floor to break up into separate branches at any moment, she thought how helpless he seemed outside of his natural habitat: the wine bars, bistros, coffee houses, and art house cinemas of gentrified East London; his world of first nights, private views and sightings of famous painters in greasy spoons near Fournier Street. She’d never thought of him as a rude or awkward person before, but then she’d never seen him outside the circle of his friends from work and those he’d known at school and university.

‘Are you all right?’ she yelled, after a period of silence.’

‘Almost half way there. It’s pretty tricky. I wouldn’t like to fall down these stairs.’

Why had she thought he’d hit it off with Huw? Her older cousin had always been kind to her throughout her childhood. Even when he was a post-graduate student at the Courtauld and she was at primary school in London, he’d found the time to take her on trips to Madam Tussauds, the Planetarium and even to Chessington and Thorpe Park. They’d been at a parade, she couldn’t remember what the occasion was; only the pavements thronged with Londoners and tourists, and Huw picking her up, his arms tight around her waist, and holding her high, so she could see over the heads of the crowd and witness the spectacle: the marching lines, the noon-day sun glowering on the brass instruments, the man almost dwarfed by his great drum.

The beating had stopped, but there was no sign of Quentin. She went out to the landing. The narrow, nearly vertical staircase was illuminated by a dim light; the

floor below was in darkness.

‘Quentin?’ she semi-shouted, trying to control the panic in her voice. ‘Are you all right?’

No reply. Very slowly she stepped downwards. The handrails on either side of her were smooth, flimsy and rotten. She had forgotten to put on her shoes, and the wood beneath her feet was cold and slippery.

‘Quentin? Where are you?’

She flicked on the switch at the bottom of the stairs. For a second, she couldn’t find him. Everything seemed as it should be: the front door closed; the windows safe behind the wooden shutters. Then she saw him. He was lying on the brown sofa, an open hand covering the right side of his face. His eyes were closed. She went over at once and knelt down next to him. Although he appeared to be unconscious, his chest was rising and falling, as if he were recovering from terrible exertions. She shook his left shoulder and saw the faint movement of his eyes beneath the sealed lids. Gently she held his right wrist and moved it away from his face. The skin was raised in red welts and patched with watery white blisters, as if he had been whipped with a giant stinging nettle.

~

Just before noon there was a loosening in the cloud cover, a few hazy threads dropped from the grey stitching, followed by the unravelling west wind, the first patches of hurrying blue. Then at last sunlight toyed with foreshortened shadows, stamped its gloss on leaf and pond. Angharad put on her coat and went outside. The bough of a tree, snapped off by the previous night’s storm rose in arches from the long grass like a sea-snake shaggy with wrack and slime. The roof tiles of the annex and the longhouse were undamaged, saved by the wooden beams that had moved through the centuries to the rage of storms. But when she reached the far end of the garden, she saw the well lid was lying on its side in the lawn. The stone was even thicker than she’d realised and from the way it was positioned, with its metal handle wedged in the grass, it appeared it been lifted from below.

She went over to the mouth of the well and peered down. Although the bottom was not visible, she sensed the shiver of water in its depths. She picked up a handful of gravel and watched it fall. After a few seconds, there was a distant splash. Then, as she was about to turn away, she noticed them: the lines in the interior of the well, around six or seven feet below the rim. Was it strangely patterned lichen or marks left at a level the water had once reached? As she looked closely, she realised the spacing suggested letters carved into the stone. She was too far away to make out the words. Possibly they were a wish or a blessing, or even some sort of invocation to the guardian of the place. In Wales, wells were often holy shrines dedicated to some local saint who had succeeded a pre-Christian deity.



‘Interesting, isn’t it?’

Angharad had not heard Huw come up from behind, but he was standing next to her, staring down into the well. He was wearing a battered green hat, a waxed jacket and baggy brown corduroys: a countryman but for the long grey hair curling just short of his shoulders.

‘Do you know what those words say?’

‘No, they’re not in English.’

‘Welsh?’

‘Possibly some early form of that language. Rather surprisingly nothing is known about this locally. I’d have thought that one of the nearby Victorian incumbents of the Church of Wales would have been sufficiently curious to find out, but that was not the case. They weren’t even interested in Castell Howel.’

‘Has this happened before?’

‘Yes. This is the third time since I’ve been here. Before that, I’m not sure.

Nothing’s recorded. It’s a great nuisance. I have to pay a not inconsiderable sum to put the cover back. It takes several men.’

‘Why don’t you leave it where it is?’

‘As I said earlier, I’m sure it’s there for a reason.’

They started to stroll back in the direction of the longhouse. Angharad noticed a movement in the copse at the edge of Huw’s garden: a sudden indistinct flash of red.

‘What’s that?’

‘Sorry?’ said Huw.

‘There was something red in the wood over there.’

‘Really?’

‘I only caught a glimpse of it. It seemed rather blurred at the edges.’

‘Was it an animal, do you think? A fox ...or a man in hunting pink?’

Mind you the

the nearest hunt doesn’t often come close to Castell Howel. This isn’t the right sort of country for them.’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘It’s probably a piece of plastic sheeting. All sorts of things were blown about in the storm last night. Is your friend having a lie in?’

‘I know you haven’t taken to Quentin, but I’d be grateful if you could be more

tolerant of him today.’

‘Why? I prefer a man who knows how to get out of bed in the morning. It was bad form of him not to put in even a fleeting appearance at breakfast.’

Angharad didn't answer at once. What had occurred was so improbable that she needed a moment to collect herself if she was not to risk sounding hysterical or worse.

'Quentin had an unpleasant experience last night.'

'Oh?'

'I'm sure there's a perfectly natural explanation. I put some ointment on his face and a bandage. He appears to be somewhat better this morning.'

'Good lord, what an earth happened?'

'That's what we are not entirely sure of. There was a terrible noise last night: a kind of intermittent banging and beating from below. Quentin went downstairs to find out what was causing it and was convinced there was someone at the door. When he opened it, no one was there, but someone had moved a sort of obstacle or monument up onto the path, a jagged rock or half ruined gravestone; he couldn't say which, for at that moment it was as if his face had been badly stung.'

~

Waiting for the truce to turn sour, Angharad sat with Huw and Quentin on a wooden bench outside the Inn. The border Morris Men were dancing to the rhythms of a ramshackle band: drums, fiddles, guitars and a melodeon. With their blackened faces and tattered dark jackets, the dancers were wilder than Angharad remembered: more untamed than their Home Counties cousins - leaping higher, the clash of their sticks louder, their cries inherited from less tractable forebears. The men wore battered top hats jauntily, trophies of some half-remembered insurrection.

As the dancers ran off, Huw applauded loudly. Quentin had taken off his bandage, although the right side of his face looked as if it had been slapped repeatedly by secret policemen.

'Splendid!' said Huw, adding a few hurrahs.

Quentin glanced up from his newspaper. 'I'm not quite sure why you should think that. To me it seems at best distasteful, at worst profoundly offensive.'

'Nonsense.'

'I'm sure you're going to tell me that it's a fine old tradition: this blacking up to mock the moors; in fact, it's a piece of mediaeval prejudice we could do without.'

'Now that's where you are wrong. The custom has nothing to do with skin colour and everything to do with class; they blacked up in order to avoid being recognised by their employers.'

‘While you two squabble, I’ll get another round of drinks,’ said Angharad.

The front bar was already filling up, the regulars at the bar jostled with an influx of

Morris Men and fat-bellied farmers ordering Sunday lunch. It would be quicker to slip through the wicket gate and round to the snug. To her surprise, the back garden appeared empty. Even the children’s playground, with its slide, swing, wooden climbing frames and tree house was deserted. She was about to go into the snug when she saw him, seated on a cast iron chair under the shade of a beech tree. He was facing away from her: an unremarkable figure from that angle, apart from his red coat. At first she thought it had been torn into ribbons, like the jackets of the Morris dancers, but when she moved closer she saw it was made out of feathers. She must not wait for him to turn towards her, for then he might speak. Already his head was moving slightly, soon to be in profile; his face not flesh, but rock: striated, parti-coloured - budding ammonites and mineral glitter.

She ran towards the back entrance and pushed heavily - almost hurling herself into the snug. The door banged against the wall, trembled. An elderly drinker looked up from his pint. Hearing the commotion, a barmaid came through and stared at her. Angharad heard herself breathing heavily.

‘What’s the matter, love?’

‘Umm ... not quite sure.’

‘Take your time.’

She could not risk the barmaid being unable to see it. Give it time to move away, she told herself.

‘Nothing. I’m all right now. Always in too much of a hurry, that’s me.’

With the drinks on a tray, she made her way back to the front garden. There was no sign of the man in the red coat. For the first time, it occurred to her that the figure might be connected to the Morris Men. Was he wearing a mask? Not an uncommon practice in some parts of the country. Yet she was sure he had not been among the dancers. Perhaps he was member of the band.

When she returned, Huw and Quentin were talking about poetry. Perhaps at last they would find some common ground.

‘I couldn’t disagree with you more,’ said Huw. ‘Strictly speaking the writers you have

mentioned are not poets at all. Their verse - for that’s all it is - never rises above the personal and the domestic. They speak for no one beyond

themselves and are not in touch with anything more exalted or mysterious than their own ambitions.'

'Well, who should they be speaking for?'

'Their tribe, their prince ...'

'That point of view died out centuries before the Romantics. What are you? The official spokesman for the Dark Ages?'

'A true poet has the power to praise, bless and curse. Your lot might raise a giggle or a sentimental sigh at a Wine Bar reading but they're not poets.'

As neither of them was prepared to thank her for buying the drinks, she thought they could at least reassure her that the man in the back garden was nobody to fear.

'I've had rather a shock,' she said, with more emotion than they were used to from her.

Quentin turned round, concern expunging contempt.

'When I was in the back garden, I saw a man in a feathery red jacket. He had his back to me so I didn't see his face properly, but I had the impression he was wearing a mask. Did you see him? He may have been with the Morris Men.'

'I didn't see anyone like that with them. Was he blacked up?' asked Quentin.

'I'm not sure. I don't think so.'

'Perhaps one of the local mad mummers got out. I wouldn't worry about it.

Lunatics are pretty thick on the ground round here.'

'Now from your description' said Huw, quite without his usual belligerence, 'that man is dressed as a poet.'

~

The next day there was no sign of Huw in the longhouse. Angharad searched for him in the garden. She followed his dark footprints over the dew until she passed through a wicket gate and came to the brow of the hill, from where she looked down over a field to the limits of her cousin's land. Huw had almost reached the well, which remained uncovered in spite of his declared intention to arrange for the cover to be put back. He was holding something in his right hand, possibly a parcel wrapped in brown paper; she was too far away to be sure. Then as she was about to wave and call out, he reached the well and dropped whatever he been carrying into it. For a moment, he stood quite still, craning over the top of the well, no doubt waiting for the burden to sink. Before he noticed her, she returned part of the way she had come and then stopped by the wicket gate. A minute later he appeared on the crest of the hill. A gust of wind

caught his long grey hair so that it blurred like a streamer of cloud high on a mountain.

'I'm sorry if this is unexpected,' she said, as soon as he reached her. 'But Quentin and I have decided to get back to London today. The forecast isn't good and ...'

'I'll be sad to see you go early. You know that. I am afraid I can't honestly say I'll be sorry to see the back of your friend.'

'Just as a matter of interest, why did you take against him quite so violently?'

Huw gazed at her steadily. 'How frank would you like me to be?'

'As frank as you like.'

'Very well then. He's a thief.'

Although she had already imagined what his reply to her question might be, this response was unexpected. Perhaps Quentin's conclusion was correct: her cousin was so deluded as to be dangerous.

'What on earth makes you say that? I'm well aware that you haven't hit off with Quentin, but even so!'

'Let this man go back to London. Stay here with me in Wales.'

Then for the first time since she had arrived, he looked at her fondly, and she remembered how deep his disinterested love for her had been when she was child.

But all she said was: 'I'm surprised the two of you couldn't find a mutual enthusiasm for just one poet.'

As they walked towards the longhouse, she recalled what Quentin had told her while they packed. *I've been making a few enquiries about this cousin of yours. Most of the wells in Wales are dedicated to saints, but not the Howel's. There's a legend, possibly pagan in origin, that this well has a guardian, some sort of bard who always does the family's bidding. Apparently Huw believes this. Even the locals find it unsettling. Personally I'm sure he's unhinged. And oh, you haven't seen my journal have you? It's bound in brown leather.*

'True poetry rises up from the very deepest places; it is elemental; its actions, even on the physical self, can be transformative. It has nothing to do with the verbiage admired by your friend, which lacks even the beauty and terror of nursery rhymes.'

These were the final words she heard Huw speak. There were letters, of course; none of which she answered; not even the last one that explained how he could no longer afford protection; the poet's fee would be unpaid.

'I'm sorry, Huw. Quentin and I will be leaving straight after lunch.'

At first she thought it was smoke that billowed from the open door and windows of the annex. As she ran over the long grass, she wondered why there was no acrid scent of burning; not even a flicker of flame. Once she was within a few feet of the building and forced to step away from the hot grey clouds, she realised what they were steam. And then from above, an almost musical hiss.

She looked back at Huw. He was standing, with his legs slightly apart and his hands in his pockets, where she had left him. Although he was some way off, the shape of his face suggested he was smiling. A year later he would fall to his death down the stairs in the annex.

The steam started to fade; she edged into the sitting-room. No one. The staircase still fumed, cloudy with hot curses. At last, when the way was clear, she found Quentin, pink and cooked, on their bedroom floor. Vapour rose from bubbling puddles, the places where the oaths still boiled. He was beyond balm and tincture: no honey, milk or cooling streams would soothe or heal. In his agony, he had torn off his clothes. On his chest and face, white islands of skin rose in blisters; every inch of his flesh was a scald.

## MILVERTON'S EYES

— *M. Grant Kellersmeier*

THOSE of you who know me personally – who know me well – know that my wife and I lived together for a year and a half before our marriage in a town that neither of us had been to before, or had any connection to whatsoever. It is true that I later learned that an aunt of my father's had lived there – not three blocks from our apartment – for years, and that my grandparents had visited them there often, but I wasn't aware of this until I had been installed in the area for several months. To us it was a strange place: a quaint port town on the Indiana side of the Ohio River, snugly slumbering between Louisville to the west and Cincinnati to the east, with dozens of miles of green hills and shaggy woodlands between them. The River spilled its way westward towards the Mississippi – and hence to the Gulf and the Atlantic – all beneath our watch. And we had a lovely vantage point to view it. But before I get to the apartment at 512 East Main Street, or to our neighbor below and what we suspected of him, I had better begin at an early point in these memories.

My wife and I drove down to the town – a four hour trek from the area we were then living in – on a rainy afternoon in either March or April. The drive was a disappointingly unremarkable one, crossing through featureless soy bean fields and towns whose gas stations and boarded-up Main Streets were the only memorable features. Three or four times we drove into hilly terrain where the highway wove dangerously around flinty hillocks and under moss-drenched overpasses, but for the most part we filled our time straining the radio's tenuous grip on NPR stations which would perennially fall out of reach to be lost in a sea of gospel, country, and hissing static. The rain grew heavier as we drove further south, until we were surrounded on all sides by a flashing white halo that blocked our sight, leaving only the walls of water that passed by us like a series of large white veils being pulled back and forth and up and down.

Out of that floating water we could dimly see two grey towers that pulled into focus as we neared them, and then we were between them; between two massive walls of stone and earth as the road cut between them and dove downwards. The highway spun in loose tendrils, weaving around piles of stone and walls of brown rock, curving delicately as if trying not to be noticed by the great formations that peered at this new and unwanted innovation. The car seemed small and I felt as though it

was now of little protection should a rock overhead suddenly give way as the road signs warned they did. We sped out of the cliffs' shadows, past broad, weedy hillsides that swelled up like the backs of great whales encrusted with barnacles and slimy with algae. And then there were houses: unlit trailers from the eighties, small single-storied shacks from the fifties, and unpainted farmsteads from before the First World War. A Catholic graveyard loomed to the right, fenced in by stone walls and overshadowed by the jaw of a thorn-infested peak. It was in plain view with its grass clipped diligently and an whole acre untenanted by the dead, but even now I remember how old the stones were, how forgotten they seemed, almost as if someone had begun the project and suddenly thought better of it, leaving a relic of ambition and futility ironically uncompleted.

We drove over a bridge which spanned one of the black, silent tongue of Crooked Creek, which slithered its way out of the Ohio River's embrace and disappeared in the shadows of the woodlands and flintrock. We entered the town just as the clouds seemed to float off across the river into Kentucky, and for a moment we saw the sun glint boastfully between two shifting piles of vapor. It cast a brassy glow over a Main Street which surely looked little different now than it had at the beginning of the previous century. To the west the businesses had taken up camp in two or three story Victorian-era flat-tops, whose bricks were bleached by decades of sun, snow, and rain. At the center was the city hall, a Federal Era building, boasting a discolored Civil War monument clawing defiantly at the shifting fog, with a cannonball from the Siege of Vicksburg nestled proudly at its base. To the east were a long series of houses, duplexes, churches, and apartment complexes. Here and there were some modern innovations, but most of them were the product of the Victorian and Antebellum Eras. Fresh reports from Custer's defeat in Montana had been read on these porches. The looming ramifications of Lincoln's assassination had been discussed in these shuttered rooms. Slaves had dragged themselves from the water and pressed their wet bodies against these dry bricks as they evaded bounty hunters.

My wife successfully interviewed for the job that she had been offered, and in a month we drove back into town and selected our first shared home. The sky was white with heat, and steam saturated the air and buildings and pavement. The sun loomed triumphantly over the courthouse as we pulled into the city's chief intersection and turned east. The apartment we had selected was only three blocks away: the penthouse of 512 East Main Street. There are times when I wake up in the middle night and I momentarily forget all the history that has marched on since



then; times when I am back at Apartment Six, when I look up and see the old, warped windows letting in the orange glimmer of the old streetlamps, and expect to feel the old, bowing floorboards on my bare feet. But I don't set foot out of my bed, not until I remember that we live four hours away and that I will never have to dream in that building again. But the impression is a strong one, and my wife complains that I wake her up every now and then with a stifled gasp. I rarely remember these episodes, but when I do, the emotional impact is galvanizing.

Apartment Six occupied the entire fourth floor of a four floor Victorian building. It was constructed in a year when France was at war with Prussia and President Grant was serving his first term. The floors below us were carved up into smaller apartments that were tenanted by affluent, middle-aged couples including an Egyptian surgeon, a banker, and several retirees with multiple properties who lived in the building seasonally. We didn't have trouble bidding for the residence, and I remember thinking that although the condominium was popular with wealthy professionals, we must have had an advantage because the climb – some forty-six steps in total – had frightened away prospective tenants. This is what I believed, for the apartment that we took was the crown jewel of the complex: a studio apartment of over 1,900 square feet surrounded on all sides by double casement windows that brought in air during the summer and light during the winter. The bedroom – which featured a vast, built in wardrobe and an en-suite – was easily made private by closing two ten-foot tall French doors. Hardwood floors spanned the entire apartment, a comfortable laundry room doubled as guest quarters and a library, and one of the casements opened out onto a section of roof which afforded one of the most remarkable landscapes of hills, spires, and river. During the summer months I used to climb through that window with a folding chair and some small means of entertainment – a book, a cigar, a chilled porter – and enjoy what felt like the apex of my life.

The third floor was split into two apartments which shared a landing with us. Walking up the first seventeen steps brought you to the six by six platform, and turning around to the right brought you to a locked, glass-panelled door which opened into our stairwell, which – upon turning once more to the right – brought you to another flight which led to our living room. If, however, you stopped before turning right, there were two other doors which opened into two other apartments. To the left was Apartment Four. This was where Susan lived. We saw little of her, but much of her cleaning lady, a middle-aged woman named Ellen. When Ellen would mount the stairs our cat would discontinue whatever he was currently occupied with, scuttle down the steps, and watch her through the glass

door. Although Susan seemed to be homebound, Ellen was chipper and friendly, and we knew more about her than the woman who actually owned the apartment. This was, as I said, the door to the left. Apartment Five was the door straight ahead which was visible from the foot of the stairs. This is where the person we called Milverton lived.

I say called because we never learned what he called himself. He never said and we never cared. Milverton's apartment stretched out below our bedroom and bathroom, and his living space appeared to be directly below our bed. We named Milverton after the Sherlock Holmes character of the same name: a greedy, socially awkward parasite who resembled our Milverton in personality and appearance alike. Our neighbor was a short, squat man advancing past middle age. His head was round and soft-looking, with flabby cheeks and bulging grey eyes set wide apart from a pug nose. These eyes were the dominant feature of his face: two colorless irises set in two yellowed eyeballs like black marbles pressed into animal fat. He was horrendously farsighted, I am sure, for his round glasses seemed to double their natural size, which was awful to see for they leered constantly. I never seem to remember looking at him without seeing that his eyes had first been levelled at me. They pried and wondered in a way that I found indescribably off putting for a man of his age.

Milverton's apartment, by the nature of its location, always loomed over me when I came home from work and began the ascent up our antique stairway, and even before I knew him I felt that something about it was off – not quite right. It didn't matter if you had measured the door jams or taken a picture of it to compare with our corresponding door, his always seemed – not quite larger, but incorrect, out of alignment with the general mood and symmetry of the rest of the apartments. It was externally identical to Apartment Four. It featured a white wooden door some seven feet tall with ornate Victorian trim; the brass door handle and plate that had been blackened by use, with just the faintest smears of yellow in the untouched corners and crevasses. Overhead was a rectangular transom that would have admitted a view inside his rooms had it not been patched over on the inside by purple construction paper (which I suspected of having originally been black before it was faded by time). Outside the door was a shaggy welcome mat scored by two grey streaks that almost certainly matched his toddling gait; in floral, grandmotherly script it announced "Welcome In!" to passersby. It seemed that very few people accepted the offer, for the floor boards were thin, and while I could hear him watching television, blowing his nose, coughing, and cooking, I never seemed to hear another human voice – not even him talking into a telephone.

I first saw Milverton while we were moving in. Her parents had travelled with us and we had formed a human chain in order to swiftly move boxes from the truck into our third story apartment. A box left from the trailer, met me at the foot of the first flight, where I would carry it up to the second, where my wife would collect and deposit it. In spite of the great load of boxes I found that the chore was curiously lonely. A box would be thrust into my hands every three minutes without a word or glance, and I would walk it up the stairs and return to my post in the same manner. We had possibly gone through six boxes of cookware and knick-knacks before I noticed that the door at the top of the stairs had opened. Behind it was a red wall which successfully obscured any view of the interior. There was nothing hanging from it – pictures, key-catchers, coat hooks – and indeed this was the only feature that I could see: a wall painted dark crimson, like an overripe strawberry. In front of the wall but behind the door was the little man with his round, bald head and his unblinking eyes. My first impression was one of embarrassment: clearly we were upsetting our neighbors before we had even met them. But then I looked closer at him. The expression I had taken for annoyance was actually entirely neutral – blank, like the face of a lethargic toad watching something that had the potential to upset his stupor but had so far proven nothing other than a vapid curiosity. And if Milverton had any emotion whatsoever, that emotion was curiosity. But not like an imaginative child or an excitable puppy or even a prowling cat. It was like the curiosity of a man who watches two people converse in a foreign language that he has never heard and never wishes to learn. The distinct impression was that he saw me as a quaint curiosity; not a young, noisy threat to his comfortable retirement; not a potential friend; not a nice young man with a pretty girlfriend who would bring some life into the elderly population; but a strange and inconceivable oddity. I made eye contact with him in the first moment that I realized he was standing in the doorway, but broke off without a word, because there was no question or salutation in his expression. This is a strange thing to describe because usually it is an unspoken code of human beings that our glances speak for us: they say “Can I help?” and “Oh, hi there! I’m kind of shy but it’s nice to see new neighbors” or “Great... another young brat to make a lot of ruckus. I’d thank you to keep the noise down, and no parties after eight; I have my stories at seven and then it’s off to bed.” But his face made no such declaration: those glassy black balls just sat in his fat head without blinking or breaking their aim at me.

Suddenly there was a box. I took it and turned. Now in most stories like this that I have heard of or read about this is the point where he

would have vanished and shut the door. But I looked up and realized that I had the excessively distasteful task of climbing the stairs towards the unblinking toad on the landing. I smiled thinly once or twice at him to make sure that the awkward energy between us was as one-sided as I could manage, but for the most part I kept my eyes down and trudged up the steps, watching the worn and warped brown steps and the off-white, scuff-mottled rises that separated them. I was half way there. Look up. Still standing. Watching. Look down. Step. Step. Step. I will sigh exasperatedly as if the load is heavy to fill the silence. Step. Step. Step. Three quarters. Look up. With five steps to go I had hoped that he would either walk in front of the door or walk behind it – either announce himself or retire inside. But as I climbed onto the penultimate step, I felt my pulse palpably thud in my ear drum when I saw him step aside and open his door wider, never breaking his googling stare. Had I been more dazed by the action, I might have accepted his mute invitation and walked straight off of the landing and into the waiting apartment. But no, surely not. It was the lunacy of the gesture – that by simply holding open a door and stepping back you could coax a complete stranger to change their intended course and make themselves at home. It was an outrageous offer, but it stunned me, and a small part of my mind wanted to obey the expressionless command to leave my wife and her parents and to enter his territory, but I denied the existence of such a daft impulse and turned the corner sharply. Entering our apartment and turning once again to mount the stairs on our landing, I occasioned to see him once again: black eyes made wet and bubbly behind his glasses, still fixed on me.

By the time I had deposited the box and descended onto the shared landing, the story seemed over: the door was shut and nothing except for the “Welcome In!” mat was left to remind me of the encounter. And indeed we saw nothing of Milverton for the remainder of the month. My wife had still yet to meet him, and as much as I dreaded walking up the steps when I came home from teaching night classes, I rarely thought of him outside of those lonely ascents. We didn’t see a thing of him until one Saturday morning during that same blistering summer on the Ohio River. The steam clung to everything, and the heat bled through walls and leaked through the roof so that our air conditioning had given out the previous afternoon leaving us to suffer through the night. I couldn’t sleep because of the humidity, so at four in the morning I decided to take a cold shower. The water stung in my face and hair, but it felt delicious on my skin, and I drank from it until I felt full of cool water. Turning the tap off I toweled the water from my feet and legs, but let the moisture dew on my torso in hopes of relieving the miserable temperature. Walking out of the

bathroom, through the bedroom, en route to the living room, I caught a glimpse of bright yellow. It startled me because the room was deep blue, and only a few windows glinted with the dusky orange of street lamps. This light was foreign to me and unaccounted for. I walked towards it and realized that it came from the bedroom floor, where it perfectly outlined half of one of the floorboards: two long silvery bands of parallel light, and a short stroke connecting them at the top. It horrified me to think that our floors were as thin as that, and without stopping to plot out the condo layout, I paused to wonder whose light that might be. Curious, I stooped to the floor and peered into the crack. Now, I might have expected to find a perfect peephole through which I could spy on Milverton and witness his direful deeds, but the truth of the matter was that his ceiling must have had a tile loose and that light must be pouring through this and illuminating the cavity between our floor and his ceiling, for all I saw was the back of a tile. I had still not done the mental work of figuring out which apartment would be below the bedroom – we had heard the nose blowing, the TV blaring, the coughs coughing and the cooking clinking, but none of this named the originator – and so I gave it no other thought. I made a sandwich, read some stories, and went to bed exhausted.

As I said, it was in the morning that we saw Milverton again. We left early to spend the day with a friend who had air conditioning while ours was being repaired. Having left our many windows open to air out the steam and musk, we tramped down the stairs and hurriedly unlocked the door. Through the glass panels I saw a figure bent over the “Welcome In!” mat, adjusting it with serious attention. To my wife it was just a round, bald man in his fifties, but I suddenly felt an impulse to turn her around and return up our stairs where we would suffer in peace. But the bolt was thrown and the knob turned and now the door opened, and in a single, twisting motion, Milverton had turned around and was eyeing me from behind his magnifying glasses. This time a smile played on his lips like a breeze that brushes across a pond in regular pulses.

“You’re the young folks upstairs, huh?”

His voice was unremarkable: neither creaky, nor oaky, high nor deep, garbled nor clear. It was a voice. A man’s voice, but entirely without feature or personality or accent.

“Yeah,” I said, pushing my wife along she had stopped to talk. “That’s us. I think I saw you when we were moving in.”

I wanted to simply leave things at that and spill down the stairs, but I knew that polite society required that I give him the chance to respond before clipping him off. But he surprised me.

“Don’t shower at night, guys,” he said without inflection. He stepped into my path and righted himself. Now we were facing one another squarely. “I heard you. Can you not do that? I think you can. There’s no need for it, and it bothers me, guys.”

“I’m sorry if I woke you up; I didn’t realize you could hear—“

“I didn’t say you woke me up. I asked you not to shower at night. That’s all. You should be in bed, anyway. Sleep at night. That’s what you do.”

Here he nodded slowly without breaking his gaze. There was something in it now, something alive, where before there had only been wooden death. It was like an ember had been lit in a dark room, and now for all the darkness this one red light had tainted everything around it with its murky personality. It was dark, but something was there, and it felt like hate.

I don’t really remember what I said other than to say it was a loud, frantic combination of laughs, apologies, promises, and farewells as I attempted to placate him into letting us go. I don’t know why I had any impression that he wouldn’t, but that feeling was strong, and I was strangely relieved when I managed to slip under his nose and pull my wife out with me – down the stairs and out the door. He was not there when we returned to the apartment and the repaired air conditioner.

The months built on top of each other like bricks reaching towards a planned conclusion, and while we rarely saw or heard of Milverton, I was still tense whenever we would leave our apartment or return to it – always anticipating the sight of his open door. In the meantime we settled into our new town, found restaurants that we favored, learned where the bookstore lived, and became familiar with the riverside. One day we were leaving the frozen yogurt shop when I noticed that the shop next door sold historical artifacts and replicas, mostly from the Civil War – oil lamps, muskets, hand-cranked sewing machines, old dress forms. I went inside and emerged with a replica saber. It wasn’t sharpened, but it only cost fifty dollars. Such was the character of our new residence: yogurt stores and antique shops, electric cars and horse-drawn buggies, replicas and artifacts. The town seemed formed out of two parts, one buzzing and humming with modernity – hot dog carts, indie rock concerts, and camera-toting tourists – and another – lower, beneath it all, under everything – that exuded unconquerable antiquity. Sometimes when I would walk home from the little market in our neighborhood, especially when the afternoon had waned and the sky was deep pink and the shadows deep purple, I had a sense that if I turned a corner sharply enough I would find myself in a previous century. The neighborhoods by the river were densely populated with old Antebellum storefronts and

Federal Era brick houses, separated at intervals by modern bungalows and four-squares, as if two rival gangs were innocuously moving around each other in silent but understanding preparation for an inevitable battle. The modern houses were cheery and optimistic, but they seemed small and pointless next to their ponderous brick neighbors. After dark it would not have surprised me to find the alleys and courtyards sheltering tall shadows wearing slouch hats and flat caps, smoking long, thin cigars, and thumping on the cobble stones in hobnailed boots. I often had this mental image when I was hurrying home at twilight, although in my mind's eye the faces were always washed away by unnaturally permanent shadows, like the blackening of progressive decomposition.

We had been in town for a year when one day I came down the stairs to find the cat pawing frantically at our glass door to the landing. I heard his paws smacking against the panes like erasers being drummed on desktops, and saw the white flash of his tail as he clamored back and forth, swatting and calling out in eager howls. I was nervous to descend the stairs, but decided that if Milverton was causing his antics I would simply grab the cat and stay inside. For whatever reason I didn't like the idea of our cat looking at Milverton anymore than I liked the idea of Milverton looking at me. But when I came downstairs I saw that Ellen was tapping on the glass, and my nerves relaxed into amusement. She jumped a little when she saw me, but I smiled and opened the door. Would she like to pet him? Only if it was okay with me, but of course it was. As I mentioned, the cleaning lady for Apartment Four had nurtured a strange little friendship with our typically antisocial pet, and I knew that she had never actually been able to rub his head or chin in spite of their daily ritual. She said that she was just leaving from her work at the apartment, so I invited her in and offered her some coffee while she sat with the cat on our entryway bench. I went upstairs to get a couple of mugs and returned to the landing to find her glaring through the door. She didn't break her gaze when I came down the stairs, or when I reached the bottom. Looking over my shoulder I saw Milverton shuffle lethargically through his door. The red t-shirt he wore was dark with sweat and clung tightly to his corpulent frame. He closed the door, but not before exchanging a venomous glance with my guest: I know that it was the light flashing on his glasses, but the piggish eyes that they magnified seemed to blaze with unnatural power. But the door was now closed and he was now gone.

"He's a weird one," she said.

I was tremendously relieved to hear the subject being broached. As much as Milverton featured in our lives, there was no one to share in my disgust. The president of the condo was a respectful Coptic surgeon who

was too introverted and too well-bred to indulge my commentary on our neighbor, and the other tenants never seemed to be interested in condo gossip. My wife was unsettled by the uncanny way that he seemed to materialize when we were shopping at the Kroger – he would suddenly be staring at us from the middle of an aisle that had seconds early been empty – or walking down the side streets, but she saw him as little more than a bizarre phenomenon, more of an oddity than a threat. But in Ellen's voice and face I read hate, and I jumped at the opportunity to compare notes.

"He is isn't he? Listen, do you know his name? We just call him Milverton here, and no one else here calls him anything besides 'the guy in five.'"

She shook her head, her eyes still locked on the closed door with its age-blackened handle.

"I don't know. Maybe you've noticed that he doesn't get mail?"

"I don't remember seeing anything in his box – not even junk mail, yes."

"It's weird, that's the only word for it."

"How long has he been here, do you know?"

"I started work here twelve years ago and he was here then."

"Twelve years? Really? And no mail, no name? I mean, surely we could ask," and here I said the name of the condo president.

"Oh him? He doesn't know," she said bitterly. "He owns the apartment, and he did before anyone here lived in this building. What I've heard is that he bought it with cash back when that wasn't as rare, and that he's paid for everything he needs with cash."

"But there's his license plate. Maybe that would clear it up."

"It could, but knowing his name won't be enough to understand what he is. Sure he pays taxes and has a driver's license and a social security card – I assume he does anyway. But it's not who he is; it's what he is that I don't like. There's something old about him. Old and poisonous, like those toads that kill dogs who try to eat them because they're dripping with the stuff – every day, every night, its oozing from their backs and out of their eyes: poison that could knock a grown man to his knees and into his grave."

I followed her gaze which still hovered nervously around his door jams. Our cat was playfully cycling from the floor where he wove devotedly around her legs onto the bench where he rubbed his face into her hand which was frozen in space, outstretched and limp.

"Do you know anything about him personally?" I asked, hoping to fill the vapid silence that had settled on us after the last word she had spoken.



“No, no I don’t. Only that he hasn’t changed once in twelve years. His clothes are sometimes newer. He used to wear jeans and a polo before he started wearing t-shirts and khaki shorts. But his face – that damned frog face of his hasn’t changed. He is no bigger or smaller, no greyer or darker. The same as if he was a photograph in a frame. But he moves around, though, and it isn’t right for photographs to move.”

She was talking to herself now, and her narrowed eyes told me that she was thinking very hard. The last phrase floated off her lips in a slow, half-whispered conclusion.

“Sometimes I think he’ll get me.”

I had been lost myself in a meta reverie as I pondered Ellen’s reverie, and was jolted back to myself by the strangeness of her words.

“Get you?”

“He wants company, you know? You feel it, too, yes? Not company, maybe so much as collection. Not that I know what he keeps in that apartment, but there’s – there’s almost a sense that he will leave the door open, and – and you know the feeling? It’s as if it’s an afterthought, but still a desire, like a little boy who casually leaves a mousetrap in an attic and checks on it from time to time: he doesn’t put them everywhere, and he doesn’t hunt mice with a pellet gun, but he changes the cheese every week, and even though he spends his time playing in the fields and climbing trees, each night he checks the trap, and nothing would make his night more than to come up there one evening to find that some rodent has finally taken the bait – some stiff-backed, open-mouthed thing with its spine shattered and its body hard with death. And to think what he would do with it... What would a boy like that do with a mouse? No parent wants to have such a boy – a morbid little bastard who plays in the woods by himself and comes home with odd smells on his clothes and mud on his hands, who reads books about genocides and crematoriums and executions alone in his bed with the door closed, who makes dogs bark when they catch the smell of him, whose neighborhood begins to lose its cats – more and more, year after year – until one day someone wonders what’s happened to them all,” and here she pulled her friend up onto her lap and clasped her hands protectively around him. “He is that sort of boy. He’s old and fat and grey, but he’s that sort of boy. And he’s too lazy to hunt, but he knows that if he changes the cheese and checks everyday... one day he’ll get his mouse. And I don’t wonder that he hasn’t already caught a few.”

Ellen finished her coffee, thanked me, and left our cat with a warm rub behind his ears. She was out of the door and into the corridor. Before I had turned the light out and made my way up the stairs I heard the bolt draw

back from the door across from ours, and the hinges sighed like the springs of a mousetrap being cocked.

There wasn't much traffic on Main Street that night – only the soft hum of travelers crossing the slumber gap between Cincinnati and Louisville, interrupted at odd intervals by the far-off moan of an ambulance and the occasional watch cry of a barge horn as it churned through the black waters of the Ohio with its sagging load of pig iron, coal, or limestone, passing under our windows like a primordial whale calling for company in the lonely night. My wife slept soundly as she always does, and as she especially did on nights that were so still and silent. But I had trouble falling asleep. Perhaps my conversation with Ellen had unsettled me, but I kept imagining the man who in all likelihood was sitting in a chair directly below me, separated from us by two feet of floorboards, space, and ceiling tile. I remembered the dislodged tile and the light it had – and continued to – leak through our floor when he had a light on, and I felt even less protected at the thought. He seemed like a roommate or a pet. But the more I pondered the thin veneer that separated us, the more it felt like the roles were reversed: maybe we were his roommates – his pets. I shuddered when I remembered Ellen's description of the little boy who lures cats and dogs into the woods for pleasure killing. I saw in my mind a small child, a fat child with a round head and fat eyes magnified by round, thick lenses. His hands were pudgy but nimble. And they were strong. Strong enough to crush life from a living animal's throat. Whether I was dreaming or imagining I can't say, because the vision both seemed to emanate from my mind and to be projected onto it, but I saw him even clearer now: he was wearing knickerbockers tucked into dark calf-length socks which disappeared into plain, brown ankle boots, and he wore a short-sleeved white button-up and a grey flannel cap. I realized now that this boy in my mind is from a very specific time – not a generic child, but one dressed in the regalia of a period before my lifetime, or my father's, or my grandfather's. He is walking down a mossy hillock and looking behind him very often. Now he is at its foot, on the bank of a black, muddy creek, and I am recognizing Crooked Creek, and the bridge that we drove over that first day is not there, but something is in its place, although it is wooden and already grey with weather and age. And now the boy is under it, and he is still smiling and looking, and I now realize that I am very hungry and feel dirty and sore and that my feet are cold while my legs are warm, and the boy is showing me something. He is pointing and smiling and his teeth are showing through the smile. And I move towards him, and we are under the bridge, and I am so very hungry. And the boy is showing me a rabbit,

or perhaps it is a dog, but its skin is gone, and only the bright pink muscle is showing. It is uncooked, but I am hungry – so very, very hungry. And I saY “Thankee! Thankee right kind! I know it ain’t fittin’ fer you ter be dealin’ with the likes-a me, but Gawd effin’ that ain’t right kind of yeh. Gawd bless yeh, young’un. Gawd bless yeh right good.” And my hands are on the rabbit, or maybe it is a dog, and the muscle is warm and wet, and I am unsettled even though I have seen war and been to Shiloh and watched the carnage at Stone’s River, and hadn’t I seen Captain Symond’s body torn into four quarters by grapeshot at Chickamauga? But I am feeling uneasy about this young’un when I see the butcherly job that he has done – and so well, too. And now is shadow falling over my eyes and blood is drumming in my ears because the coldness in my feet is now everywhere, and I know what I am feeling because I was bayoneted through the shoulder by one of my our own pickets when I came up behind him during a guard change at Fort Donelson. And it’s happening many times, more times than is natural, even for this sort of thing, and I’m on the ground, and my hair is being tugged on. I’m feeling the heat of two stubby legs against my cheeks, and I’m calling out but then I stop because I’ve lost my voice and my throat is on fire and my head is very cold and then I am seeing flashes of light and whiteness and electric pops like a galvanic battery.

At this point I swam out of my blankets, and my hands flew wildly towards my throat – guarding it which the knuckles that I hoped would stave off a carving knife, but of course there was nothing to stave off, and I wiped the sweat off of my chest and cheeks and brow. I got out of bed for a glass of water – and also to force myself to shake off the nightmare. Get up, I thought to myself, get out of bed and walk around; there’s nothing to get you and nothing to be afraid of. But how cowardly did I slink from the bedroom with my shoulders hunched and my eyes flitting madly around each shape and shadow that they could decipher from the darkness. I returned to bed still shattered by my dream – or vision or imaginings – and greedily wrapped myself in the sheets. But I hadn’t failed to notice the yellow outline of the loose floorboard, and the idea of Milverton being awake with me – and I say with me because I continued to feel the increasingly distinct sense that he was as much a member of our household as the cat or my wife – was hopelessly disturbing for reasons which I could not describe or attempt to voice. I ignored the intrusive light, but I could not ignore the sounds, for I could shut my eyes, but I could not shut my ears. There were the normal noises: the recline of an easy chair, a gruesomely loud series of phlegm-smothered coughs, incidental mutterings, the creak of floorboards, and the clatter of plate

ware. But just as I was becoming comfortable with the prospect of becoming vulnerable to sleep something else caught my attention: a slow, squeaking, rubbing sound, like a hand which has been pressed hard against a wet tile wall and is now being dragged across its surface, or like wet rubber being dragged over a hard floor. The sounds coincided with a flabby padding of naked feet against tile, and the picture that formed in my mind was of a man staggering out of a shower and pulling something with him. I refused to feed my imagination any further, having felt betrayed by it earlier, and I put in ear plugs and listened to podcasts until I fell asleep.

We lived in that town for nearly two years, from the May of 2012 to the summer of 2014. We each found our first professional jobs there, and our careers flourished, but once we became engaged in October of 2013 we decided that it would be a convenient time to relocate closer to friends and family. Of course I also relished the chance to move away from Milverton, but I didn't think about him as much after our engagement. We had decided to move our little household to Fort Wayne, four hours northward, and the prospect of putting so much distance between us took out the chill of Milverton's awkward gazes and uncanny appearances considerably. Milverton notwithstanding, I knew that the move would signify a loss as much as it was a welcome eventuality: I had grown to love the little town with its quaint charm and unescapable history. I even became attached to the clusters of shadowy men that I imagined smoking cigars in their slouch hats and hobnails, for while Fort Wayne might be haunted by the ghosts of Maumee warriors, French traders, and Johnny Appleseed himself, I doubted if any of their shades had the same gallant character of these faceless loiterers. The cobblestones started to become very dear to me, and once we had signed the lease on our new apartment on Rivermet Avenue, just east of downtown Fort Wayne, I found myself spending most of my free time walking down the oldest parts of town, stalling my progress homeward, and wandering aimlessly across the narrow streets and under the looming Antebellum domiciles. My imagination was pregnant with impressions and suppositions to the point where I felt I knew a dozen residents of each tall-windowed house from a dozen different decades. I could see their figures and knew their names even though their faces always evaded my musing. Here on the riverbank was a two story Italianate where Jack Tawney and his wife lived after he retired from captaining flatboats up the Ohio to Pennsylvania. Mr. Sheppard, the coal mogul, and his Canadian mistress stayed there fifteen years later during his divorce. It didn't end well, for she committed suicide and he moved to St. Louis, but Judge Pierson moved his family there after

that, and they were comparatively happy although his son was never heard from again after he left to join the AEF in the Great War. After they sold it, Henry Bramwell used the cellar to store bathtub gin and sold it out of his kitchen before he caught polio at the Crystal Beach Pool. It was damaged in the 1937 flood, but Bramwell's children repaired it and sold it to Susan Gentry who lived there peacefully while her husband was flying B-17s over Berlin and Hamburg... And so it goes, and so it went.

My wife was at work and I was packing our apartment when the condo president knocked at our landing door to tell me that Ellen was missing. Two policemen had come with him and they were curious if I recalled the last time I had seen her, and if she had given off any odd impressions. I didn't remember if I had seen her after our conversation a few weeks earlier, but when I gave them my abbreviated account and guessed the date (for I couldn't remember exactly, but I thought it had been probably Thursday the 12<sup>th</sup>), it was apparent that I could not have seen her since then, or if I did it had been after she failed to come to work the first time. After taking down a few notes, the cops left, chatting cheerfully as they made their way outside. I watched them laugh and gesture nonchalantly as they climbed into a squad car and pulled away. The case certainly didn't seem to worry them. It surprised me that the police had waited so long to interview the residents, but the little surgeon politely informed us that they didn't think her disappearance had anything to do with the condo or anyone in the condo. It was suspected, they had told him, that she had left town to avoid paying a rent on her apartment, which her landlady found unlocked after Ellen's employer had called in search of her whereabouts. Even though her valuables were still in place, the police continued to pursue the theory that she was dodging creditors. Ellen was never seen again. The case is still open today.

"If you can think of anything, let me know, or call the police."

"Do you really think they're taking this seriously?" I asked.

"I should hope so! Why do you question that?"

"Have they interviewed everyone?" The question lodged in my throat and came out in a forceful, angry tone which gave vent to the irrational and unfounded suspicions that were whirring in my brain like vague, unformed sheets of vapor that barely suggested the well-defined cloud that they were destined to shape.

"You and your neighbor. I know you were acquaintances so I suggested that they meet with you."

"What about the guy in five?"

"Mister..." he paused and twisted his face. I saw on it that this might actually be the first time he had realized that the man's name was a

mystery to him. "The gentleman in number five did not have a relationship with Ellen so far as I know."

"I would encourage you to ask the police to question him," I said sharply.

He eyed me curiously, nodding his head as if testing the weight of a melon.

"Perhaps, perhaps. If you say so, then perhaps. You must know more than I. The gentleman has never caused any trouble that I know of, and he pays his fees in cash every year on the first of January. He never has been a problem. But yes, yes..." it was as if the self-composed little Copt was suddenly seeing something that his unobtrusive nature had been obscuring until now. He was a kind man but a private man, the sort who shuns gossip and spurns hearsay along with intuition and imagination. But even within his precise, trusting mind I could see dim and nightmarish shapes forming. His forehead twisted as if he were calling into question problems which he had heretofore written off or refused to consider.

"Yes... I see perhaps what you might mean. Maybe. I might ask that they call on the gentleman. Yes. Well, excellent day to you. Goodbye."

The president disappeared down the hall after our discussion, and I turned around to close the door after him. I fumbled with the lock – for whatever reason the bolt hadn't lined up with its receiver and I had to push hard against the door before it ran home – and when I looked up Milverton was glowering at me from behind his door – his grapefruit head wedged between its white surface and the crimson wall behind it, with a few pudgy fingers peeping out above the doorknob as he slowly drew it back. His eyes seemed to swim in fluid, being even more large and watery behind the glasses than usual – two great, black, liquid pools that threatened to fill the entire surface of each lens. I felt my soul well with hate and I broke the gaze that had so often petrified me, slamming the door indignantly and returning to the monotonous chore of packing.

That night my wife was going to be very late, so I went to bed early after a light supper. The summer days were long and the evenings were light, but a storm had spilled across the Ohio River Valley, and the sky which the day before had been the color of raw honey the night before was a dusky, putrid green. Shaggy purple clouds mottled the horizon, spreading over the town at a steady pace until it was as dark as any winter evening, and the mood was set for an early bedtime since I had no wish to watch the storm or try to fall asleep once it had already opened up with the loud violence that the clouds forecasted. As I settled against my pillows I could already hear the rippling murmur of approaching thunder,

and the last thing I remember before I fell asleep was a searing flash of electric white.

There seemed to be whispers all around me. Not the sort that show up in heavy-handed horror movies where a fellow is on his bed tossing from one side to the other as familiar voices clearly speak the words that haunt his heart. No, instead it was as if people were actually moving from one room to another, speaking in this corner and around that wall, their tones appearing first as choppy echoes in the cavernous stairwell, then as muffled squabble in the laundry room behind the curtains, now behind my head as glassy accents bouncing off the bathroom tiles. I heard them shifting physically across space like two (when there were two, although there weren't always) men casually moving from one area of the apartment to another with all the casualness and nonchalance of longtime residents. And now and again as my eyes moved behind closed lids I was seeing the apartment lit by daylight, or by dull electric lamps, but with different furnishings and sometimes different walls. Here the bathroom was a ratty kitchen, there the laundry room was a closet that stored a huge metal tub and a miniscule sink basin with ugly black knobs. And the voices flowed in and out of the rooms. Worried. Always they were worried. Two men speaking in angry, hushed tones, a man and a woman nervously holding a meeting in the corner of the bedroom, a fat old man (so he sounded) anxiously turning a rotary dial before contacting his son with worrisome intelligence. And in the gaps between I sometimes saw shapes: men in seersucker fiddling with boater hats, teenagers handling chunky landlines in tattered acid-wash jeans, a women wearing cloches picking at pendulous strings of beads, old gentlemen in three-piece suits with watch-chains and square bowties, pretty girls in flowing skirts that swung below their knees, young bucks in suspenders that flanked neckties which were ludicrously short, balding fellows in checked leisure suits dabbing sweat from their domes, sooty young women in shirtwaists wiping their hands on stained aprons. And always they worried and wondered: *We should move – It's bothering my sleep now – I'm calling the landlord – It ain't a right thing, Mac – Yesterday I saw him on the stairs and he just smiled at me, but golly what a smile! – I can't explain it, Sal, but something about him just don't settle with me – Get the kids and go town to the auto; we're leaving tonight – I dunno. I mean he's a dweeb, but there's like something else. No. No, he's just such a creeper, but like, it's not like he's ever even talked to me, ya know? – Mr. Levenstein, you know, the Jew in number three, well he says that he's been in the house since the War with Spain and in all that time he says this fella hasn't ever changed. Not a jot – Good God, Mary! Good God!*

When I woke up my wife was not beside me. I frantically grabbed for my phone in a blackness that I had not expected – apparently the storm had knocked out power to the north side of town, because the window panes that usually glowed orange were indecipherable from the wall. The phone gushed white light into the room, and I saw a text that announced her plan to stay with a colleague due to the ferocity of the weather. I felt relieved at once and turned back to my bed. But before I had even rested by shoulder down I was up again, and this time I would not go back to sleep. I had heard something. Something on the stairs. But for whatever reason it was so much more visceral than anything that had been flitting through my mind that I immediately flailed to a sitting positing and stretched my hands out for some kind of defense. It had definitely been a sound, a real sound. A fat, flabby footfall – a naked foot on the naked wood. And there was another. And then – this one was different, less heavy, sharper, like a hand. It was repeated, and then the feet, like a heavy, grown person was crawling up the stairs on all fours – foot, hand, foot, foot, hand, foot, hand, foot, foot, hand... I looked desperately for a reference point, but all I could managed to see were the two windows just opposite me, the glass of which occasionally flickered with blue light as the lightning crackled in the low-hanging clouds that clawed at our town's hills and steeples. At irregular intervals the two tombstone-shaped apertures would gleam with cold electricity and admit a watery blue flash like the gleam of a television menu. Of course, my senses were thrown into chaos by the sudden importance of hearing and impotence of seeing. Used to favoring the other to inform my world, I clung desperately to my underdeveloped sense of sound and waited to hear what would happen next. And it came – a revolting flop, followed by the squirmy squeak of bloated flesh being dragged slowly and determinedly across bare floors. Pat! Pat! Two swollen paws would reach out ahead of their primary mass, and then a torturous screech as a belly was dragged forward. The sounds were in the living room, inching methodically towards the massive French doors that served as a fourth wall when closed.

For the first time I realized that whatever it was, it knew where to go, and that to remain in bed, silent and inert was a poor strategy. Desperately, and in pathetic vanity, I rushed out of the sheets and flung open the switches of every light or lamp I could reach in the room. Lightlessness prevailed, of course, and the straining breath of the crawling thing was now outside the door. I rushed into the darkness, clawing about ineffectively for a means of protection. I then remembered the dull saber I had bought at the Civil War antique shop. The blade, as I mentioned, was as sharp as the backside of a butter knife, but it was three feet long and



weighed five pounds. At the best, I knew that its pointed tip could stab through flesh, but my chief defense was in the physics of a weapon of its dimensions: swung with a full motion of the arm, the force of the blade would unquestionably shatter bone and crush muscle, and a direct blow to the head – sharp or dull – could crack open any man’s skull. I say this in retrospect, knowing that if I were burgled tonight I would feel comfortable defending myself with the saber even though the blade is slightly bent, but that is a contest of flesh against flesh, and whatever was dragging itself towards my bedroom may have been composed of flesh, but it was animated by something which no blade or bullet or bludgeon could fend off.

I hoisted the sword from its hooks on the wall, and removed it from its sheath with a grating screech, letting the scabbard clatter noisily to the floor as I backed into the corner where my wife kept her shoes and waited. If the blade was wrenched out of my hands, or if it broke from the blows I weakly comforted myself with the possibility that I could grab a brace of heels and push them into my attacker’s soft eyes. I was thinking this when the door shook. A sweaty cluster of fingers had gripped it from the outside with a snapping, forceful grasp, which now pried it open. I swung around to peer at the blackness that I knew contained my attacker, and in my nervousness, I struck the blade on the edge of a bookcase, twisting the weapon out of my hands and sending it spinning through the darkness in the direction of the open door. It made a noise like a thrown skillet, and I could hear it rotating in slow orbits on the wood before it stilled. There was an asthmatic wheeze, and both doors now creaked open. In that moment a family of lightning sizzled opposite my two windows, and I saw the silhouette of my companion struck against the turquoise panes: rising up on its stubby arms, with head thrown back, mouth agape, and throat puffed out, its round head dangled along its spine, and although I could only barely infer anything beyond the outline, I confirmed a suspicion that needed no confirmation as Milverton slid across my floor like a sea lion dragging its ponderous girth behind it. Suddenly it was down, flat to the ground, and a hand shot out in the direction of my lost saber. With nausea in my spirit I heard flabby skin smack down on steel, and noted the rumbling clatter as the blade was pulled steadily across the boards towards a sound – a kind of giddy breathing – that I prefer to leave undescribed.

The printer clicked on loudly and three series of high-pitched electric beeps – the dryer, dishwasher, and oven – sang out as eye-peeling light blazed in every corner of the room: the overhead light, two standing lamps, a desk lamp, the bathroom vanity lights and overhead light, and

the brave yellow bulb in the closet all threw their educating rays out in a network of interlacing light. And there on the floor, pressed into it like flattened wad of dough, his swollen hand greedily clutching the first six inches of the saber blade, was Milverton. He was entirely naked. Even his eyes were uncovered, and for the first time I saw his eyes: black, beastly holes that flashed angrily in the light with an animalistic intelligence that I still cannot say whether it was less than human or more than human, only that the ghastly message which they conveyed was anything thing but. His teeth – which I had never seen – were clashed together and bared, and reminded me of encounters I have had with animals which I would rather forget. In the second that the electricity returned I saw his puffy, grey-skinned body splattered on my floor, and it stunned me, but in the following second my wits returned, and I launched across the yard or two that separated us, clutched the leather grip with a quick motion, and swiped the replica from his fist. His eyes seemed to further darken – perhaps because the thin halo of white that encircled his black irises had blushed dark red with rage – and he squirmed towards me with a rapid twitching shuffle, like an aggressive crocodile, and his teeth gnashed with an iron clap. I was so disgusted with the image that at first I forgot myself, but then I twisted my finger tightly around the leather grip, hoisted the blade over my head, and brought it down with as much weight as I could impart to it on the side of his face. The bone yielded, and the sound is difficult to relive even under the circumstances. The steel rang and the blade quivered. Before he could cry out, I threw it back into the air and using both hands like an axe, I transmitted all the force my body could generate into a blow across his back, and I heard his ribs give way and saw the blood hemorrhaging under his fat.

Far worse in some ways than his entrance was his exit: he cried out in a childish, pig-like wail, and scuttled backwards through the door like a newt fleeing from a shock. I heard the rapid patter of his feet and hands as he trickled down the stairs and crashed onto the landing and into the hall. My last memory was of his face – eyes wide in injured shock, mouth agape with wounded indignity, like a toddler who after clubbing his sibling with a heavy plastic toy is awestruck when their will is defied and the bruised child slaps them in the mouth.

I had forgotten about the cat. He was a mess of raised hair and peeled eyes, foaming with rage and terror in the laundry room, but when I went to collect him (more for my company than for his comfort), he seemed to freeze and loosen – something in the air had been communicated to him, and his eyes widened while his ears rotated forward like antennae. His outrage seemingly gone now, he suddenly darted past me, slinking low to

the ground, curling around the corner, and rushing down the stairs, his bell jingling determinedly with each velvet stride. I had a dim understanding of what he might be doing, and in horror I grabbed for the saber which I had tossed onto a pile of taped-up moving boxes, and ran after him. I turned the corner just in time to see his plume-like tail disappear into Milverton's apartment, for his door was wide open. Hoping to be able to catch him in the entryway without encountering the injured occupant, I leapt through the door and caught a glimpse of white flashing in circles at the base of a dark shape. But before I made a move for the momentarily distracted animal, I found myself staggered by what surrounded me. The windows which looked out over Main Street were open, but a bizarre, red flickering light seeped in through the casements, and unfamiliar sounds floated through the night air: steady, stony clatters, the regular turning of steel on brick, the sounds of livestock – of sheep and pigs and cattle – braying, and the distinct moan of a steam whistle passing behind the building as it moved sluggishly down the river. The odor that buzzed in my nostrils was humiliating – I use the word because there is no other way to describe a young man's first encounter with raw, unembalmed death. Syrupy and sweet underneath, but cripplingly pungent in its rancid atmosphere, the smell of human decay billowed from each black corner like gases from a marsh. In the pale red light I could see that the apartment was entirely contemporary without a single anachronistic touch, unlike the sights and sounds in the street bellow, but the walls were dark with raggedy, stick-like shapes that seemed suspended from wires or hooks or nails. The cat was crooning loudly at some seated thing – black and squat – that festered in an easy chair, winding playfully in a figure eight around its two bloated feet, occasionally pausing to raise himself on his hind paws, head bent to receive a scratch that would never come from a rigid hand that was bursting with putrefaction. In the glinting light I made out the oversized shape of a woman whose white clothes were blackened with rotting blood, and whose pulpy face was unrecognizable, though her identity was clear.

A cry came from the street bellow – “You men, put your backs into that. We need to clear the streets before the pigs come into town for slaughter day. Two hours to daylight and we have seven thousand swine on their way to the dockyards,” and another – “Here me, ya’ll. The *James A. Garfield* is puhling intuh pawrt, so make shuh ever’ stevedoh is attis post in fifteen min’tes. She gonna be a busy day, boys.”

I was distracted by the commotion enough that I didn't notice the dark shape slithering in my direction, but when a giddy wheeze caught my ear, I spun around and swung the flat of the blade into the bobbing head that

was worrying at my ankle. Something burned in my calf, but the mass slithered away at the blow with a yelp. I turned on my iPhone flashlight, holding it over him with my left hand while I cocked my right arm with the sword. In the white light I saw his face like a pink globe – his right cheek and eye socket disfigured by a pulpy, black weal. Unblinking and expressionless, he slowly pulled himself to his feet and set his round jaw. Calmly – as if repressing at tremendous amount of venom with a tremendous amount of self-control – he slid into bathrobe and gingerly applied his glasses to his broken face. With a smart motion he spun around, and in the glare of the cell phone I saw that his face was twisted into an ambiguous smile that gleamed with malignance. His black eyes once more swam glassily in the goggle-like lenses which magnified his bloated, purple injury.

He stood there in the twilight, the wrenched grin barely disguising his desperate hatred, with his fat hands hanging at his side – heavy and engorged with blood. The red light from the strange world that he looked out over – a view hidden from my window just four feet above his – glared savagely into his rat-hole apartment and shone in the black surface of his eyes like railroad lights on wet asphalt. I realized that there was nothing I could do to defend myself from him if he wanted me. I wondered how he had lured Ellen into his den. Maybe this had been a trick, too, and I began to question my part in the decision to follow the cat over this threshold into another world. Perhaps I had no choice in the matter. Perhaps this was a snare that had been laid for me for decades or centuries, one which the invisible rails of my life had circled around in large, open spirals until now the moment came when the destination was unmistakable.

He stepped forward, eyes twinkling in the murk like black billiards being rolled through a candlelit room. That wet-lipped smile spread thickly across his face, and I saw the black encrustations of blood rimming each tooth. My panic struggled against the hideous, irrational curiosity that beat in my heart, demanding to stay put and even die if it meant knowing what this was – all of this: this nightmare-haunted town with its sleepless ghosts, this strange dimension that I was now standing in where decades and death had no jurisdiction, yet seemed so paradoxically pervasive, this grotesque caricature of a man who fed on fear and life and was agelessly aged. I wanted to run, but with each clap of my heart I felt a voice growing in horrified wonder – louder and louder – first in my mind, then formulating in my throat until it poured out in a wild scream that I hardly recognized as coming from my voice.

*“Who are you, God damn you?”*

The question seemed to both shock and satisfy him. At first the smile flew from his face as his jaw plunged open and the flabby skin sank in awe. I sensed that he was unused to being questioned directly. Most people must try to avoid interacting with him, clinging to small talk and curt responses. Then, as he recollected himself, the skin reshaped itself to form that malicious, arch grin, as if pulled back into place by invisible wires. The eyes no longer shone – they burned.

“You know exactly who I am. I’m more apart of you – more a part of that –” he gestured to the black, swollen corpse fermenting in the chair “than your own skin.” As he said so, he flourished his sausage fingers in a gesture that ran up and down the length of my body. He bit down on his lower lip, peeling away the upper as if to suggest a rising curtain. And somehow I felt the metaphor. I did know him. He wasn’t some creature I had read about – this isn’t fiction, after all: he didn’t whisper to me “Before I fell from Grace, the angels had a name for me, and it was... *Luc-i-fer...*”, neither did he say “I am called many things by many people” before listing the international names for death, sin, or trickster demons like Mephistopheles, Apep, Baphomet, Beelzebub, the Black Man, or Nyarlathotep, and he certainly didn’t say “I was a prince in my homeland, and I fought the Church’s wars until I was too strong and they tried to break me – but they couldn’t; nothing can break me. Not man, nor his laws, nor death, nor time, nor anything. They were right when they called me the Dragon, the Devil, *Dracul*. Ah! I see you know of me after all.” As I said, this is not fiction, and the answers are not as neat and relatable. The fact is that I did know him, but that is where I must stop, because what I knew of him was not a name, but a feeling.

Here was this thing – this fat, bloated vermin – who had weathered what seemed to be twice the number of decades that I could ever hope to survive, who had thrived on the lives of his neighbors, and had transcended time, space, and matter themselves, all by being sedentary and unambitious. For one and a half centuries at least he had stayed in the same town – the same apartment – shunning the sights and experiences of an entire world, and his reward was immortality. I knew then that I hated him in a way that was entirely unique to me. It wasn’t a feeling like disgust – which I felt towards his flabby body, fungal skin, and unblinking stare – and it wasn’t indignation – which I felt towards his invasion of my life and home – or outrage – which I felt towards his murder of our little cat’s harmless friend. What I felt was a soulful detestation that rose against what stood in front of me – a positive refutation of the crannies in my own spirit which shaded the Milvertons that had grown there in my weakness and apathy. He was as much a part of me as much as the bacteria that

peopled my intestines and the death that daily grew in my atoms – enhanced with every inhalation, heartbeat, and synapse. I knew him – knew him deep in each capillary and cell, deep in the fibers that held me up, deep in the fluids that fed my life – a shadow in the farthest corners of my existence. Here was my muffled anger, my redirected hatred, my hushed lust. Here was that slimy, lumbering personality that longed to drench itself in comfort, hiding from all other human faces in the warm shadows of selfishness that I yearned for early in the morning, when I was hungry, when I was irritated, when I was tired; a face that I had become familiar with: a grainy visage seen from the corner of my eye.

Somewhere in the crimson-tinged darkness behind Milverton I sensed a plodding, swaying movement, as if a small crowd were silently biding their time. From the dusky glow of the lamplight creeping in from the dirt street bellow I could make out the silhouettes of tall, sturdy men with wide, pulpy shoulders and heavy jaws. At intervals the orange gleam of dragged cigarettes peered at me like snakes' eyes blinking sleepily in the dark. The town ghosts were materializing in the gloom like carrions flocking after the clatter of troops marching to destruction. It was as if the world outside the window – the one which I had so often felt, and heard, and smelled in the periphery of my understanding – was quietly making preparations for an invasion. Milverton's apartment seemed to be the hinge point between the dimension that he had fled and the one in which he and I lived in – a lobby whose doors were locked to the outside, but permitted a view of a universe no less real than the one I was born into and stood in now, and I sensed that his hand was at the deadbolt, ready to admit the denizens of whatever timeless place teemed beneath his windows.

Even as I warily scanned the shades behind him, a kind of sallow intensity swam over his features, and the shades appeared more and more distinct against the scarlet panes. Just as I felt myself being drawn into that glassy light, the cat howled. Pivoting on my heel, I saw the white animal gleaming pink in the murk, squatting authoritatively on the sagging head of his decomposing friend. The image of the loyal animal clinging unabashedly to that image of foul corruption struck me like a blow to the face, and I felt an impulse tremble in my arms as I dashed headlong into Milverton's fleshy body. His teeth and eyes flashed with shocked desperation as he fell to the floor with a hideous flop. He sprawled under my weight, as I pressed myself into him without a thought, shoving my hands and face into his trembling skin. For some reason he was entirely immobilized by my touch, and his tongue churned between his teeth and lips, smacking violently and working his spit into a

foam that glinted in the lamplight as it dripped down his cheeks. Before I knew what I was doing, I spread my entire body over his, pressing my face against his, feeling the hot vapor gushing in panicked spurts from his lips and nostrils. I had been holding him down for what felt like minutes before I noticed that the room was bathed in husky, purple light from the night sky. The electric lamps outside of our building outlined the panes in milky white, and the hiss of tires on wet pavement sounded in the street below like waves breaking softly on a beach. I looked down at Milverton. His jowls were quivering, and his eyes jiggled in his skull like blackberry jelly. With a shove, I stood up and surveyed his body – flattened on the floor and sparkling with oily sweat.

The cat was now at my side. With a long, unflinching gaze, it considered the jiggling mess, and then it silently turned for the door and disappeared up our stairs and into the blackness. I found the saber with its warped blade and quietly picked it up. In front of me were windows unobstructed by loitering phantoms, still occasionally illuminated by a weal of lightning. I turned around and left Milverton sweltering on his floor. Before I ascended up the stairs I made sure that both of the locks on our door were set. I slept until noon, when the sunlight refracted in the puddles and the rain-drenched foliage.

I never called the police about Ellen's body. I knew in some part of myself that I change had happened before the morning, and I went downstairs when I woke up. The door was closed, but through the transom I could see a beige wall gleaming with midday sunlight. Something pushed me to turn the handle, and I wasn't surprised by what I found, or – more to the point – what I didn't.

I didn't tell my wife why I was so tired and nervous, or why I had decided to give the cat an impromptu bath, or why a smell like spoiled ham lingered in the bathroom where he had been cleaned and the bedroom where the loose plank had finally been pinned into place with six framing nails. We carried our boxes out as unceremoniously as we carried them in. After five hours we had packed our furniture, books, and boxes into a moving van. My parents' car was packed with clothes, towels, and linens. Our car carried the leftover miscellany. The cat in his carrier was snugly tucked into the backseat. We pulled our little convoy out of the parking lot, up the alley, spilling into Main Street, and flowing steadily with the westbound traffic until we turned north on Highway 421. The highway rolled over the low hills, climbing rapidly up the ravine that passed through the two craggy cliff faces. We lurched over Crooked Creek, jolting across the bridge – that site of a long forgotten bridge where some half-starved tramp had been lured and butchered by in a previous century.

Our tires spun eagerly, humming on the pavement with each revolution, dragging us up the looping road, higher and higher towards the cliffs. At every bump of the tires, every shift of gears, I expected to see a toad-shaped man lurch in front of us, emerging from the woods on all fours, skitter across the highway like a crab – anything to prevent our escape from that memory-haunted city where the structures of three centuries stand solemnly side by side, as if in defiance of time and space and progress. I looked for him on the shoulders, behind the guardrails, and I even spooked when we passed a deer carcass, round with putrid gases. But it was only a deer, and we drove on and on, into Versailles and Greensburgh, onto 465 and thence to I-69. We drove further and further, and we stopped in Fort Wayne where our new apartment stood, overlooking a smaller river, Fort Wayne where we married, where we bought our first house, where we work and sleep and eat and dream – full 200 miles from 512 East Main Street.

But I don't sleep well anymore, and no distance can comfort my nights. There are times when I lay awake well into four o'clock, listening for a flabby footfall on the stairs – gentle but solid – or peer into the muffled shadows for the globular head and bulbous form beneath it. Will it hop into my bedroom like a frog? Scuttle in backwards like a spider? Or slide on its belly across the floor beneath my hand like a centipede? I don't know what to expect, but I know only too well that my escape may have been made, but it may just as likely have been a delay. When will I meet Milverton again? Will I glimpse his face in the reflection of my car window when I'm unlocking my car after a night class? Will I turn a corner on my way to my son's college graduation and walk into his open embrace? Will I be struggling in my death throes only to recognize his black eyes glaring over the crest of my doctor's surgical mask? Or will I have met him walking home from school twenty years ago? Will I have met him at my daycare when a strange, round man walks in a deftly plucks me from the room like a tramp picking an apple from a tree? Will he be waiting for me in my future or will he hunt me down in my past? Of course there is no way to answer these questions. I know that I was not supposed to escape. I was supposed to accompany Ellen in that dark room lit by the gaslights of another century, and perhaps I still will. Milverton disappeared without a sight or sound, and his apartment was impeccably tidy, the little Egyptian surgeon told us while we were moving. There was no odor to arouse suspicions, and certainly no stains or bodies or bones. He was gone. Probably to another time, possibly to another place. I hope that my embrace – the feeling of my flesh clinging to his, not in defense but in communion – forced him back into whatever snake hole he first emerged



from. Maybe he was now a six year old boy, not yet lonely and bitter. Maybe he was a young man trying a different source of vitality. Maybe he is dead. But Ellen has never come back from the dead, and I have not forgotten about my encounter (as time-travel logic would expect), so I fear that he may be none of these things. Whatever he is, whoever he is – there is no name for it, and I won't begin to speculate – I only hope that my fear-exhausted life concludes before I see those piggish eyes boring into mine.

# SHOCKLEY HOUSE

— David Maurice Garrett

EVIL! Complicit in thought and deed with the Devil himself am I. My cold, black soul is doomed, as it should be, for all eternity. No amount of guilt, remorse, repentance, or atonement can, nor should, save me now. Would Satan be forgiven if he asked it? No! There is nothing left for me but to confess my part and name the one who has dragged me to Hell with him; for we shall be together for all eternity in that pit. It is that thought that stays my hand from ending it all this very instant!

The other day I saw the following article and recoiled in horror at its implications:

## Are EMF's making you see ghosts?

For some people, ghosts are a very real part of their daily experiences. Barring spectral visitors from the afterlife, what causes these people to believe they're being haunted? A research team thought it might be people's sensitivity to electromagnetic fields (EMFs) and non-audible sound. So a group of scientists put several people inside a house full of EMFs and infrasounds and tried to haunt them.

According to the Daily Grail, the scientists from Goldsmith College's Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit got mixed results with their EMF-laced house:

*Recent research has suggested that a number of environmental factors may be associated with a tendency for susceptible individuals to report mildly anomalous sensations typically associated with "haunted" locations, including a sense of presence, feeling dizzy, inexplicable smells, and so on. Factors that may be associated with such sensations include fluctuations in the electromagnetic field (EMF) and the presence of infrasound. A review of such work is presented, followed by the results of the "Haunt" project in which an attempt was made to construct an artificial "haunted" room by systematically varying such environmental factors.*

Unfortunately, when the team tested this theory, they came up ghostless. They asked 79 participants to walk through their

haunted house and record if and where they experienced any unusual sensations. While some participants did feel such sensations, the locations in the house where they felt the sensations did not correlate with the locations the team had “haunted,” suggesting the sensations were caused more by the power of suggestion than electromagnetic fields.

But other researchers have had more luck summoning ghosts with EMF. Michael Persinger, a neuroscientist at Laurentian University, published a study on a brain damaged girl who reported frequent nocturnal visits from an apparition. Reports *Scientific American*:

*When Persinger and his colleagues investigated (at the behest of the girl's mother), they found an electric clock next to the bed that was about 10 inches (25.4 centimeters) from where she placed her head when she slept. Tests showed that the clock generated electromagnetic pulses with waveforms similar to those found to trigger epileptic seizures in rats and humans. When the clock was removed, the visions stopped. Persinger determined that the clock, in combination with the girl's brain injury, were highly likely to have been contributing factors to the perceived nocturnal visits.*

Regardless of the cause, the notions of ghosts and haunting do have a measured effect on our psyches. In 2005, a study published in *Human Nature* had participants take a test on which they were given the opportunity to cheat. Some of the test takers were told the room was haunted, while the others were not. The students in the haunted group were overwhelmingly less likely to cheat than the non-haunted group, suggesting that, even if they didn't fear ghostly retribution, they still had the uneasy feeling that someone might be watching them.

The research is perilously close to the work that Dr. Matthew Remy and I conducted on those poor, hapless mental patients. Such research can only lead to horrible outcomes. Dr. Remy may not be as famous as his great grandfather, but he inherited the same obsession that ultimately was both of their undoing. His great grandfather, Dr. Calvin S. Moody, was initially championed as a groundbreaking psychiatrist, but I know too much about his barbaric and cruel methods to let this view of him persist.

Matt Remy and I were colleagues for many years in Denver as psychiatrists at University Mental Health Clinic; and I knew he was the

great grandson of Dr. Calvin Moody, but that was when I held the putative view that Dr. Moody was a great psychiatrist and researcher. One day Matt and I were having lunch and for whatever reason the topic of a current patient of mine came up. I explained that she was suffering from hallucinations and was convinced that she was being haunted by a ghost.

Matt found this case oddly interesting and continued to question me in great detail. Several days later I found myself on a rather unusual lunch trip with Matt that he assured me would be well worth it. Imagine my surprise when he pulled up to the foreboding remains of Shockley House!

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The old Shockley House is a legendary place, although it had fallen into neglect for decades. The old manor home was in dire need of restoration and appeared a creepy husk of its former glory. Of course, I knew some of the legends about the place: it was an old sanitarium, Doc Holliday had convalesced there in his latter consumptive days, in later years it had become a home for mental patients who had nowhere else to go, and finally, it was haunted.

As I sat gazing at the faded, cracked walls and foreboding gothic architecture with its columned façade and lone octagonal turret, I could plainly see why the legend of it being haunted applied. While I didn't believe that particular legend myself, it was obvious that this old home fit the stereotypical description of a haunted house and anyone who believed such pseudoscientific silliness would readily gravitate to such conclusions. Of course, Matt had brought me to this place for a very calculated reason and he soon began to tell me the story of the house.

Towards the end of the Civil War, Dr. Charles Brice Shockley built the house initially as his retirement residence. The elder doctor was too restless in his retirement to putter about the house and soon transformed the manor into a sanitarium for the then prevalent Tuberculosis patients who struggled through the disease with little to no effective treatments. In the parlance of the day, these people were said to suffer from "consumption".

Shockley House remained in the Shockley family for the next four decades and was largely operated as a sort of resort or spa for most of that time. Just after the turn of the century it was then purchased by Dr. Calvin S. Moody, the forebear of Matt Remy; and the reason why Matt had brought me here began to become a bit more coherent. But there was yet more to the story before I finally understood what he wanted my role to be in his fantastic scheme.

Dr. Moody had refurbished the manor to create his in-patient mental hospital as the locus of his research. My knowledge of Dr. Moody's work at this time was what the current psychological literature commonly taught; he was one of the prominent champions in the 30's and 40's of using psychotropic drugs instead of the more traumatic or invasive techniques such as shock therapy and lobotomy that were widely used by numerous professionals and colleagues of his day. These practices are considered barbaric by today's standards, but it was not so long ago that they were considered legitimate, scientific treatments for mental maladies.

And then Matt told me this: "Shockley House has passed through the family into my possession. I've planned on renovating it for many years, but I just can't bring myself to commit to it. You see, Keith, there's something historic and romantic about it the way it is. I find a certain air of mystery surrounding it; like it's still got more secrets to discover. Modernizing it would destroy my chance at finding them, I should think.

"The reason I brought you here, though, is to show you what secrets I've already learned from the place. You know the case of yours we were discussing the other day, the lady who believes she's seeing apparitions?"

I told him I did.

"Well, it would seem that Calvin Moody, in his later years, became quite obsessed with many such cases. That phase of his life is left out of his biographies about his work. I suppose that on the surface it reeks of treading too close into the realm of the paranormal. The truth, however, is that his work was very methodical and that his obsession with this work finally led to his undoing. In the end he committed suicide right up there."

My gaze followed his pointing finger up to the octagonal tower that dominated the top of Shockley House.

"Come on," Matt continued after a brief pause, "I want to show you his office and some of his case files."

We made our way up the overgrown path and up the creaking, worn stairs. As Matt rummaged through a key ring searching for the right key to unlock the front door, I marveled at the state of the structure. It was sad, in a way, to behold this fantastic specimen of gothic architecture in such a neglected state. The paint was flaking to the point that the bare wood was as prominent as the painted portion. One had to carefully navigate the steps and porch for fear of treading upon a rotten section of wood that would surely give way underfoot.

Matt succeeded in finding the right key and we were soon inside. I was surprised to find the electricity was working as Matt proceeded to flip on switches as he led us through the front hall and several rooms. I had to keep up but wanted to pause and explore each room. The dust was thick

and most furniture was covered with sheets that were also caked in films of dust and cobwebs. The walls still held pictures and décor that had probably been in place since the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Following Matt, we soon entered the old office of Dr. Moody. It appeared as it must have appeared in his day except bereft of any cleaning. There was a large wooden desk with papers, paper weights, a name placard and a mortar and pestle upon it. The walls were covered in diplomas, certificates, and pictures. Several book cases lined the walls, each filled with text books, reference books, and random medical devices. On one wall was a large sitting couch and recliner.

Matt strode over to one book case and removed a thick set of patient records. "These are, in my opinion, the most interesting cases as well as the most representative of his categorization scheme."

"Categorization scheme?" I asked confused.

"Oh, yes. As I said, he was very thorough and methodical in researching the many ways in which a person may be haunted by various apparitions. He codified several distinct types of hauntings which he was able to induce in his patients."

"Induce? You mean he caused these patients to believe they were being haunted by ghosts?"

"Yes. But further, he was able to orchestrate the particular type of haunting he wanted!"

"I'm sorry, Matt, this sounds quite intriguing, but what is the point of you showing me all this exactly?"

A curious grin spread across his face as he said, "Because I want you to help me reproduce his work."

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That night I sat at home with the case files Matt had given me. He had insisted that before I read any of the case files that I read a paper Moody had written explaining his theories behind his work. I give a portion of his treatise here because I hope to show how persuasive a hypothesis Moody lays out. After reading his cogent argument I was fully drawn into the research one would need to conduct to prove his theory. Before reading his argument I was at a loss for why Matt was so entranced by Moody's later work, but after reading his treatise, I was intrigued to the point of wanting to reproduce his research.

"A PSYCHOLOGICAL BASIS FOR HAUNTINGS  
by Dr. Calvin S. Moody

Humans are a species of storytellers and as long as man has created and shared stories, his tales have included beliefs in the supernatural. For a scientist who holds a materialistic view of the world, one must wonder why it so prevalent throughout the multitude of races and societies that supernatural hauntings be a common belief theme. Is there a rational explanation that can be proven empirically?

Before embarking on this venture, I must make a thorough definition and classification of what I mean by the term 'haunting'. When a person claims that they have experienced a haunting they may mean that they have seen a ghost or other such apparition, heard unexplained noises, been tormented by demons through possession, or simply felt a presence that can't be explained. In all such cases, the causative agent is some type of spirit or energy that is incorporeal in nature somehow interacting with the corporeal world.

What changes from case to case is the motive of the entity in why it is interacting with the senses of the material percipient.

Initially, I was tempted to make a first categorization of two types of hauntings: personal and impersonal. But closer reflection shows that all types of hauntings are ultimately personal in nature. For example, a personal haunting would be one wherein the victim feels like the apparition is targeting them for some purpose, such as a possession or to deliver a warning. One would be tempted to say that a passive haunting such as merely seeing a ghost walk past a doorway would be of the impersonal kind. The ghost didn't try to interact at all with the witness. But is it not still a personal, subjective fact that this particular person believes they saw a ghost? Ultimately, it falls into the psychological realm because a statement of belief about witnessing something supernatural, i.e. outside of the normal natural order of things, is a statement about the psychological state of the person's belief in what their senses have conveyed to them.

I therefore took a different tact and searched for a categorization schema that centers on the psychological state of the hauntee. It became readily apparent that hauntings carry with them a strong emotional component and that these emotions are completely in the realm of negative emotions that serve to hinder the flourishing of a healthy psyche. One would also be tempted to default to the emotion of fear as common to all types of hauntings. While fear is a common reaction, it is not necessarily the causative emotion. In

researching many such cases I have recognized just three types of hauntings based on the negative emotional, psychological state of the hauntee.

The first type of haunting involves the emotions of loss or remorse. I call this type 'The Sad Haunting'. This type of haunting is typified by a spirit that is unable to pass over to the afterlife because of an emotionally charged episode that leaves them replaying over and over the same moment of emotional tragedy. As for the witness of this type of haunting, they have lying latent in their subconscious, or even overtly recalled in their consciousness, an episode of extreme attachment to someone or someplace that has been severed. They are therefore compelled to find psychic equilibrium by externalizing the feelings of loss being replayed.

The second type of haunting is centered upon the emotion of anger. I have titled this 'The Angry Haunting'. This haunting manifest in two primary ways: either by possession or through the mischievous poltergeist. In the former, the spirit inhabits the body of a person to force them to commit violent, aggressive, or vindictive acts on those around them. This is many times attributed to malevolent entities such as demons but may also be a channeled spirit of a deceased person. In the latter, the entity manifest in the environment by causing disruption through noise, vandalism, or disorder. One can easily see how these are all displays of anger being projected onto others. From a psychological standpoint of the hauntee, there is again a repression of anger either needing to be expelled or reciprocated from receiving anger from someone else.

The final, and most complex, category I call 'The Guilty Haunting'. There are many ways in which the feelings of guilt, embarrassment, or shame can be manifested in a person's belief they are being haunted. A common type of haunting in this category is the apparition that is coming to somehow punish the hauntee; displayed as a vengeful spirit coming to set right the scales of justice. This is the most extreme and overt case wherein the person is fully aware of their transgression and feels deep down inside that they must atone for their sins. It doesn't necessarily have to be a spirit, either. The person may merely feel like a curse has befallen them and that it is the curse that is acting as the judge of morality in rectifying their immoral act. But it need not be such a conscious form of guilt. A less overt form is the spirit that has come to act as a warning spirit or harbinger of impending doom. In this case, the



hauntee has an unconscious feeling of guilt that is being externalized. The psychiatrist must uncover just why it is that the patient possesses these latent feelings of unworthiness or guilt. And finally, but very similarly to the harbinger haunting, is the watcher, shadow being, or unseen presence that points to a form of paranoia in the hauntee. They feel like judging eyes are upon them indicating yet another form of underlying guilt that must manifest itself in order for their psyche to seek a healthy balance again.

There are countless symbols with which human beings ascribe meaning to and the supernatural haunting stories of our species are no different. Many times it is these universal symbols that allow a person to rationalize their negative emotions being manifest in the world of the external. For example, based on the above theory, let's suppose a devout and pious priest is walking through a park when suddenly, a black cat darts across his path. A witness sitting on a nearby bench comments to him that he will now be the recipient of bad luck. The black cat superstition is a widely held cultural symbol that could very well open the person up to a belief that they will actually befall ill luck. But our priest, being a person of healthy psyche and adhering to his belief system without serious transgression, will likely chalk this experience up to a silly superstition; or, he may likely believe it to hold truth but will very likely choose not to dwell on it because he will think that things are rightly in God's hands and that his piety will surely ensure that God will see that the bad luck is so insignificant that he need not worry. Now imagine a person who possesses an unhealthy amount of unconscious guilt who is ripe for this imbalance in their psyche to find release being in the same predicament as our priest. The cat and the ensuing remark by the bystander will likely fester in their psyche inviting some type of pressure release in their belief system. For it is the belief system of the person that must be preserved. One can easily see how this one meaningless cat can be imbued with such symbolism that they are quickly carried away into a phantasy where they are the victim of a curse returning upon them for the bad deeds they have committed. And thus, they are suddenly haunted by a curse.

So you see that it is fear comingled with these other forms of negative emotion that causes the mind to override the senses in order to create a belief system that allows an outlet for such psychologically damaging emotions. If the psychiatrist could find a patient in such negative emotional distress and cause them to

believe they were haunted in one of the various ways specific to their particular type of emotional distress, would this ultimately help the patient to achieve psychic equilibrium? The following case studies are the culmination of years of research along these lines and should suffice to prove that the above presented hypothesis is true."

And there you have it, Dr. Calvin Moody's presentation of his theory was wholly lucid and presented with fine logic for its case. In short, I was sold; at least well enough that I couldn't wait to dive into the case files that now sat upon my desktop to see exactly how he managed to pull off these orchestrated hauntings. But before I cracked the first file, there was one burning question that needed to be answered.

I called Matt and he answered quite quickly saying, "Keith! Have you read his treatise? What do you think?"

"Fascinating! I must admit, Matt, at first I actually thought you were wasting my time, but this is actually quite riveting stuff."

"And the case files? Even better, huh?"

"Well, I haven't even started those yet. I wanted to ask you a question first?"

"Sure."

"What happened to Moody? Why hasn't this work been brought to wider attention in the field?"

"Well," he breathed a heavy sigh and I knew that I had stumbled upon the rub of the story, "As I mentioned today, he committed suicide before publishing."

"But why didn't anyone publish posthumously?"

"Because of the reason he killed himself. How would his theory stand up to the scrutiny of the fact that he killed himself because he claimed he was being haunted by the ghost of Shockley House?"

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In order to gain some insight into Moody's methods, I'll give here the story of one of the case files which he cited in his treatise. The patient was only referred to as Marla; most likely a fake name used to protect her real identity. Marla presented to Moody as a patient suffering from numerous personal issues that she felt were keeping her from leading a normal, healthy social life. She was neurotic and suffered from chronic anxiety and depression. She struggled with both personal relationships and professional relationships, having been through many boyfriends and jobs. The catalyst for her seeking Psychiatric help was a nervous breakdown.

After several weeks of sessions, to include some sessions of hypnosis, Moody determined that her neurosis was rooted in her feelings of guilt towards her father. Marla's father was a stern man who was mentally abusive in how he manipulated Marla's emotions. Marla and her father's relationship was horribly strained up until her early 20's. He was heavily controlling and she rebelled against his attempts to control her so thoroughly but he would always manage, in the end, to force her to feel guilty about her behavior. Usually this would end in him drinking too much and breaking down into a drunken fit of apologies and entreaties for her to understand that his actions were out of love and not out of malice towards her.

Marla's mother had left her husband when Marla was just a small child and there were also issues of guilt associated with Marla not feeling like she was good enough for her mother's attention and approval. Marla's mother had died several years after leaving of some unknown reason and had been so estranged from her ex-husband and daughter that Marla had no real closure with her mother. Marla had no siblings.

Marla tried to distance herself from her father once she reached her 20's but he would always manage to call or contact her, usually in a fit of drunkenness, begging for her assistance and playing upon her guilt. At one point Marla met a man and they dated for several months in which time Marla had, through a struggling willpower, managed to avoid her father and his antics. Tensions built to ever increasing extremes and her boyfriend began to grow tired of the inconvenient intrusions of Marla's father.

One night, he drank himself into an uncontrollable rage that led him to Marla and her boyfriend's doorstep. Marla and her father argued in the front yard, screaming at one another, and causing such a commotion that Marla's boyfriend had to intervene. The old drunk became ever more belligerent towards the young man until the argument became physical. This escalated quickly out of control and suddenly Marla's father attacked. In his liquor-addled brain, however, he was too dull of sense to find his mark and the boyfriend found a rock and crushed the old man's skull. He fell dead.

The authorities arrived and the boy was immediately charged with murder. The outcome of the trial was that he was found guilty and the man was given a life sentence for his crime. The relationship between Marla and her boyfriend ended as well.

Marla was left feeling like she was the cause of both her father's death and her boyfriend's incarceration. The guilt plagued her for near 20 years at which time she found her way into Moody's care at the age of 41.

Marla was also a semi-religious person, not devout but open to the idea of a supernatural reality. Dr. Moody took her feelings of guilt and her open mindedness towards the supernatural as traits he felt would be a perfect fit for one of his test subjects.

Moody's experiment entailed subtlety in causing Marla to be haunted by one type of "The Guilty Haunting". He could never overtly persuade her to believe she was being haunted, though. In order for his theory to work, he could only expose her to the right symbols that would push her to believe some type of apparition was haunting her.

The first thing Moody did was to convince her to move into Shockley House for a short period of time. Having her as an inpatient would allow him more control of her care and her environment as well as more ability to observe her.

The room Moody prepared for Marla was carefully decorated to include a large, dark portrait of a man with an intense gaze whose eyes seemed to follow you no matter where you moved in the room. There were many other lesser pictures, but all contained subjects whose eye produced a similar such optical illusion. The room was also painted and decorated with darker colors with the lights engineered in such a way that the room was only ever dim at best.

The real priming of Marla's psyche took place in the one-on-one sessions with Dr. Moody. During these sessions Moody steered Marla into conversations about her relationship with her father and why she felt his judgment still held sway over her life. Each week there were also sessions of hypnosis; in these sessions Moody would help her connect the symbols of judging eyes with her guilt. Of course, Marla would have no memory of what was discussed while she was under hypnosis. And, while Moody did allude to judging eyes always upon her, he never told her directly that she would see any ghosts or mysterious figures stalking her.

Finally, after nearly two months, Moody's efforts paid off. Marla was found early one morning in the living room looking quite haggard and obviously shaken. Moody brought her into his office and during this session Marla became emotional and began sobbing. Marla told Dr. Moody that she needed to leave Shockley House but would not articulate exactly why. Moody had to coax her for quite some time till she finally revealed that she had seen a shadowy figure several times in the house. The first time she saw it was at the end of the darkened hallway as she was walking from the bathroom to her room across the hall. She described the figure as a tall, dark figure with pale eyes intensely staring at her.

She quickly ran into her room and convinced herself that she had only seen a trick of the shadows in the hallway. It was many nights later that

she saw it again and this shook her up so bad that she began to suffer from insomnia. The room became an intolerable place for her. The previous night she had awoken to see the figure standing in the corner of the room watching her. This is why she was found in the living room.

After this success, Moody convinced Marla to remain in his care but agreed that it would be better for her to move out of Shockley House. His treatment plan for Marla took a different direction after this. He stopped focusing on the symbols that encouraged her guilt and began to treat her in a manner that removed those guilty feelings.

This particular case was an example of a very successful case. Not all cases progressed in such a fluent manner. In some cases it took more time to yield results. In other cases Dr. Moody eventually resorted to medications. Generally, he tried not to augment the treatment with drugs, but was willing to do so when results were not forthcoming. And finally, in yet other cases, there were no results at all.

Most unusual of all, though, was how the cases took a dramatic turn towards the end of the research. Just before Dr. Moody committed suicide, the patients began to experience extreme hauntings much more easily than prior patients. This anomaly was quite inexplicable to Matt and me until our own research struck a similar crescendo of terror.

Looking back upon this now, I expect some might see with clarity the unethical aspects of Moody's research. Keep in mind that in his day, such experimental techniques would've been considered normal fair. Also be aware that our research took a slightly different approach in which the ethical concerns were addressed. Still, considering the unintended course things took, our naiveté is no excuse for inflicting such horrors as resides in Shockley House upon anyone. And, while I stand guilty, it was poor Matt who paid the ultimate price with his life just as his forebear, Calvin Moody, did.

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Initially, our research was conducted in our offices. We conducted interviews on patients in order to find the right candidates and fully informed them of the nature of our research into paranormal encounters. After gaining the consent of 21 patients, we began our research by using electromagnetic frequencies while patients were hooked up to an EEG machine.

The results were horribly inconclusive. In Matt's eyes the results were an utter failure. So we decided to try new methods. Again we met with poor results. This cycle continued until we found ourselves slipping closer and closer into Moody's original methods. Finally, one day Matt came into

my office and announced that he was beginning the renovations to Shockley House.

"It has to be done, Keith. We need the right environment in order to prime the patients. The office here is just too clinical an environment for a ghost sighting."

Three months later the work was done and the house was refurbished throughout. We were ready to begin with a new batch of eight patients who would be living in the house for a two-week "retreat". Matt had finally convinced me to keep the real nature of our research from these patients while the experiments were conducted. Gradually, ever so slightly, we had acquiesced on protocols to the point that were now duplicating Moody's research almost exactly.

We hired on for the staff two nurses, a housemaid who handled cooking and laundry, and a technician to assist with the EEG and EMF machines. Matt and I worked the day shifts and the two nurses were to work the night shifts.

On the third day we still had nothing significant to report. I left for the evening and was awoken in the middle of the night by my phone. I was met with the frantic voice of Nurse Stephenson.

"Dr. Ballinger! You must come quick! Dr. Remy and a patient are fighting!"

"Edith? What are you talking about?"

"Dr. Remy stayed late after you left and apparently tried a procedure on Meagan."

"A procedure?"

Then there came an awful yell from somewhere in the background and the line went dead. I dressed as fast as I could while trying to call back Edith. She didn't answer so I tried Matt. There was no answer from his cell either. As I ran out of my house to the car I found myself confronted with a hellish thunderstorm. I was thoroughly soaked by the time I unlocked my car and jumped into the seat.

It's a wonder I even made it to Shockley House with the storm raging, my car speeding, and me trying to frantically call Matt, Edith, and Mary, the other nurse. No one answered and a feeling of dread began to settle over my rain-drenched body.

When I pulled up to the house the first thing I noticed was how dark the place was. The storm had obviously taken the power out. Lightning cut through the sky followed by a cacophonous boom of thunder. In the brief moment of illumination I saw that the front door stood wide open. I rummaged through the glove compartment and found the small emergency

flashlight and then I stole my nerves, took a deep breath, and ran for the house.

No sooner had I made it to the steps than I saw Donald, one of the psych patients in our experiment, ambling across the yard. I called out to him but he was unresponsive. I ran over to him and was taken aback by the expression on his face. The poor man was in a daze. His features were vacant and his eyes glazed. He acted as if unaware that the rain was pelting his face. He was mumbling something I couldn't make out.

I tried to talk to him but it was useless. I managed to hold him by the arm and guide him to the back seat of my car. "Wait here Donald," I said even though I knew he didn't hear me. It was then that I was able to discern what he was mumbling.

"It's always watching me. It's always watching me. It's always watching me. . . ."

I shut the car door and made my way to the front door again.

The house was dark and quiet. I played the flashlight over the front room but saw nothing. "Matt!" I yelled into the darkness. "Hello! Matt! Are you there? Edith! Mary! Hello!" Nothing.

I started towards the old office of Dr. Moody. Then a blood curdling scream split the silence from somewhere above me. The flashlight beam shot up the stairs just in time to see a shape flying towards me. By the time I realized what it was the body landed head first on the first few stairs with a sickening crack.

I rushed over to the body and rolled it over. It was Mary; one of the nurses. Her head was flopped over to one side and blood was coming from her nose, mouth, and ears. She had broken her neck upon impact against the angulated stairs. The worst part was her eyes. They were wide open staring into oblivion but still held a look of horror; as if she had seen something so terrible that it froze her expression even after death. I checked her pulse to ensure she wasn't still somehow alive. Nothing. I stood up and a wave of nausea hit me. I had to rush back out into the rain and vomit.

I wiped the foul taste from my lips and pondered calling the police but just then a scream from the upstairs grew in volume over the din of the storm. I rushed back inside and made my way upstairs calling for Matt once more.

When I reached the landing at the top of the stairs I paused, scanning the hallways with the flashlight beam. There was no movement anywhere. And then I caught a faint light coming from one of the patient's rooms. Slowly I walked down the hallway straining to hear if there was any movement within. Reaching the door, I shined the light into the room. The room was empty of people but it was in complete disarray. The bed sheets

were strewn about and equipment of various types were knocked over. The light emanated from a digital camcorder mounted on a tripod. I recognized it as the one Matt and I used to film various interactions with patients.

I pressed the menu button in order to retrieve the last video clip. I pressed play and watched. The clip began with a shot of the room less than an hour prior. Meagan, one of our patients, appeared in the clip strapped to the bed. Her wrists and ankles were secured in leather straps, but most disconcerting of all was that her head was immobilized. She was struggling against the restraints, obviously panicked by what was taking place. She was screaming and kept crying out “No, Dr. Remy! No! No, Dr. Remy! No!”

Then Matt’s back appeared in the frame as he approached the bed from the angle of the camera. I could see that he held instruments in his hands. He reached the bed and then crouched over her head. As he turned to gain a better angle above her head I caught a look at his face. It was somehow not right. It was and wasn’t Matt all at the same time. Something in his features had contorted. Then he said in an angered voice, “I told you! It’s Dr. Moody; not Dr. Remy!”

Then he lifted the instruments and I realized what they were. In one hand was a mallet and in the other was an orbitoclast, an instrument used in transorbital lobotomies. He placed one into her eye and began to pound. Meagan began to scream a tortured wail that shot ice through my body.

Suddenly the room’s light changed. It was the flicker of lightning followed by a clap of thunder. Then the lights went out in the room. The last image the camera caught was a mysterious figure materialize from the wall behind Matt.

I stood perplexed; in shock about the meaning of the film; about what in the hell to do next. What happened? Where were Meagan and Matt now? Where were the other patients? Where was Edith? My thoughts fumbled over each other in a blind chaos of adrenaline fueled madness. Then I heard a long scrape followed by a thump from up above and it repeated ever so slowly again. And again.

While I stood listening and trying to interpret the nature of this sound another sound came from down the hall. It was a moan. A pitiful, sorrowful moan as if someone was sobbing. I inched my way to doorway and called softly, “Hello? Who’s there?” The light shot down the hallway and illuminated a crouching figure in the corner. They faced the corner and it was impossible to tell who it was from just the hump of their back but I believed it was Demetrius, another one of our patients.

I walked slowly whispering his name, “Demetrius. It’s alright Demetrius. It’s me, Dr. Ballinger.” As I reached him I could tell from the



back of his head that I was right. It was Demetrius. He didn't respond to his name, though. He just shivered and kept sobbing. I reached out and touched his shoulder. He jerked as if hit with a Taser and looked up in stark, naked terror. He was pitiful to behold. His eyes were hollow and spittle ran down his chin. A long, pathetic moan crawled from his idiot mouth. The poor man was worse off than Donald.

As the moan died away my attention once again locked onto the slow scrape-thump coming from upstairs. I made my way back to the steps and probed the darkness above. The only thing up there was the thing that I always found the most ominous about the place – the octagonal room that brooded over the whole house like a lurching vulture.

Slowly I mounted the creaking stairs. Millions of years passed as my heart thundered in my chest. I reached the first landing and turned to make my way up the final set of steps. Shining the light up above I saw what made the noise. It was Matt Remy hanging from the rafters by a rope about his neck. At his feet sat Edith, her lunatic features distorted into a look of sheer madness. She turned towards me and began to cackle an insane gurgle of laughter as she continued to push Matt's legs, swinging him like a child swings its dolly. His feet scraped the wooden floor and then he thumped into the wall only to return to her for another push. The worst part of the whole daemonic show was Edith's eyes. Protruding from each socket was a bloody, gore-encrusted orbitoclast.



