

*Original Horror, Weird Fiction, & Ghost Stories*



## *THE YELLOW BOOKE.*

*Edited and Illustrated by M. Grant Kellermeyer*

VOLUME III.

*Wulpurgis-Night Edition*



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An Oldstyle Tales Prefs Original Pvblication.

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THE  
**Yellow~Booke.**

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VOLUME III.  
APRIL MMXVI.

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❖ CONTEMPORARY ❖  
*Weird Tales, Ghost Stories,  
& Horror Fiction*

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**Wulpurgis-Night Edition.**

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*Edited By*

M. GRANT KELLERMEYER





## Oldstyle Tales Press

SUPERNATURAL, WEIRD, & HORROR FICTION

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# INTRODUCTION

— *M. Grant Kellermeyer*

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 child’s sadistic 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, SPRING 2016





## ✠ AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES ✠

### *David Senior*

David Senior is a writer and photographer who lives in Norfolk, England. Inspired by the writings of MR James, HP Lovecraft, WG Sebald and Dennis Cooper, he has written a short novel called 'The Sinners of Crowsmere.' He runs the website 'EastScapes: The Abandoned, the Curious, and the Forgotten in East Anglia' at [eastscapes.blogspot.co.uk](http://eastscapes.blogspot.co.uk), a base for images and writings about East Anglian folklore, (psycho)geography, and forgotten histories.

He is a lifelong fan of horror cinema, experimental writing, old sad songs best played in the small hours, broken toys, medical curios, and damp faded photographs found in the middle of nowhere. He intends one day to learn how to play the banjo.

— V.

— V is the moniker of Vincent Larson, one of the founding members of the EURUS Publishing Group, LLC — an e-publisher that prides itself on being both artist-centered, and dedicated to literary quality. When not winding his way through the labyrinth beneath Mt. Voormithadreth, tending to the eldritch-webs of Atlach-Nacha, he can be found reading and writing.

He also occasionally stares up into the night sky — at the constellation of Orion — and wonders: "How much longer do we have?"

#### FAVORITE HORROR AUTHORS:

Clark Ashton Smith, H.P. Lovecraft, Edgar Allan Poe, Clive Barker, and Laird Barron.

### *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.

## *Thomas Olivieri*

Thomas is an accomplished ne'er-do-well and wastrel of renown -- he lives, writes, and loves in a state of serene frenzy. Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and M. R. James are some of his favorite authors and influences.

## *Brian O'Connell*

Brian O'Connell is a ghoulish who enjoys walking in the forest and along the beach. His favorite writer is Matthew M. Bartlett, but he's also particularly partial to Scott Nicolay, M.R. James, Laird Barron, Nadia Bulkin, H.P. Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, Kristi DeMeester, William Hope Hodgson, Arthur Machen, and Tom Breen, amongst others. The Yellow Booke marks his first published appearance. He would like to thank Matthew M. Bartlett for his encouragement and Michael Kellermeier for taking a chance on his story. You can visit him at [www.conquerorweird.wordpress.com](http://www.conquerorweird.wordpress.com). He likes the rain.

## *William J. Booker*

Bill Booker is currently a writer and graphic designer: He splits his time between the two. Author of *Trippers* (2011), now a cult novel in the genre of British Psychedelic Literature. He enjoys writing, reading, graphic design, photography and walking. He lives in Leicestershire, England UK. Three years at art college. To date he has worked as a graphic designer in advertising agencies, as a director of an advertising agency, as a partner in a design company and as a freelance designer.

He has served on the committee of a distinguished literary society for ten years. Other activities have included lecturing in graphic design at an art college and managing a punk band, a metal band and (briefly) an indie band. Besides writing and designing he's done time as a screen printer, a post office worker, a plasterer's labourer, the weigh-man in a book warehouse, a van driver, a limestone flooring salesman, an admin assistant, an airborne data analyst, a Photoshop artist, a seminar organiser and also worked in a couple of engineering factories. His writing has so far included a series of short stories, book reviews, advertising copy and press releases. He is currently working on new writing projects including short stories and a novel.

Much-loved horror/supernatural writers include, firstly, those languishing in that other country known as 'The Past', Robert Aikman, E F Benson, Frank Belknap Long, Algernon Blackwood, Walter de la Mare, William Hope Hodgson, W W Jacobs, M R James, J Sheridan Le Fanu, H P Lovecraft, Arthur Machen, E A Poe, Charles Williams, and for added wit and sly black humour, T F Powys and Saki (H H Munro) and, secondly, those still squirming under the beady eye of 'The Present', Ray Bradbury, Ramsey Campbell, Jonathan Carroll, Stephen King, Dean Koontz, Phil Rickman, Peter Straub.

[www.williamjbooker.com](http://www.williamjbooker.com)

## *Geoff Woodbridge*

Geoff Woodbridge has been twice published by Oldstyle Tales Press. He has been writing short fiction for some time, alongside an English Literature degree. Inspired by a wide range of classics, The Bronte Sisters, Machen, Bradbury, and Voltaire, his work also echoes an influence, that of film, theatre and music. His working background is media critique and performance management. He is currently working on a novel alongside a collection of his dark fiction. Geoff resides in Liverpool with his Fiancé and his Rare Black Setter.

## *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 Booke!!*

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

## *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.

## *Axel Koehler*

Born in 1973 in Giessen in the heart of Hesse, this young scholar of Scottish Gaelic language and culture was raised between two old university towns, Giessen and Marburg, the latter of which is known for an atmosphere H.P. Lovecraft himself would find very inspiring, as much as M.R. James or Arthur Machen, two more of his favourite authors who inspired him to turn to the “dark side” of speculative and supernatural fiction after having been a loyal adherent to the genre of *high fantasy* for most of his earlier youth.

While studying the language and traditions of the Scottish, and the Irish Gael at the universities of Aberdeen and Edinburgh, and thus, in two old cities with an equally gothic atmosphere as that of Marburg, the author came across H.P. Lovecraft for the second time in his life after having rummaged through his youngest uncle’s collection of classic fantasy and supernatural horror as a teenager, as well as across the other two aforementioned authors in a dusty old tome that might well have been a grimoire at first sight in a remote cottage surrounded by dark, eerie ancient woodlands in the Isle of Colonsay, the young scholar (who also publishes monographs and papers, of course) decided to turn author himself in his favourite genre...

Favorite writers: Bram Stoker, Fiona MacLeod, Arthur Machen, John Buchan – Lord Tweedsmuir, Edgar Allan Poe, H.P. Lovecraft, S.T. Coleridge, The German Romantics, Algernon Blackwood, M.R. James, William Hope Hodgson

## *David J. Gibbs*

Fueled by imagination and the search of the unknown, Cincinnati native David J. Gibbs looks for the lost threads of stories wherever they might be. Never losing touch with the wonder and magic of childhood, he continues to push the limits of imagination with stories that will excite, delight, scare and, most of all, surprise his readers.

His work has appeared in ‘Sanitarium Magazine’, ‘The Sirens Call’, ‘Under The Bed’, ‘New Realm’, ‘Massacre Magazine’, ‘Aphelion’, and ‘Nebula Rift’. He has also published two collections of short speculative fiction entitled ‘A Taste of the Grave’ and ‘Once, Twice, Thrice’ as well as a novel entitled ‘The Walking Man’. His work has also appeared in the following anthologies; ‘Dark Monsters’, ‘Tales From The Grave’, ‘Hidden in Plain Sight’ and ‘Creepy Campfire Quarterly’.

More info at <http://www.davidjgibbs.com>

A short list of some of the horror writers I enjoy: Peter Straub, H.P. Lovecraft, Stephen King, Ambrose Bierce, Edgar Allan Poe, Ray Bradbury and Clive Barker

## *Christopher Burke*

Christopher Burke grew up in Cincinnati. He received a B.A. in English from Northern Kentucky University and an M.A. in English from the University of Louisville. He subsequently worked as an audio book editor and bookstore staffer/supervisor for several years. Christopher's fiction has also appeared in *Nightscript* and on the award-winning *NoSleep* podcast, and he is a regular contributor of reviews, essays, and interviews at [www.weirdfictionreview.com](http://www.weirdfictionreview.com). More information can be found at [www.christopherburkewords.com](http://www.christopherburkewords.com). Christopher currently resides in Rhode Island. Some favorite horror writers: Jean Ray, Robert Aickman, Daphne Du Maurier, Shirley Jackson, Robert Chambers, Kelly Link, Thomas Ligotti, Nathan Ballingrud, and Eric Basso

NON MORTEM TIMEMUS,  
SED COGITATIONEM MORTIS.  
— *Lucius Annaeus Seneca, called "Seneca the Younger"*

PULVIS ET UMBRA SUMUS.  
— *Quintus Horatius Flaccus, called "Horace"*

MEMENTO MORI.  
— *Common gravestone epitaph*



# The Yellow-Booke.

# THE BROKEN HOUSE

— *David Senior*

WATER fell through the holes in the ceiling, splattering heavily into the swollen, saturated carpets. The young girl moved slowly through the room, filthy dampness seeping up around her small trainers. She could feel it leaking through her shoes and into her socks.

Graffiti lined the walls of the house. Some of it childish scrawling, some of it quite artful. Some the girl understood, some she didn't. Much of it vulgar. She paused in front of a chipped wall dominated by the clumsily spray-painted words

## THE DEVIL IS HEAR AND WANTS TO TAKE YOU AWAY

Even as an eight year old, she sniffed dismissively at the spelling.

She walked carefully up the stairs. The ceiling here was intact, so the floorboards far more stable, but she still moved with caution. There were lots of exposed nails poking through the woodwork.

At the top of the stairs was a small round window, one of the few in the house with the glass still intact. She had to stand on tiptoes to see out. The surface was dirty. She looked out at the flat blankness of the fen landscape: empty, grey countryside scarred with drainage ditches and odd-angled trees, increasingly hidden by dark encroaching drizzle.

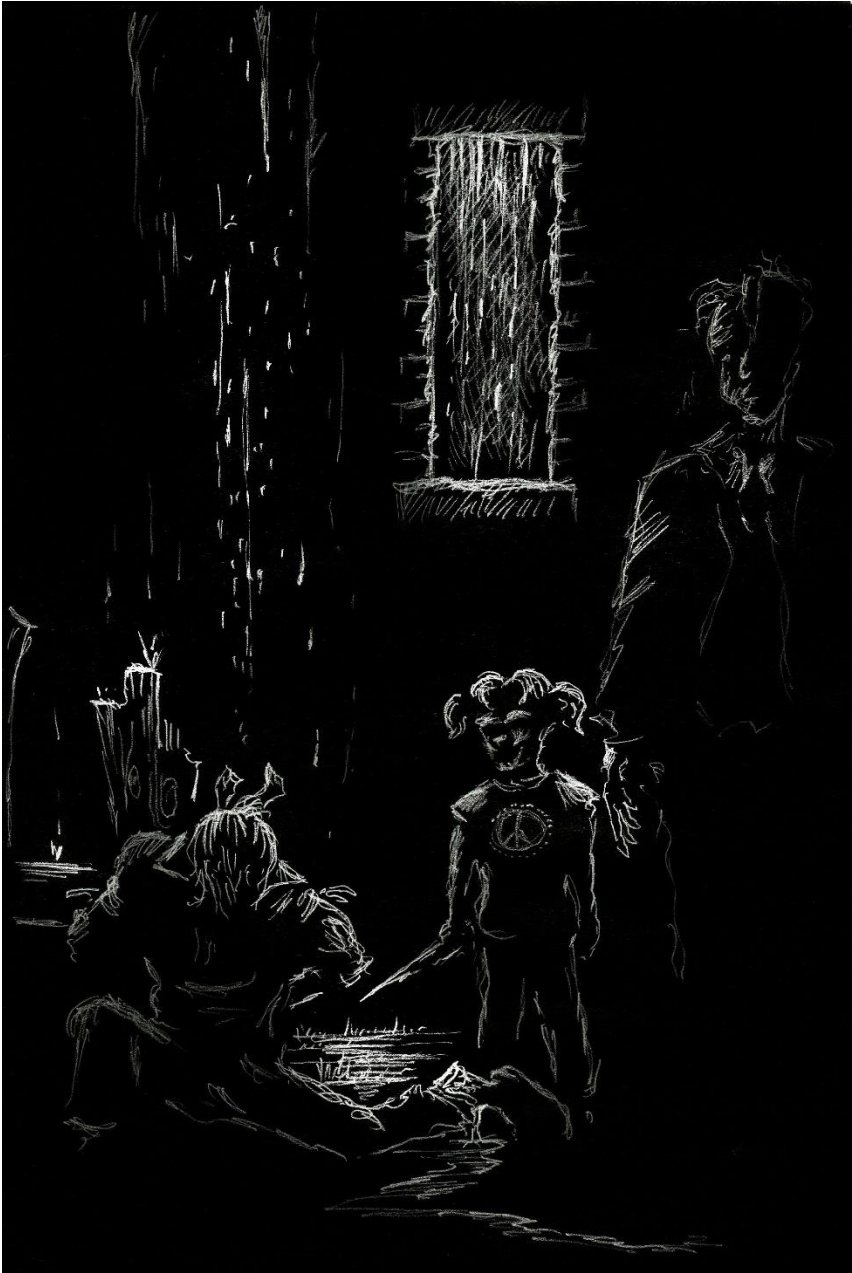
The car was down below, parked in front of the house. The girl's mother was still sitting in the driver's seat. Head thrown back, face torn away, jaw slack and gaping a mouth full of smashed broken teeth. The inner windows were an explosion of already-drying crimson.

The girl peered down at her for a while before moving on. Closer to the devastating holes in the roof, it was chillier up here, some of the rain falling down through the house turning to spray in the strong draughts. She was only wearing her dungarees and t-shirt, and held her arms for warmth.

She headed towards a door so badly smashed it was hanging from one hinge only, splintered and shattered. She carefully slid past it into a room overlooking the overgrown garden at the back of the house, with more featureless landscape beyond the crooked and broken fencing.

Her father, hands bound behind his back and an old rag stuffed and taped into his mouth, was here. He was on the wet stinking carpet, rain soaking his clothes through. His hair was plastered to his face, almost hiding it. His ankles had been shattered, badly, shocking grey bone piercing his leg on one side. His skin was yellow in pain.

He lifted his head when he realised she was there. He looked exhausted, and in agony, but tried to form words through the muffle of his gag.





The girl watched him dispassionately, her arms hanging limply by her sides.

One of her fingers rubbed idly at the stitching on her dungarees.

He grunted desperately at her for a while, pleading and frantic, twisting his body as he tried to free his arms. Eventually realising he was getting no response, he slowly looked at her with wide, bewildered eyes.

She wrenched a shard of wood from the shattered door. It had a vicious pointed end. Her palm began to bleed from gripping the sharp wooden edges.

He tried talking again as she approached him, trying to make more words around his gag, trying to reason with his eyes. Then he began to scream into the fetid material balled into his mouth, crazily, hysterically trying to lunge his body away, eyes bulging at something over her shoulder.

The girl could sense there was someone behind her. She knew her father wasn't screaming at her.

She took him by the hair and cradled him in the denim against her chest. She stabbed him in the face. It made a dull meaty sound, and he made a startled, straining grunt. She yanked the stake out, and did it again, and again, destroying his eyes and his face and his teeth and the meat that made up his personality and his soul and wrecked his head until the wood was blunted and useless.

Her hands were torn to ribbons, rough wooden pins jutting out of her torn soft skin. She paid them little notice at first. She let her father's head go, and his body slumped heavily against the wall. She dropped the stake to the soft floorboards.

She turned to the figure behind her.

The tall man stepped towards her. He wore an aging suit and a fraying, musty overcoat. His head was split down the centre, the ancient wound creating two grey flaps of dried face. Eyes watched her at insectoid angles.

She held her bleeding hands out, only now seeming to feel any pain, looking down in despair, her face grimacing into an imminent sob.

He opened his arms for her. She embraced him. She was now feeling the pain in her shredded palms and torn fingers.

'Grandpa,' she cried at the old man, for comfort.

# THE JOURNAL OF DR JAMES MONTAGUE

— *Matthew E. Banks*

*The following events have been reconstructed from the diary of Dr James Montague, King's College, Cambridge that has fallen lately into my possession, any further detail being culled from the gossip and hearsay of Dr Montague's acquaintances and neighbours during the period in question.*

JAMES Montague arrived in the small Cornish Settlement of Gull Cove towards the end of a particularly wet March in 188-. A thin, stooping man in his early forties with an intelligent countenance, his face was set in repose on the verge of a sardonic smile.

What his business was in these parts none of the locals who came into contact with him could tell, but he was courteous enough in his transactions with them.

Dr Montague's journal from the time he moved into his temporary accommodation in the attic room of a Mrs Isabella Heylt tells us that his little trips into town were simply for the purpose of visiting the local library in order to investigate his own family history, with the focal point of these studies being his grandfather, Marcus Montague, a shadowy figure, who has begun, it seems to exert a growing fascination on his last remaining descendant.

"I have waded through several volumes of marriages and deaths in the district library," Montague writes in his precise hand on the third day of his stay, "and as yet found no mention of my grandfather's participation in either of these influential ceremonies. My family would not speak of him and it appears official records do not either. I must hope to find some clue as to my family's connections down here before life becomes too hopelessly tedious and I am forced to do something criminally obscene. I spend all my time currently in that impossibly small library or else I will walk down to the sea and then turn around and walk back. Really, one's descendants should be more careful about where they die."

After two more days and two blank pages, Montague is finally inspired to make a further entry, although it has little to do with his research:

"No further progress. I shall go back on Saturday and with satisfaction draw deeply on the adulterated University air. Furthermore, the popular misconception that country-dwellers are more amenable than their urban counterparts was confounded late this afternoon when, taking a stroll through the grounds of the church where I believe my grandfather to have been married, I was surprised by a very old lady appearing suddenly at my side.

"The woman's aspect, I have to confess, made me uneasy. Her eyes were tiny and deep-set and seemed to be sinking into a skin so profoundly wrinkled as to suggest shattered glass. Her mouth was merely a small dark hole. I was even more

disturbed at how upon seeing me, she reacted to my presence, for she proceeded to denounce me in a low, scratching voice as if I had done the entire population some profound disservice. Recovering myself, I asked her from where she thought she may have known me. She replied most distinctly 'I know you well enough, don't I' and as quickly as she appeared, she was off and on her way.

"What the woman was doing outside of an asylum I could not guess," his entry concludes, "It really does seem to me now that my coming down here was a futile exercise. I shall be glad to get back."

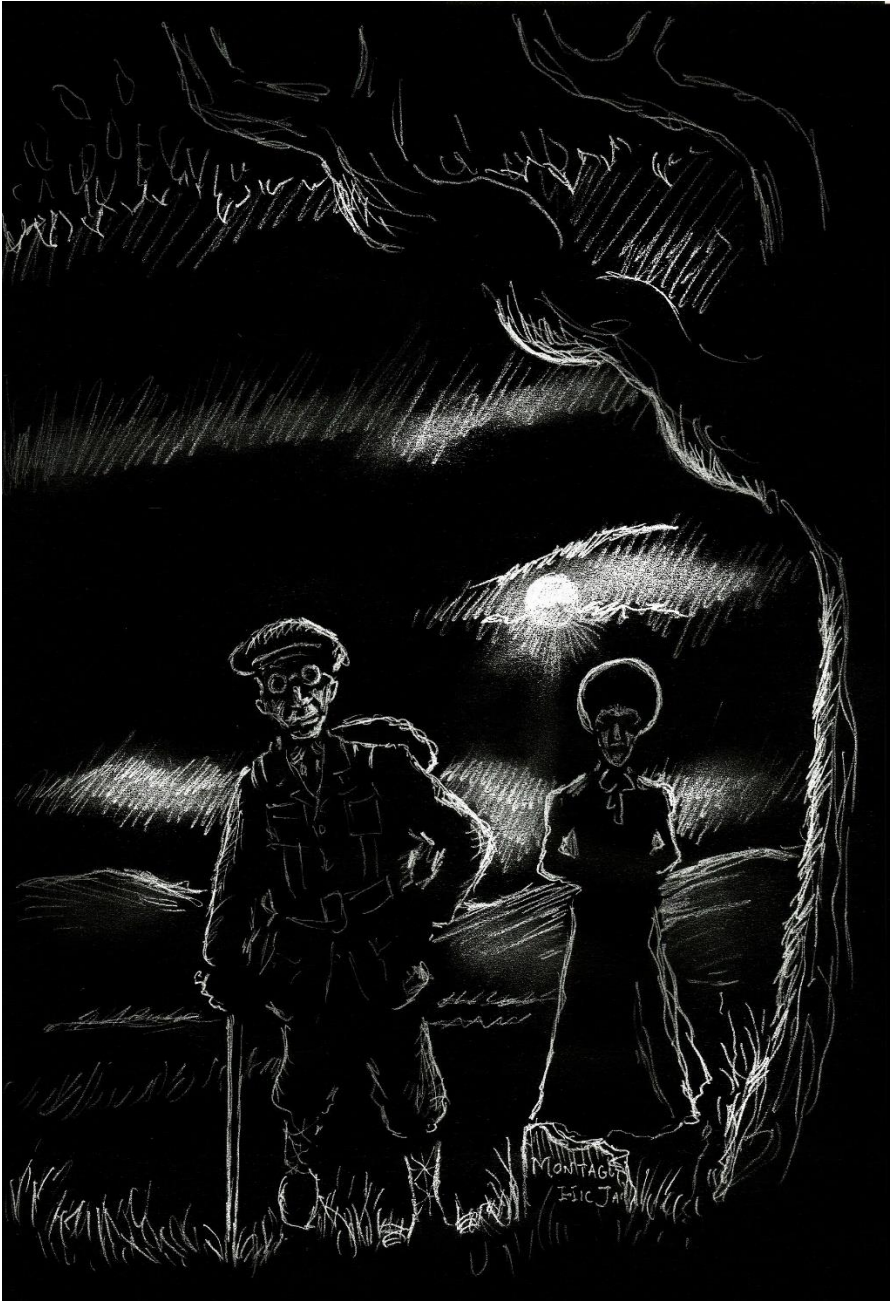
The following day, however, Montague is back at the same church in pursuance of some morsel of information concerning his grandfather.

"Having received the permission of the rector and the blessing of the verger, I was allowed access to the parish records which are kept in a small, light hexagonal room at the back of the church, beside the organ. A fair wind had got up and, despite the fact that it was barely half-past two in the afternoon, the light was already draining from the sky. I paced up the nave of the empty church until I reached the little wooden door with the iron ring handle that opened into the backroom. Here I quickly located the book I required and read through it in silence – despite a small gale that blew outside – for what must have been a period of an hour or more. The unending list of strange names that have long since been separated from their owners seems to have lead me after a while into a type of stupor, because it was in some such state, with the hawthorn swaying wildly against the tiny latticed window, that I was jolted out of my reverie by someone murmuring "I see you" in low tones. It was some seconds before I realised it was I myself who had involuntarily spoken aloud and then, immediately on focusing back onto the page, my eyes alighted on the word 'Montague' in the middle of a long line of names for the April of 1811. At last, I have him. The initial was indeed my grandfather's but the name next to it, Victoria Jane Morvella, was new to me and assuredly not that of my grandmother.

"The furore outside abated and, there being no other noise in the place, dimly I became aware behind me of the sound of the vicar sweeping past in his cassock in the aisles of the church making his way towards the altar. He had obviously seen me but, seeing how immersed I was, left me uninterrupted. Rapidly making a note of the entry and replacing the register where I had found it, I made after him to ask...I don't know what exactly. I believe I was feeling in need of human company – but, in any case, he was nowhere to be seen and so I pulled the door to and left for my lodgings.

"Victoria Jane Morvella. I have never heard this name mentioned before by anyone in my family and on the quiet, darkening lane I fell to wondering who she was and what had become of her."

The discovery of his grandfather's unknown marriage to a local girl gave Montague a new enthusiasm for both his investigation and his new surroundings. The next day, Montague has a real find:



"I have found my grandfather's grave. It is nothing but a small stump beneath a bent ash tree and is probably all he deserves, but it is him all the same. So he came back here to die. I took a photograph of his final resting place and even dragged the old verger across to take a picture of me standing next to it. At least I know where the old philanderer ended up, although, I must admit, I felt something as I stood there, a sensation of – I do not know – but there was something else there as well. I was actually loathed to leave the place."

There is little of note recorded for the last two days subsequent to this discovery, and if the memory of Mrs Heylt is to be relied upon, Montague had a restless night of it on the second night. Hearing a noise outside her bedroom, she came upon him on the landing complaining indistinctly of having had a bad dream. He was on the point of leaving the house when Mrs Heylt intervened. His face she described as strange, lacking in the cool intelligence it displayed by day. Montague neglects to make any mention of this incident in his journal.

On the third day, Montague resumes his notes:

"I should have left this place some days ago but there is something that makes me stay. Another thing – when I went into town this afternoon to collect my photographs I found either they have made a mistake in the developing process or else I have been extremely unlucky. Somehow, in that lonely churchyard, a woman I do not recognise has found her way into the picture of me standing by my grandfather's grave. A young woman by the look of it in a flowing, black dress, but I did not think there was anyone there at the time and the verger, who certainly must have seen her, made no comment. It is strange and I cannot look at the photograph for long. There is something strangely familiar about her countenance... I find it most disconcerting to say the least."

There is a break in the writing here and then, a little further down the page, another, shorter paragraph, in a different ink and probably added later.

"But surely I have seen that face! I cannot think where. I do not know anyone down here. My mind is not working at its greatest capacity at the moment. I don't recognise some of my own thoughts. I shall perhaps pack my bags tomorrow and leave. Cambridge seems so far away. The air is so cold here."

A letter on blue notepaper, dated that day and inserted at the back of the journal, shows that Montague has managed to clear up one mystery, that of the identity of the old woman in the churchyard. The letter is signed by one Charlotte Dymond and, extracting only the significant passages, reads –

'...referring to your visit to my mother's house I would appreciate it if you didn't call again. She is 97 years of age and apt to become confused sometimes and often leaps from this year to that year without knowing the difference between them. The fact that you so closely resemble your grandfather only makes it more difficult for her. As you probably know, he acted so disgracefully all those years ago by leaving his new bride so that she went and took her own life and people of my mother's generation still remember. They say she was such a loyal, loving girl and yet she was buried in the obscurest corner of the graveyard with the suicides

and murderers. I apologise of course for any offence caused to you previously on her part...'

Mrs Isabella Heylt remembers Montague's last night well. She had retired early as she had a long journey ahead of her the next morning to visit her ailing sister in Truro. As she lay there in the stillness of her room, she stiffened suddenly as she heard a voice through the floorboards above her – a man's voice, definitely – low, but urgent. It was, to Mrs Heylt's ears, as if he were making a confession or apology. She uses the word "he" instead of "Mr Montague" because, though the voice was similar to Montague's, it was somehow fuller, more lilting in style, and – here she makes apology for what she fears is an idle mind's embroidery – it had to her the quality of a voice that had not spoken for a long time. Already in a nervous state of mind, a movement of her foot dislodged a book she had laid aside and sent it crashing to the floor. She let out a small shout of fear and the voice in the room above abruptly ceased.

The entry in Montague's journal for the following day is a short one. It gives the appearance of having been written in a great hurry:

"There you are, out there now, waiting. I was mad to leave. I will see."

It was not until some days later that a male body was recovered on the rocks of Gull Cove. It was thought that the man, struck out along the cliff path when it was already dark, unaware that a small section of the path, that part leading up to a sheltered mossy outcrop once a meeting place for lovers, had fallen away. It was generally agreed by the people in the village that it must have all happened very quickly and very likely knew nothing about it. The lone walker who found him, however, will tell you that, by the expression set onto his dead white face, James Montague knew every second of that fall.

# THE LAST JOURNALS OF THE PATTERN WEAVER

— *N.*

*"Listen well, for here is great secret wisdom: All is One Single Piece, with Moving Parts." —The Book of Odd*

To say that I am frightened of the Cold is an unfathomable understatement. The Cold is insidious. Like a fanged, sentient thing that seeks to tear at me. Each evening, when I finally wander out of my small apartment to walk the shadow-washed streets, I know that the Cold waits. It shimmers and stalks in the air, seeking to work its sharp nails into my skin like a jealous woman.

The Cold is not of this earth. It is an extraterrestrial spirit. Its origins are as shadowy and ancient as the multiverse itself. I will tell you about it. But after I do, you may find it hard to sleep. Once you understand the nature of the danger that surrounds you at all times, please do not blame me if you are unable to sleep well. As I said, the Cold is a beastly thing — as only such creatures formed of the darkness of space could be.

Think about it. Most of our warmth is nothing more than a by-product of the sun. Without the warming rays of sunlight, and gravity, there is only the void of empty space surrounding our world. I know that space is Cold. Icier than regret. Whenever winter comes and I feel the prickles of snow on my bare skin, be assured that I understand its true nature. Winter is merely the barest hint of it. The Cold we feel is only the smallest bit of true Space Cold. Only the sun keeps this ravenous, pitiless thing away. And that, a losing battle; I am sure.

Despite my knowledge of the nature of this particular enemy, I still walk the streets. I have to. The creation of the Great Key must continue, regardless of my fears of the Beasts That Pursue. Despite its brutal finality, the Cold is only a harbinger of those to come. It is merely the most conspicuous sign of them. The Cold, you see, too has masters. These things never travel alone. And all of them hunger.

I have been working on the Great Key for over a decade now. It originally started when I first noticed the Patterns, as a child. They were everywhere, on everything. I used to play with their configurations like a normal boy might play with a puzzle. I would pick apart the twisted geometries with my eyes — turn them about and study their shapes and colors — before finally moving them with my hands. I would move the Patterns around, mixing and matching in the hope that they would fit neatly and securely into each other. The figures, or "Patterns" as I later dubbed them, seemed to be disjointed pieces of a whole. I understood this instinctively as a child.

The pursuit was always about fitting them all together. The problem was obvious: these Patterns were legion. There were countless thousands. They were everywhere. If they were scattered puzzle pieces; then the final picture was enormous. But when I was a child, the sheer impossibility of fitting them all together never occurred to me.

I believe I may have appeared to be autistic at the time. I am not sure. The unconcerned foster parents of my early childhood rarely spoke to, or about me. My presence was not important to them. I was cleaned, clothed, and fed. Very little school. I learned to read from the other children in our house. I picked up on it quickly. But I often scared those other children. I really did not play, in a way that they would understand. I spent hours sitting, picking Patterns out of the air with tiny, questing fingers. My hand would always stray upward into the empty spaces, tracing the lines of the Patterns that I watched shift and move on the playroom walls. My lips would quiver as I whispered softly. Usually it was self-encouragement.

"Yes, yes. Close, almost ... ah, no! It does not fit there."

I do not blame the children for their fear of me. I realize that my behavior must have seemed extremely odd. It was not long before I realized that these signs and sigils were only visible to me. A few embarrassing moments taught me that much. I learned to keep the gift of this sight a tightly-guarded secret.

Keeping secrets becomes a dark art. Like being a good liar. It is not such an easy task. Secrets can multiply into an unwieldy mass after only a short period of time. One cannot keep them all in, let alone keep them organized. They eventually spill forth, to the ruin of their keeper. It was just this sort of leak that first exposed my ability to the enemy.

We were poor children. Heat was an expensive and rare commodity. I spent years experiencing the unyielding torture that is the Cold. The long, thin teeth of it were the worst. The Cold has a million mouths; and they all enjoy biting. Each night, as it crept slowly upon me, I was consumed with terror. Terror eats its prey as well. The Cold began to gobble me up, as completely as a snake swallows a mouse.

I cried a lot during those frigid nights, when I was very young. It is hard for me to remember. Sometimes, as a child, I imagined that the tears streaming down my cheeks might harden and crystallize — maybe fall to the dirty, wooden floor-boards as icy diamonds. I could collect them, perhaps, and purchase some warmth. I doubt that ever happened ... but children seek out magic, even in hell. I must have eventually realized that crying was useless. Still is. Terror and the Cold are siblings with the same hunger: fear and warmth — in copious, juicy quantity. This too I began to realize. I gave up crying and started to fight.

I was a smart child and grew into an intelligent and inquisitive teenager. New foster posters attended to my proper education. They did not love me, but they performed their duties mindfully. In school, I began to understand that to fight the Cold, I would have to first know its nature. Learn the secrets of my enemy. For a while, I put aside the Patterns. I had divined no particular use for



them, other than that of an enjoyable distraction. I turned instead to books for answers.

It was there, in the world of the printed page, that I first stumbled upon a vast mystery which we call the elements. I also read of outer space. The bulk of information I encountered threatened to distract me from my original purpose. I found wormholes and noble metals to be of particular interest, and nearly lost sight of my goal while studying them. Then I happened upon the notion of Absolute Zero; the frozen temperature of pure stasis and deadlock. It is just a theory. Science has found nothing that is quite that cold. But Space wants to be. And if not for stars, perhaps it could. I had found the place of origin; my enemy's home lair, so to speak. Somewhere out in the deep, unknowable cosmos. And that defined the nature of my enemy.

The Cold that had bothered me for so long, here on earth, never originated from this planet. It was the excruciating stuff of nightmares, and cosmic infinity — a dark-hearted entity, with a soul of snow. The Cold exists in the very non-substance that surrounds and enfolds the planet itself. Its body is a titan of size. And it is immortal. But more importantly — it hungers, and it is merciless and terrible in its emptiness.

Cold affects everything. Fire is snuffed. Leaves fall dead from trees. And rivers turn to stone. So I knew that the Cold had no specific interest in me. I was but another of its innumerable, eventual victims. It had no personal reason to pursue me at the time. But then, the leak occurred: I started this journal. Shortly after I began to pen the words concerning my ability to read and see Patterns, I noticed a definite change in the nature of any cold with which I came into contact. Stronger, deeper, more fierce. Each time the chill touched my flesh, it felt as if it came with a terrible personal grudge. The Cold had read my words. The Cold knew I could see the Patterns. And the Cold did not like it. Its masters would be angry. It wanted me dead.

For several months after this realization, my life reached a new level of stark dread. The Cold was specifically targeting me because of my ability. There was nothing I could do about it. How do you fight such an insidious enemy? There are few weapons with the power to affect this beast. And, as I reasoned at the time, none of them were at my disposal.

Have I mentioned God yet, in these pages? No, I suppose not. It is only now that it has a place in this tale. I am certain that my idea of God would surprise many. But that is not important. God was the deciding factor in my battle against the Cold. Only God has access to the weaponry needed to defeat my enemy. And only God can grant knowledge of those weapons. It does so through epiphany. Such tools of war are housed in a certain place. A secret space that does not exist in the realms of what we consider to be the Here and Now. They are folded in a location that is cleverly hidden — in the *There and Then*. This occurred to me during one of my night-time walks. My first epiphany.

I stumbled for hours down the darkened streets that vein through this city, when I was struck with the answer to my mysterious torment. The Cold stalked me because I could see the Patterns. The Patterns were useless to me, yes, but the Cold was not aware of that. Perhaps it thought I was biding my time. Or perhaps it simply thought that I was ignorant of its sinister stalking, and its awareness. Either way, it desired to creep into me like a dark thought. Rob me of warmth, hope, and eventually — life. So it must follow that the Patterns were what the Cold feared. And, I reasoned, it could only fear them because they were a distinct threat to its very existence.

Imagine my elation at this particular revelation! The Patterns led to a way to combat the beast; this universal Cold enveloping us all. And if the Patterns were a threat to the Cold, then perhaps they also threatened its masters. If the Patterns were a weapon against one ancient adversary — the Cold — then surely those Patterns could be used against all of these Beasts That Pursue.

Though this astounding discovery initially filled me with pure joy, it did not serve to keep me happy for long. An obvious, but monolithic obstacle still barred my way. I had spent years "playing" with the Patterns. I had manipulated, moved, studied, and memorized some of them; yet still I was no closer to divining their mystery than I was when I first became conscious of their existence. Noticing and interacting with the Patterns might be one thing — using them was something else entirely.

I am not sure that I will be able to completely record this bizarre tale for future readers. Already my fingers are numb. Barely any feeling is left to them. The Cold is not a quick killer. It has no desire to be expedient. The Multiverse is ancient beyond reckoning, and the Cold is just as aged. Patience fires its hunger, and it savors anticipation. Time is its ally. Being indomitable is a core virtue that the Cold learned through eons of study. So I have had the opportunity to pen many pages. Even so, I am beginning to succumb to the influence of this most-deadly adversary.

To complete the important points of this record; that is all I can hope for now. Let me continue, dear God. Please give me the strength, the *warmth* of life, to continue.

I had finally puzzled out the answer to the mystery of aligning the Patterns on another of my night-time walks. Quite simply, I call it the Great Key. Much like the Egyptian hieroglyphs of old, which were deciphered only after the Rosetta Stone was uncovered, it dawned on me that the Patterns were a cipher of sorts. Perhaps they were not puzzle pieces, but instead, letters of a great writing that have been scattered about. They needed a key to unlock their meaning. And much like the Rosetta Stone — simply tucked away and hidden in plain sight — so must such a key, after created, be hidden somewhere. To await the person who could use it.

The key would not just decipher, though. No, that was not enough. It must reflect, magnify, utilize, bind ... and it must open. It must be a tool of learning, as well as a magnificent weapon against those who seek to veil the truth concerning their devilry. For whom the Cold serves — as their harbinger.

Such a key would not be of any use to someone who could not see the Patterns. For the spiritually-blind, this Great Key would be nothing more than a pretty trinket. And I am too damned old to use it. The Cold will get me, sooner or later. But surely there will be another, I thought.

This knowledge — and this strange, doomed mission — cannot be my fate alone. If someone younger, stronger, and more ready to fight came along ... and he could see the Patterns ... *and* he had the Great Key? Well, there for sure is a warrior to fear. I wished him, or her, the best. And I will offer what I can for that fight, I thought.

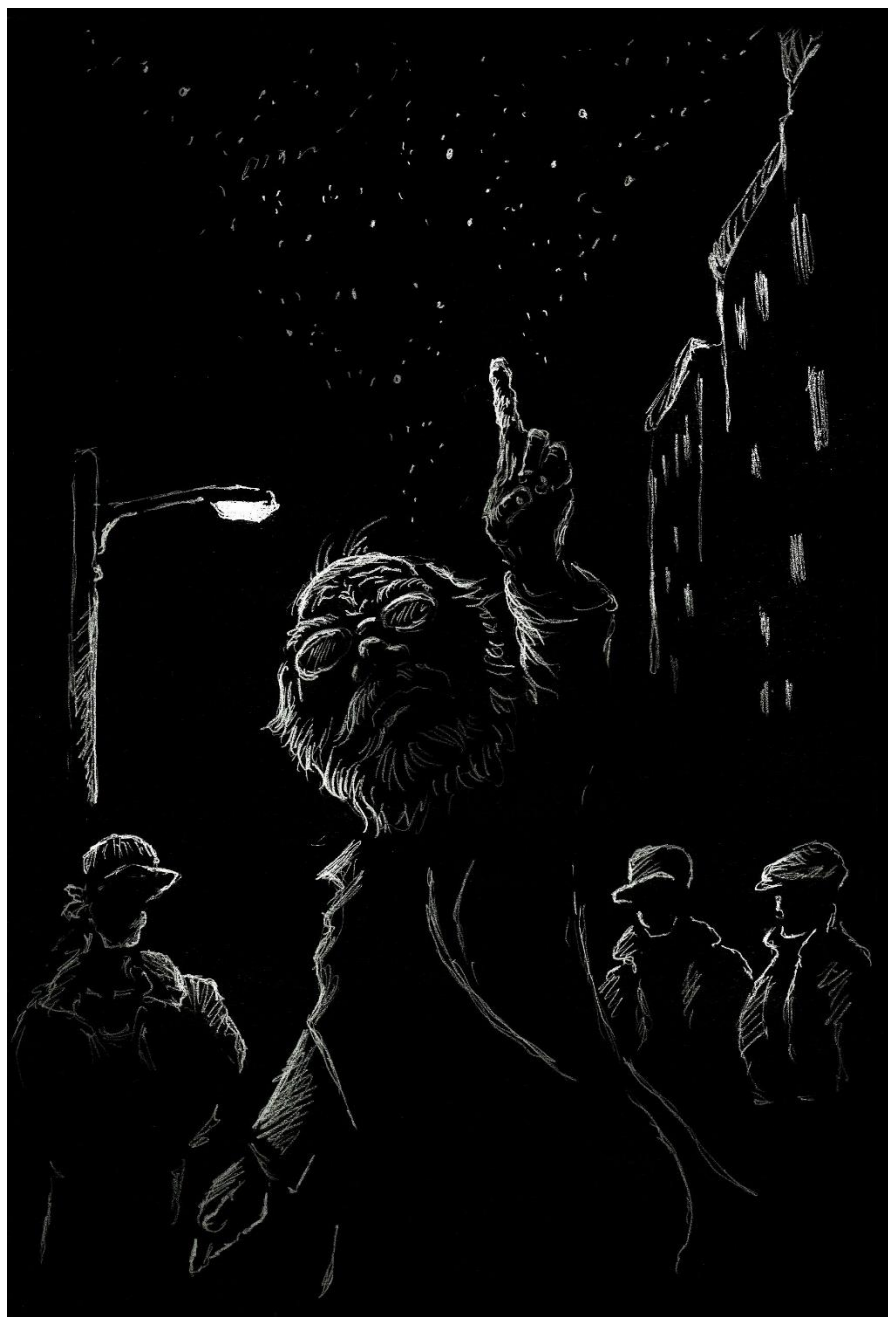
Such became my new goal. Figure out how to link the Patterns to a key. Then, make that key and hide it; in preparation for a future person who could use such a weapon. What a fine idea. I had to begin the work. And Holy God — was it work!

It took me months just to figure out how to identify specific Patterns, and then find each of its corresponding partners. You see, I had discovered that Patterns came in Major Pairs, each with its own subsets of Minor Pairs. Often, these twins were separated — miles of distance between them. They cannot be drawn, or in any way reproduced on paper — for some reason I could never understand. Every attempt leads to random scribbling on a page. I found that out early. Some sort of protective measure, I assume. So, I had to memorize them. It often took hours. Many of the Patterns are astoundingly complex. And some of them are very similar, differing only slightly in some minute way.

I then had to compare each Pattern with its mirrored twin; again, usually separated by a great distance. It was a task not suited for most. My only saving-grace was that none of the Patterns existed inside of a building or structure. They were not hidden in that way; they did not like to be confined. They seemed to be able to move out of the way of such obscurity, if they wished. All of the Patterns hang suspended, out in the open air, usually no more than a few feet from the ground. They are quite obvious to one who can see them.

After identifying matching Major Pairs, and the Minor Pairs, it took me weeks longer to puzzle out a way to link them together. The final answer to that conundrum made me chuckle for days, as I sat on my bed. It was simplicity itself. Such advanced truths usually are.

Imagine strings — once having stretched between two points — that were then severed, and dissolved. Such was the state the Patterns were in. They had to be retied, end to end, and the whole ultimately rewoven. Pulled back together like an elaborate, woven rug which has unraveled. Of course, it was another task that whittled away precious time; and the Cold was gaining. There were small consolations, though.



This part of the project allowed me to use paper, and a good pen. As is my wont, I used bright yellow pages, and scarlet-red ink. I acquired a detailed map of the city itself, with all of its major buildings, roadways, side streets, alleys, and parks. Upon it I began to mark the location of each Pattern, its twin, and the sub-pairs linked with it. Then, I used a simple ruler to draw the most expedient line that I could walk between them. I could not draw the Patterns themselves, of course, but I devised a simple labeling system that I linked to each memorized Major Pair. I gave the corresponding symbols a unique, alphabetical designation: A to A, B to B — through the alphabet — then doubling the letters, AA to AA, etc. Unfortunately, I could not fly ... so it was a bit disheartening to stare down at the final, drawn plan and realize that I would be walking back and forth until the Rapture — so to speak. A lot of walking, anyway. Sighing became my refrain. The city itself was against me as well ... with its thousands of beasts, predators, and distractions. I could not complete this weaving from the comfort (the damnable Cold notwithstanding) of my small apartment. I had to leave, to follow each Pattern to its linked partner, and bring both together with a thin, but nearly-indestructible, string of energy. Each jaunt out of my home brought fresh torments. How does one walk out into the open, easily, knowing that dangers lurk? Bravery is in short supply, when one is old and alone.

For example, one night, as I glided down the scrolling, endless sidewalk — my right index finger pointed straight up, pulling a Pattern-connecting string behind me — I was assaulted by a vicious band of young men. I use the word, "men," as a polite alternative to the truth, you see.

"What-cha doing, old man?" one of the imps challenged. I stopped walking, my hand still pointing up. I realized how that must look. But letting go of this end would snap the string back to its origin point, beneath a Pattern. I would then have to go back and retrace it, losing hours of tedious work. Not to mention, further continuing to suffer the terrible agony that had lodged itself in the muscles of both my arms. Try holding up your hand and arm for a good long while, with no break; you will soon realize my meaning.

"Minding my own business, young sir. Perhaps you could do the same," I answered. Three scruffy teenagers, cloaked in mismatched coats and hats — as well as wicked intention — began to surround me.

"The old spook's sure gotta a mouth on him," one vicious creature spoke, directly into my face. He continued to leer toward me, his look as vile as his breath.

"Maybe he's crazy! Some crazy old bum walkin' around with his hand in the air," another postulated.

"Hey, Overlords! Beam him back up to yer spaceship!" cackled the final fiend. He was unaware, poor creature — but his taunts gave him away. I knew who had sent these brutes. These teenagers were not fully cognizant of why they were being used. But the Cold had reported my activities. And its masters had sent these wretches either to torment me, or stop me altogether. Either way, it might be catastrophic. Time was running out.

The third beast completed the triangle around me, shoving me roughly from behind. "Hey! Got any money, y'old creep?"

I tried to respond, while keeping my hand aloft. It was pointless. Cats play with mice — they rarely release them. The beating began.

Minutes-that-felt-like-hours later, they left. I lay, sprawled across the filthy concrete, my work ruined for the night. My ribs and legs throbbed from the sharp kicks. My head felt as if it could hold its own in a conversation with a football. That nasty band of spiteful imps chortled with laughter as they moved down the street. Their true purpose was again revealed, this time by their inaction. The mugging would have yielded rich reward, had they checked my pockets. I had several dozen large-denomination bills wadded up in each one. I never left the apartment without money. But the boys had not robbed me. That is not what they wanted. It was simply a gratuitous smiting, meant to teach me a lesson. It was fortunate for them, of course, that I had been occupied with holding the Patterns together. I may be old, but I am not defenseless. Perhaps it was more fortunate for me. Suffering a few bruises were worth not being forced to hurt one of them.

I turned my head slowly, feeling the rough grit of the sidewalk against my skull, and stared. The exquisitely-complex trail of string I had woven for hours abruptly snapped, before recoiling across miles of hate-scorched cityscape. It zipped back, like energy-elastic, to its origin point. Counting time spent in the memorization, course-plotting, and the actual walking needed for reconnection — literally dozens of hours were lost in seconds. I could not help but weep.

I will not trouble a reader with other such tales of my early trials. Suffice it to say that the city has endless ways to tighten the thumbscrews. But I persevered. Through all of the tedium, torments, boredom, astounding feats of memory, and vicious instances of well-timed inconveniences, I finished the project. The entire city eventually shimmered with my work. As if some great Being had pulled an intricate, bright-glowing-pearl-studded web throughout the metropolis. One night, as I stood in front of the one window of my apartment, I stared out at the great project that had consumed me for over a year. Every Pattern in the city, and all of the Minor Pairs, was now linked together in a humming, scintillating tapestry. It glittered with energy, power, and potential. The Pattern-Weave was alive with purpose, and it basked me in the grateful, beautiful glow of its completion. But unfortunately, I could not share it with anyone. I was the only one who could see it.

It was a lamentable fact, but I knew that one day another would witness what I had accomplished. He would stand, Great Key in hand, and know that he was not alone. Or perhaps, she, would realize that a kindred soul had paved the way before her. It gave me much-needed comfort, and I enjoyed for the first time that evening some blessedly-dreamless sleep. Just before dozing off, I imagined a young, warrior-woman who might take up my work. I was already proud of her; I had always wanted a daughter.

I only allowed myself a day or two of rest. To be candid, I believed that I had earned a bit of respite, and probably would have taken longer if possible. But

the Cold continued its unceasing campaign against me. It would not be long before it found a way to render me useless ... and eventually in the grave. A frozen stiff. Forgive me that silliness, dear reader. But what is one to do in the face of such horror — other than the occasional laugh?

The work was not yet complete. I had crafted the Master Pattern; an intricate Pattern-Weave. It would serve as the energetic basis to control and manipulate all other Patterns, whether they were connected or not. But my Master Pattern had no key.

To be useful, Patterns must be forced to obey and link together. They were an esoteric language; and needed to be in the correct order to speak their message. As my work made plain, that was no easy undertaking. And that was assuming one knew of the Patterns' existence, their purpose, and then puzzled out how they could be reconnected in the first place. Not a likely occurrence, despite the fact that I had achieved it. And it had taken me decades, all told.

No, the Great Key was crucial. Without it, the completed Pattern-Weave was useless as soon as one traveled away from this city. I could not hope that this future warrior might possibly puzzle out the weaving of Patterns, in the midst of all the planar-horror with which he would surely have to contend. Pattern-weaving was my job. Plain and simple. And there is an old proverb: "Just because it has not been given to you to complete the work, does not mean that it has not been given to you to start it."

Wise words; and I agree.

I began to walk again. It served many purposes, not the least of which was to combat the Cold. The Cold had invaded my apartment, and the building itself, with its attenuated claws. Moving to a new place was pointless and a waste of precious time. The Cold would follow. Such a duck-and-weave chase would endlessly wear me down, and my work would never be complete. I had already resigned myself to the personal defeat that was inevitable. Better to spend what time remained on finishing my task.

Thus, I began to walk again. Did I already write that? As I scrawl these words on the page, a bone-deep numbness seeps its way through my limbs. It comes with a burning that is unexpected. Strange that freezing to death would, first, feel like fire.

The fashioning of the Great Key was a secret I had discovered as well, much like the Patterns and their reconnection. It was a solution that I had puzzled out long ago. Actually, I figured out the need for the key before I even realized that the Patterns could be linked to such a device. The key is an anchor, and an organizer. A symbolic one, of course, but functions as both nonetheless. Without it, all of the work I had completed was meaningless to anyone else. And might eventually fly apart, given time.

Such secrets of the Multiverse are rarely without a dose of ironic humor. Whichever Being, or Force, started this whole big bang certainly enjoyed a twisted sense of the comedic. But, I am getting ahead of myself. Or, falling behind. I am not sure.

I have adjusted the thermostat in this meat-locker of an apartment to the maximum setting. I apologize, but I am starting to get a little impatient, and irritated. I can feel the warm air blowing out of the vents. But it does not chase away the Cold in a wide area, as one would expect. I have to stand directly in front of the vent to experience any relief. Not practical while writing. Let me see if a few minutes, spent warming my hands, will allow me to continue on more clearly.

There — I apologize again for the interruption. A purposely-interrupted narrative always annoys me most in any piece of writing. Please forgive an old man. That damnable Cold! It is an invisible and implacable monster. But, the story ... yes, back to it, then.

So, the riddle of the Great Key first revealed itself to me during one of my walks. Linking a completed Pattern-Weave to a key was the best way to allow another to use all other scattered Patterns one may find (throughout the Multiverse, theoretically) — without having to manually link them himself. The Great Key resonates with the completed Pattern-Weave to which it is linked, and thus encourages other Patterns to form such a link on their own; at an astonishingly-accelerated rate. Forgive me for getting too technical. But that is the long and short of it.

Remember that I earlier mentioned humor, inherent in the designs of such tools? Well, the cosmic-joke that the Creator imbued into the very idea of the key was two-fold: the first twist — such a key must be all of one solid piece, yet have moving parts.

Yes, I know. Why make up such rules? Well, I can tell you it was someone, or something, with a far subtler, sublime, and keen intellect than anything we could possibly fathom, in our short lives. How do I know that? Because it works. I know perfectly well how I sound, and I do not give a damn. I see the Patterns. I wove them together. And the Great Key will work.

So, what was the answer to that first part of the riddle? How could something be all of one solid piece, yet have moving parts? I almost gave up once I bumped into this part of the puzzle. It nearly drove me insane.

I left my rather lucrative position in life, cut contact with everyone I knew, and sold everything I owned (which was considerable). I lived like a hapless vagabond, chasing the answer to this twisted Gordian knot. The solution, of course, came to me as most such things do: by coincidence.

Please keep in mind that I do not believe in coincidence, as a rule. Someone once wrote: "Coincidence is God's way of remaining anonymous." I believe that to be another shining truism, in so far as it goes. Just as I was about to walk away from this great work, and end my life out of despair, I witnessed a miracle. I took one last walk (I believed, at the time) through the city park. And there; an amazing "coincidence."

The day was molten, back when I could still feel such things — before the Cold caught my scent in its predatory snout. The park teemed with people, most



trying to fan themselves, or escape the heat of the sun under a tree. I heard the chiming laughter of children. On a whim, I followed the sound.

I love children. Before a certain age, people are without guile or malice. Children are refreshing; reflections of our true selves. Three such blessings appeared before me, playing a game over a bit of level concrete, which served as a basketball court. They giggled, pointed, and delighted over a shared toy.

When I looked down at the object of their play, something dark shattered inside of me. A great floodgate of joy opened and washed away my despair — as quickly as sunlight dissolves frost. I saw the key. I knew how it had to be made. Crying out in triumph, I ran from the park. It is embarrassing, but I must admit that my cry frightened the children momentarily. Their eyes were as wide as my heart just then. I returned to my apartment, renewed with purpose.

Remember how I wrote that the Great-Key-joke was twofold? Well, it is. The second part of the riddle was this: not only was the form of the key simple, but it could also literally be made of anything. Anything. There was no fast Rule that compelled the fashioning of the Great Key from something rare or precious. But ... the key must appear to be valuable to the person who made it. They must believe, to the depths of their blood, that the key was a precious and unique thing. Again, I know. Why such strange constraints? And again, I can only defend it by saying that despite how bizarre these strictures are, they work. The Great Key works. Who are we, on our tiny planet, to judge the rules of Multidimensional Law? This last part of the puzzle was bothersome, but it did not make me despair on the level that I had previously experienced. What substance would be useful for fashioning a practical solid object that might see some rough use, yet be both valuable and unique?

Obviously you could not carve the key from some precious stone. Not practical. It could shatter or break. Metal? Certainly then it could handle some rough use. And if you used gold or platinum, it would clearly be valuable. But, unfortunately, it would not be unique. There are other gold and platinum keys abroad, I assure you. The answer presented itself to me, one day, in the writings of Plato. Again, as a "coincidence."

Speaking on the ancient city of Atlantis, Plato mentioned that its walls were decorated by a rare and costly metal. According to his account, Atlantis flashed, "with the red light of orichalcum." It was a mere twist of phrase. He said little else about the metal.

Scholars have debated for centuries about his meaning. Such a metal has been mentioned in other ancient writings, but no evidence of the alloy itself has ever been found. There have been claims, here and there, that possible orichalcum was discovered in caves, ancient sculptures, and in shipwrecks. Yet none of it has been confirmed, and none of it has had that telling "red light." That was the answer. The Great Key must be made of a legendary metal that no longer existed. Nothing could be more valuable, or unique, than a resurrected myth.

I went in search of an archaeologist and a metalworker. Fortunately, this city has a rather large and famous museum. It took some doing, but I cornered the

Antiquities Curator one day after he left his office. Although initially startled by my appearance, he was a generous man. He listened to my words and, I assume, found me intelligent enough to allay any of his fears concerning my intent. He had heard of the mysterious metal and actually had had a passing interest in it as an undergrad. He found two "recipes" for orichalcum in his early research, which he was kind enough to share with me.

They were not exact, of course, but it put me on the right path. I later teased and tinkered out the true equation for the metal. It was not that difficult, considering I had such a splendid starting point. It seems a lifetime ago, but I was once a molecular chemist, you see.

I selected the metal-smith by intuition. Such gut-feelings had always served me well in the past, and I saw no reason to distrust them now. I walked through numerous jewelry stores, numismatic vendors, and silver smiths by the score. I made a few inquiries. Usually I was treated rudely, if not roughly, and asked to leave. Whenever I tried to display the wealth I had to offer, in the form of great wads of bills, I was treated as an outright thief. Strange, but not surprising. The store I finally settled on was modest in appearance. Situated near a cheap shopping center — it was an odd place. The objects in the window were finely crafted. Otherworldly, in fact. Spindles, rings, bracelets, and hat pins of exquisitely-wrought silver and gold; all scattered across black velvet like precious, glinting candy. The filigree and metal-beadwork alone would have made a Yemeni jeweler cry in envy. I knew this was the place, just as I knew that the man inside would not treat me with disdain.

I opened the wood and glass door to the tinkling of brass bells. I slid inside and looked around. The shop appeared as if it had been plucked from some old, Eastern bazaar. It was totally out of place in this modern city. Ancient artifacts, statuary, thick books, textiles, and non-traditional religious implements spilled from shelves and tables. Two cases in particular displayed the masterwork jewelry I had sampled in the front window. I moved to them. As I did, a small brown-skinned man in a tasteful suit appeared, from behind a curtain that led to a back room.

"Greetings, sir. A fine afternoon to you," he said. I smiled at him. "Is this your work?" I asked, indicating the princely pieces before me, proudly displayed in the case.

"Yes, sir. I am a craftsman of silver, gold, and copper. My grandfather taught me."

There are moments in one's life that shine like such jewels. This was one of those instances for me. Even though I had completed my masterwork with the Patterns, it was but one stage. This man would help me to finish the whole affair. I knew he would. It was foreordained.

As he continued to smile, I pulled a sheaf of papers from my coat pocket and laid them before him. Plans for the Great Key. I had drawn them with painstaking carefulness, and had included the intricate designs and letters that

were to be etched on the key's surface. I had no expertise on such things, but I imagined that crafting the key would be a terribly-difficult project.

"Can you make this for me?" I asked. He looked down and picked up the papers. The smile dissolved from his face, replaced with a deep concentration. Something flashed in his eyes — a familiarity? After a few long minutes of studying the plans, as I perused the rest of his wares, he asked suddenly, "What do you wish it made of, sir?" He continued to look over the pages, awaiting my reply.

"An alloy."

Looking up, he asked, "Of which metals, sir?"

Walking over to him again, I handed him another slip of paper. My hand trembled slightly. This was the telling moment. On that scrap was written an exact formula: specific percentages of gold, silver, copper, and a little something extra. He took the slip from my hand and looked down at it. After a moment, he spoke again.

"Red orichalcum, sir?" he asked. Despite the Cold, I felt sunlight edging its way back into my life for a moment. I breathed an audible sigh of relief. I had been led to the correct place.

"Yes. You have made it before?"

"I have attempted it, sir. Long ago, during my training. You are the first to ever ask me to make it again."

"Attempted it? Can it not be done?"

"The metal, sir, and the design? Yes, both can. Your drawings are very specific, and expertly rendered. I say that I once attempted the alloy, because I never finished making that first ingot. It was only necessary for my training that I try. It is a difficult metal. First, though, I have another question for you." I was completely intrigued. The air in the shop sizzled with something I could not quite understand. Excitement, maybe. Or perhaps something more profound than that; a tense and electric sense of waiting. There were other forces than the Cold at work, it would seem.

"Certainly. What is your question?"

He put the formula and the design down on the glass top of the case. He stared at me, more directly than any person has for years. I stood my ground. He seemed to make a decision, nodded, and spoke:

"There are three different alloys of orichalcum, sir. The first, red, was once traded in great abundance, ages ago. It still exists, though in very small quantities now. That is the formula you have here; clever of you, by the way. The second — blue — was discovered during the Renaissance. It too still exists, in greater quantities than red, though it is more-rare than gold.

"I had no idea," I stammered.

"No reason that you should, sir. The fact that you puzzled out the red was enough of a sign for me to share this with you. But, to my question, if I may. There is a third alloy of orichalcum: violet. It has never been attempted, let alone made." I stood, shocked.

He continued, "Don't you believe that such an object, the plans of which you have presented to me, should be unique? Perhaps it would be best, sir, if your Key be made of this third orichalcum alloy."

"You say that it has never been made? This third alloy?"

"No, I am certain it has not, sir. I have only recently puzzled out the extractive metallurgy needed to make it possible. Furthermore, this specific metal has a harmonic resonance. Any smith who can craft it would become aware of its existence, whenever it is made."

I looked at the strange man. What he said was patently mad, of course. Although, it was no more "insane" than invisible Patterns and old men who can connect them. I had no choice but to believe his story. And I found that it was very easy to do so. I held out my hand, "Yes, please make it. Can you begin right away?" He shook my hand, smiled, and answered: "Yes, I can."

I then asked, "So, to the cost. How much for such a thing?"

Without a pause, he quoted an exorbitant price. I stared at him.

"The cost is not for the materials, sir, or my time ... though both are valuable," he said. "It is for my family, should there be complications. There is no small amount of danger in my making such an object, as you well know. Certain ... 'entities,' shall we call them, will be aware of what I have done. They will not be pleased."

Of course he was correct. I certainly had run into "complications" myself. I pulled several large bundles of cash from my pockets, about a fifth of the price he asked. I laid the crumpled money on the glass counter. "Will this serve as a down payment — until I can bring you the rest, in a week or so?"

"Certainly. I'll begin tonight," he answered, rolling my plans into a neat scroll. And, just like that, the deal was done. I left the shop to begin collecting the rest of the money. It would wipe me out financially, but I was beyond caring. I knew I had little time left anyway.

There are a million tiny hidey-holes one can find in the city. I never felt safe keeping all of my money in one place. So, for the next few days, I retrieved what was left of my fortune. Occasionally, I would stop by the little shop to deposit the funds. The smith always greeted me with a knowing smile, took the money, and bid me good day. It was all smooth and easy. Until today. The last place I visited presented a dark challenge.

I knew immediately as I entered the gutted, toothless building that there was going to be a fight. The Enemy is nothing if not predictable with its torments. The time was coming. The Great Key was close to completion; I could feel it, as one feels the invisible and persistent touch of spider webs in a gentle wind. Two young tramps called home the vacant warehouse where I had stashed the last, and largest, of my cash bundles. I could see both men hunched over a small barrel-fire, which they had fashioned from bits of found-wood and garbage. The confrontation was inevitable.

Of course the Enemy would choose now to strike. Right when I was so close to seeing the completion of my work. I sighed, resigned.

"This is our place ... get out!" the first spoke, addressing me. He stood up straight, baring his teeth. The thin light of dusk from a broken window mixed with firelight to wash him in ghoulish colors. The second man stood as well, his long, filthy coat swirling around him. In his hand he held a jagged knife, and he was as quiet as old ice. I could see the stone, behind which I had stashed the bundle, in a crumbled wall. It beckoned me from behind them. It might as well have been a distant sunset. This was going to be bad.

Words were useless. They had no desire to let me leave, nor did they wish to discuss the purpose of my visit. I backed up slowly, trying to edge my way out — thinking perhaps to find another opportunity to get at the cache. The first man circled around to my right as the second advanced on the left: a pincer move they had practiced before. Bloodlust and adrenalin hazed the air like putrid fog. Time is only perception. It can spiral out into infinity with glacial slowness; or squeeze eons into an instant. Everything happened so fast I could barely process it. The first man lunged from the right with a snarl, his arms outstretched to tackle and enfold me. The quiet partner sliced at my left, his icicle-thin blade seeking my life. My elbow cracked the first tramp squarely in the nose, and he dropped to the ground with a red scream, both hands to his face. The second, quiet assassin, died quickly. He never saw the slash that opened his throat. I too carry a blade.

Taking his life was a terrible thing. If not for the crushing weight of my incomplete work, I would scarcely be able to breathe for the guilt of it. As it stands, I can barely breathe now. Those two men could not help what they did; I know the truth. The Cold drove them to madness. It had already consumed them, just as it wished to consume me. As it is about to. They were nothing than its icy puppets. As I backed into a wall, and slid down to the ground, I could feel an aching, wet burning in my stomach. The man I had smashed with my elbow lurched up, and ran out of the building. The second fellow lies close to me, his blood mingling with my own. Seems his knife found its deep, vital mark after all.

I can smell the copper in the air; but a mortal memory to the ice that approaches. Pulling these pages from my pockets, penning these last words ... the best I can manage. I can only now hope that my smith friend will complete the work, despite not receiving the last of his payment. He is an honorable man. Perhaps he will.

I can hope. It is all I can do. The Cold has won.

There, upon the wall, it has issued its victory cry ... written in hoary frost.



The brown-skinned smith walked into a scene out of an abattoir. He was too late. Two men, pale with death, lay near each other. One, his throat a red ribbon, still reached out toward his victim. The second, a shabby old man — who had borne the weight of worlds on his shoulders — curled in a placid pool of blood. The vacant building was as quiet and heavy as a broken promise, and short puffs of

white air marked the smith's breathing. He knelt down, softly touched the old man's face with two fingers, and whispered:

"Oh, Siddha ... it went bad for you. I am so sorry." The smith then pulled the ink-stained and blood-smudged pages from the old man's hand. "I will take your words and keep them safe. Others will know."

He then reached into his own pocket, and pulled forth a shining, new object. The light from the barrel-fire streaked across the metal in the smith's hands in glints of electric purple. The Great Key was complete. The smith reached down and purposefully touched the old man's Great Work to the now-cooling blood. The metal object flashed briefly, like a new star.

"It is complete, Siddha. It cannot now be used for Evil. Your work is done ... and begun. Go to your rest. One will come." The smith looked up at the frosty words that had begun to fade from the wall nearby.

"Yes, Scaled Ones, I know you. Your time has come ... and gone. One approaches. And with Divine Blessing, he will lead us all up, to freedom."

As the smith left the building, the very air seemed to hiss with anger and threat. It wasn't long before the words on the wall faded altogether, the faint warmth from the barrel-fire erasing all trace of their snowy presence.

WE CAN SEE THE PATTERNS, TOO, OLD MAN. WE KNOW WHAT YOU HAVE  
DONE. OUR MEMORIES ARE LONG — AND OUR TALONS, COLD.

# BEING FOR THE BENEFIT OF MISTER ESSEX-BATHWATER

— *Thomas Oliveri*

WARREN Essex-Bathwater got himself comfortable on the couch.

"You are qvite the fidgety man." The doctor seemed like a New Yorker cartoon that had shuffled off the page. "Vy do you sqvirm?"

"It's crazy, Doc, crazy. I don't believe in half the things going on around me. Right up to the moment Myrna left."

"I don't believe in' is a qveer phrase, ven it refers to von's own experience."

"All of those weirdos have been walking around my house without ever coming or going -- I should know the alarm should have gone off. I found one writing at my kitchen table one night, and one broke my nose. I really don't believe it."

"A broken nose is usually an easy thing to believe in."

"Tell me about yourself. I believe you are a banker?"

"Financial consultant at the Essex-Bathwater group."

"Family business?"

"Nah, I got in on my own. Robley Essex-Bathwater is only my uncle."

"Does it vorry you to be alone?"

"No, not really. I'm getting caught up on all of my favorite shows."

"Perhaps you should begin at the beginning."

"All right one night I was watching *Game of Thrones* in my house. Have you ever seen it? it's about the Middle Ages, when they really kept it real. I don't go in for fake stuff. I like things like hip-hop -- selling snow, shooting cops, swimming pools full of liquor -- you know stuff keeping it real."

"You vere telling a story."

yeah, so I heard my wife, Myrna, out in the hall. And she has like candles and little wooden things out, and a big old-fashioned record with a Salvation Army Band on it. And she told me me not to touch it...something about Soggy Puppies Boney Tarts Bandstand...but there was a football game about to start so I went back into the living room."

"How long did she keep up the display?"

Warren gestured with his hand. It's still up I guess. I haven't touched it at least...I dunno...maybe one of the Weirdos took it down."

"Ven did you first see the intruders you previously mentioned?"

"That first night. I got up to piss and I saw an old man and long beard. I asked what he was doing in my house and he yelled at me with this weird Irish accent thing, and told me not to interrupt his work. I could have taken him down but I went back to bed instead."

"You just left him? did all of your guests meet with such passivity?"

"You meet an old man writing on your kitchen table three a.m. and you leave him there. Nobody else would've done differently."

"Hmmmmm... unt even after your emasculation you didn't call the police."

"I wasn't emancipated or whatever you said. and Anyway the phones started going down whenever those creeps were around. Once I tried to leave when mumbly dirty little hippie with sunglasses was there and I couldn't even open the door."

"unt you think the door unt phone are connected in some way? that would be a very unusual household arrangement"

The next night I met a big black guy in a gay-looking bathrobe and I got a little tough with him."

"Unt I suppose it was he who broke your nose?"

"I tried calling the cops again."

"What vas this man doing? Vriting like that last von?"

"Talking to himself. Some crazy Dr Seuss-Shakespeare thing."

"Interesting. Unt I suppose he vas the only intruder you touched?"

"There was a crazy blonde bitch in a shiny green dress that slapped me."

"Unt you did not deserve this?"

"Nah, she was being stuck up. Couldn't take a joke"

"Hmmmmm..."

"As for how your vife left..."

"One night I got home and she was talking to this young guy at a balcony."

"Balcony? Vat balcony?"

"Well, it's not there now but there was a balcony there for that night... and this greasy-looking guy probably an Italian or something is talking to her, showing her a tattoo on his chest and then he picked her up and left out the window."

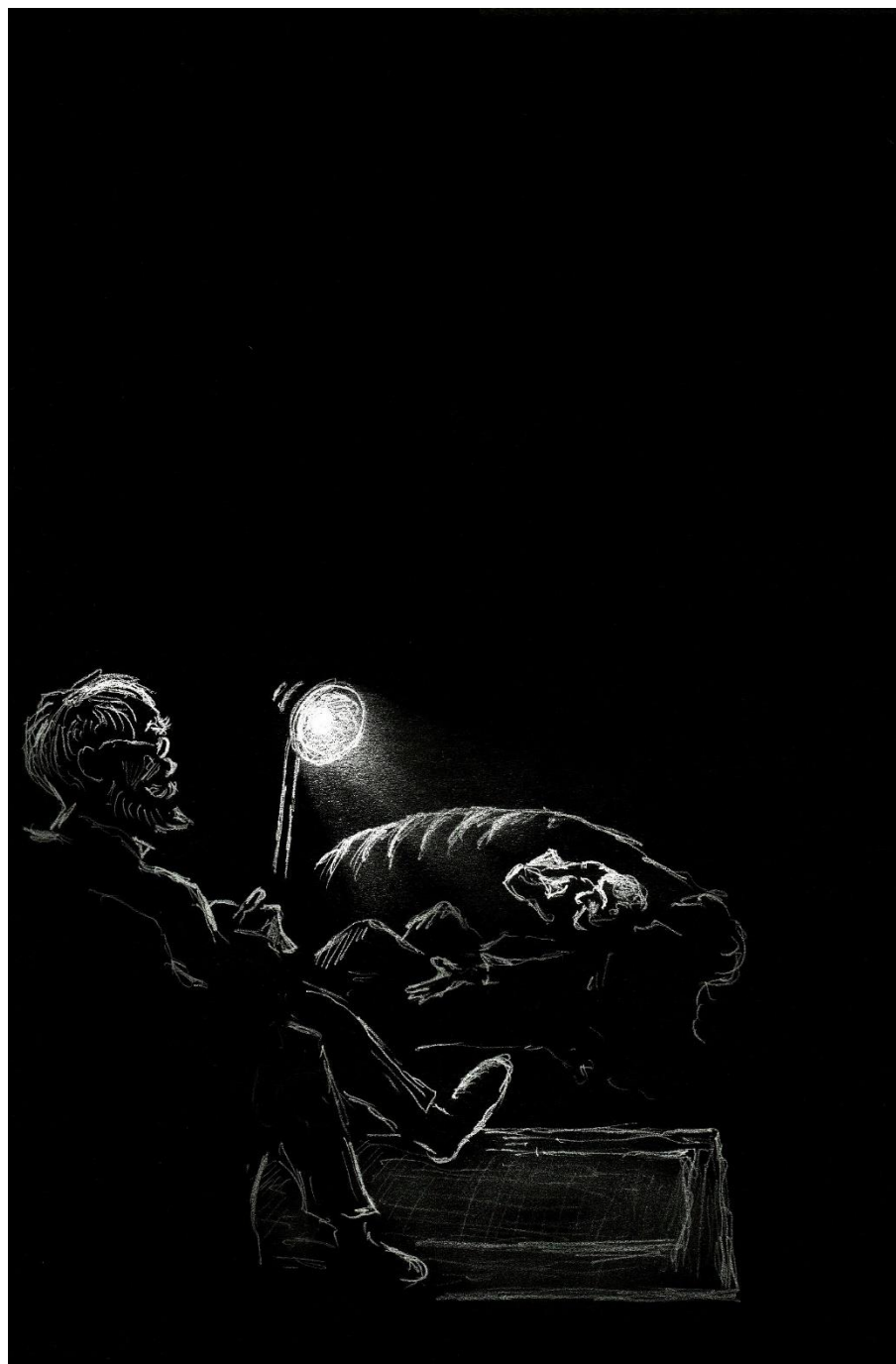
"You act as if there vere a real balcony behind a val of illusion, but the val is real. That would be a big drop. Vere they injured?"

"I dunno. Like I said the window was gone in the morning and I had just taken my sleeping pills and went to bed."

So finally she vas leaving home? So that just leaves the two us."

Warren stirred on the couch. "Yeah, what are you doing in my living room anyway?"





# WOODLAND

— *Brian O'Connell*

Dedicated to Miss Tracy Bettes, who wanted to see how this story ended when I planned not to finish it at all; to Mr. Matthew M. Bartlett, for his wonderful advice; and to Mr. Michael Kellermeier, for taking a chance on my story.

*You looked for work and money  
And you walked a rugged mile  
Your children are so hungry  
That they don't know how to smile*  
- Bob Dylan, "The Ballad of Hollis Brown"

*Come away, o human child!  
To the woods and waters wild  
With a fairy hand in hand,  
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.*  
- William Butler Yeats, "The Changeling"

YOU don't like it when they scream.

It wells up through the floor, creeping into your bedroom and into your ears, a cacophonous cacophony of cruelty, as unpredictably rhythmic as the ocean's roar. It swells and drops like the buzzing of a thousand flies, pounding and heaving, ebbing and flowing.

Your youngest son, but a babe, lies in the corner, his head lolling on his shoulder. The bullet wound on his bald forehead drips a tiny trickle of blood, smoother than water. His bloodshot eyes are staring at the floor. His eyes. You hate his eyes, just as you hate them when he is born. You wish the best for him but you already have three mouths to feed, and yourself, too, and now there is another. You wonder that you even had the drive to conceive him, you are so hungry. But you try and raise him, and ignore those eyes. You really don't want him to see you two years later when you shoot him, but he hears the cock of the shotgun and turns around. In two seconds he is on the floor next to his play blocks, really discarded lumber from an old tree out in the woods poorly cobbled together into a cubic shape. Not that he was enjoying his blocks, no, the boy isn't having fun, he's dirty and so hungry and sticking old rusty nails in the pieces of wood. Babies always like to play with things they shouldn't play but you don't stop him because you're loading the gun and you cock it and he turns around and he's dead.

Now that he's dead he doesn't look so thin and hungry anymore. He looks fuller, more complete, even, but for the blood and the eyes. He hasn't been fed for

at least five days now. Your wife is getting angry and points to the child, still playing with his crude wooden blocks, yelling about how you can't keep up a job in the town that's twelve miles away, outside of the wood. So she shoves you out into the woodland and you're off. And you're hungry too but the high hat folks don't like it when you come into their lobbies and ask if you could maybe help them about the office some time for a dollar or two. You have three children and a wife and yourself and you need to feed everyone. Keeping up the old wood cabin with the shallow basement isn't important anymore now that it's breaking down and the well has two inches of mud and dirt but no water.

They throw you out, out into the woodland, just like your wife, and you trudge back to your farm and your bleary eyes glance at the shotgun laying where you left it on the porch. Not really aware of what you're doing you take it up and start to load it as you walk into the room where your son is playing. You cock it and he glances over just like you didn't want him to, and he's dead.

Your wife runs in now, barefoot and dirty and wearing a grey rag for clothing. She stares in shock at the body and starts to turn towards him but then there's a bullet in her stomach and she's dead too.

They're wailing downstairs again. Not all of the family is downstairs, because your wife and youngest son are lying bleeding on the floor together. You think the blood would have stopped flowing by now but every night a tiny drip trickles out and begins a lazy sanguine river that will last all night, like the wailing, until the grey dawn starts.

There is no dawn in the woodland, though, because the heavy green-grey-blue-black blanket of leaves and branches covers the sunlight and when you go out its still dark, only you don't go out anymore, you just lie in the dark of your bedroom, and the only reason you know it's daytime is because the blood has stopped flowing – but no, the blood is still flowing, and it is still night.

There is no dawn in the woodland and there are few creatures that prowl there in its endless greenish blue night. They are starved and drag themselves along the weary muddy road back to their huts and shacks but that was long ago and now there is just you and your dead wife and your three dead children and the screaming and the blood and the faraway wolves and coyotes that rip and tear at finer meat than yours.

The wailing reminds you of the whistle that the steam trains make in the town outside of the woods. People are pouring out, more people than you have ever seen, and you slouch down and fall to your last resort, and you don't want to do it, but it's your last chance, so you beg. You stop people in the street, high-brow people who don't make eye contact and speak in choppy one word sentences, cookie cutter men who continue their monotonous walk down into the town and to their workplaces where they sit like the others and ignore the flabby grey masses of the destitute outside, the drunks and the addicts and the helpless and the homeless and the poor. And then they will leave, leave town, these paper-mâché cut outs, just as you leave town when the businesses turn you out and there

is no-one to beg to, and as you leave you hear the sound of the trains leaving, whistling, whistling.

As the day begins to fall and the first hours of the night wriggle into their snug niche, the whistling of the trains segues into the whisper of the wind and the rustle of the trees in its environs. Night is already soaking the land in its blue blanket, but even it cannot penetrate into the darkness of the wild woodland. Somewhere a winding river is dripping in a lazy waterfall down to a blue pool of dream, nestled in the green bed of the woods, a more beautiful picture than was ever captured in the stained glass of a church. You are surprised that the sound causes such a vivid picture in your mind, but you are more surprised by the analogy to church, since you surely have not been there since you moved out to the lonely frontier. But you have prayed, every night, of course, so why is God being so cruel to you and your family, why is He making you suffer under the curse of poverty and misery? Surely you have not wronged Him in any way. You think back to what you learned in Sunday school, about the old man Abraham who nearly sacrificed his son after God asked him to, how cruelly infantile to tease him and taunt him. But these notions are quickly dismissed, and you know the explanation to your hardships and Abraham's. Even God must get hungry sometimes, how does one feed Him?

You fade out of consciousness as your mind hangs on this question and become a wind-up toy walking aimlessly through the dark, oblivious to the writhing wind and the rustling trees and the soft pad of damp, wet leaves under your worn and ancient boots. A flicker of existence comes back to you when you see the small stumps of candles in the single small window of your old log cabin and the shotgun lying where you left it on the porch. It is just a flicker of existence, like the candles in the house, and in a moment the whipping wind blows it out. Now you are inside the room, and you don't know how you got there, and the shotgun is in your hand for some reason, and your little baby boy is playing the corner, but he hears a noise, and glances at you with those eyes that you have hated since his birth, and then he is dead. There is a woman lying next to him, dead as well, and then that flickering candle in your head comes back, and you know what to do now.

The other two children are playing in the shallow cellar and you won't make a mistake this time, won't let them know what's coming. They can't smile and if they could it would be dirty and ugly, all missing teeth and bloody gum; they have not heard the first two shots because they have grown hard of hearing, and the buildup of dirt in their ears does not help either. They are too hungry and nothing is worse than hunger, and they will starve to death and rot over their wood nailed blocks until the rats and coyotes eat their meager carcasses. So you must shoot them, both of them, let them escape the pain.

But at the top of the stairs you have second thoughts. Their names – your son and daughter's names – come into your mind, and suddenly every moment associated with them floods over you. They were birthed seven or eight years ago, into happier times, when the farm was still fine and the well still full. They're

playing in the small but fine garden in the back, only four years old, twins, both of them, and they are dancing. The fruits in the garden are in bloom, and the woodland is freshly cut and a blinding sun shines through. And your wife, hair still black and dark, comes out on the porch and kisses you behind the ear, and asks when the crops are going to be ready for harvest. Now your little daughter has fallen, and she runs over crying, with a bloody skinned knee. And a kiss and some well water will make the boo-boo all better, and things will be alright.

Only your children aren't three, they're seven or eight; only the garden is dead and black and withered and the crops are gone; only the old small wounds have gone to make room for greater ones. And they have another mouth to feed, now, a bouncing baby brother with bloodshot eyes and frenzied movements, they have rusty blocks of sharpened wood to play with and a basement to dance in, they have a mother who sits at home all day trying to make everything good again and yelling at her husband, they have a father who can't keep up a goddamn job and who has resorted to begging in the town for money, and most of all they have hunger, gnawing and writhing within them.

Another staggering step forward and the choice is made, because now you can see their pale forms in the dark dank corner, their backs to you, playing with blocks and whispering. They are barely clothed in their dirty grey rags, all tears and rips and poverty. And it is that sight that dehumanizes them, that changes them from your children into whining animals who want to be killed, who deserve better than this, two whining animals with bullets in their backs and blood on their ragged clothes. And you are creeping back up the stairs, leaving the bodies down in the dark with their toys.

There is but one last bullet in the shotgun, and you think about that long and hard. You think about using it. You want to, and you will, and you must, but you don't have the drive now, you're too tired, too depressed, so you stick the shotgun into a little niche in the wall. Maybe it used to be a cabinet, but if it was the door is long gone and there is no use for it now. You need to sleep. So you head off from the one room to the next, the only other room in the house, where your wife and son lie dead in the corner. It is a playroom for the children and a bedroom for yourself and a grave for them.

Late at night you are awoken by a shrieking coming from the basement. It slips through the floorboards, as wet and slippery as the corpses in the corner. They shouldn't be bleeding. Why are they bleeding?

But it is not the blood you are worried about, it's that pounding yell, keeping you up all night, making your body a statue of taut skin and muscle, eyes peeking over the bedsheets, hunger thin ligaments frozen in time. After hours of sitting up in bed the bleeding stops and the sounds ebb for the last time, and somehow you know it is dawn. But there is no dawn in the woods, and though you want to leap out of your bed and bound across the room and run into the wilderness away from this godforsaken cabin, but you are tired, so tired, and it is a strange kind of tired. It is a restless kind of tired, not laziness, not exhaustion, but

a sort of detachment from your body and the house, and you know you are bound to the bed just like Isaac was bound by his father.

But it is several nights – you don't know how many – several nights later now, and you regard the softly decaying corpses and their blood (a layer of it is almost covering the floor, more than could ever be in a human body) and the basement cacophony with a cold placidity. It is torture, yes, but it is no worse than that of the poverty, and you must learn to accept the order of things. You only wish you could get to the shotgun and its last bullet.

Down in the basement something is moving, and the shrieks emanate from different spots – sometimes from under the bed, sometimes in the next room, sometimes in the corner where two withered bodies lie. It is this last effect that finally breaks your composure. The screams are muffled by their wasted frames, but they bodies themselves almost vibrate with the force of the noise. New drips overlap the former ones, and the jaws of the curiously dry and soft bodies – though they are immeasurably wet by now – slack even further until you feel that it is impossible that the human anatomy could do something so grotesque. Maybe it can't.

And then the screaming stops and even the trickling of the blood is silent and you are left alone in the dark.

For a while nothing but the deafening silence throbs on your ears, and the pain is immense, for the absence of the shrieking has oddly left your ears wanting for more.

The thick blanket protecting you from the cold night isn't what is making you sweat.

And then the bottom step of the basement stairs begins to creak.

Instantly your mind is all alarms and you are struggling against Isaac's chains. Whatever is trying to get up tests the steps several times, unsteadily, and then starts to make its way up. It is slow, for some reason, perhaps lethargic, having not moved from its dark nest for so long.

You are sitting up in bed and wondering what to do next. You could get to the next room in a few bounds, get to the shotgun, shoot yourself or whatever is coming up the stairs with the single bullet left – but could a single bullet do it? The aim would have to be just right, and you cannot prepare for that because you do not know what it is. Besides, you would have to pass the bodies, and you can't do that. You cannot bring yourself to do that. Of course the only way is the door outside, but the woods are dark, and you don't want a chase – but that is the only option. And you are about to go for it when a noise assails your sensitive ears and you instinctively glance out your single window, positioned quite near the bed.

Your first thought is that it is the cold wind, but there is no wind tonight or else you would have heard it. Then what is it? Your eyes scan through the dark underbrush and you see, just close enough to you so you can see but a bit of it in the darkness, two leering eyes staring through the bushes. Wolves travel in packs, and if you ran out, soaked in blood from the floor, they would surely tear you

apart. They must have finally caught sent of that blood, and soon they will be prowling towards the cabin and all of the horrors therein.

The front door is ruled out. There is a back door in the next room, one that is never used, and you could make a dash for it, maybe grab the shotgun, too, and use it against whatever might pursue. At any rate you're going to have to make a decision because the creature is halfway up and others are scampering behind it, testing the uneven broken down steps.

You take the first uneasy step in several days, and instantly you know that if you hesitate a moment longer you will fall back into the bed and its strange pull. You must get up, but you are not eager to touch the blood-drenched floor. You shut your eyes and then you are standing in the water, for a moment, the muddy rain water that drowned your crops years ago, a suffocating conglomerate of your world's blood and flesh and tears, the flood that began the end. You are like Noah, you think to yourself, it is God testing you, you must endure. Your eyes are open and you are several years older and there is black, thick blood on your cabin floor, and you are dangling your legs into it, but it doesn't feel like blood, it feels just like the muddy water that ruined your life. You are not like Noah, the flood has never gone, it never will go, and God is as dead as the bleeding lumps of flesh in the corner.

Garnering the strength to rise takes but a moment longer, yet you can hear the soft plumping noises of a mother helping its young up the stairs. You tiptoe as quietly as you can through the dirty, silt-filled effluvium, hoping that the thing thumping impatiently on the top of the stairs cannot here the gentle splashes you make. You are two steps from the connecting door, and then you are past it. The blood is only slowly trickling into this room, though your feet are splattered with it, and you realize how hard it will be to keep quiet. More importantly, the closed door to the dilapidated cellar is just to your right.

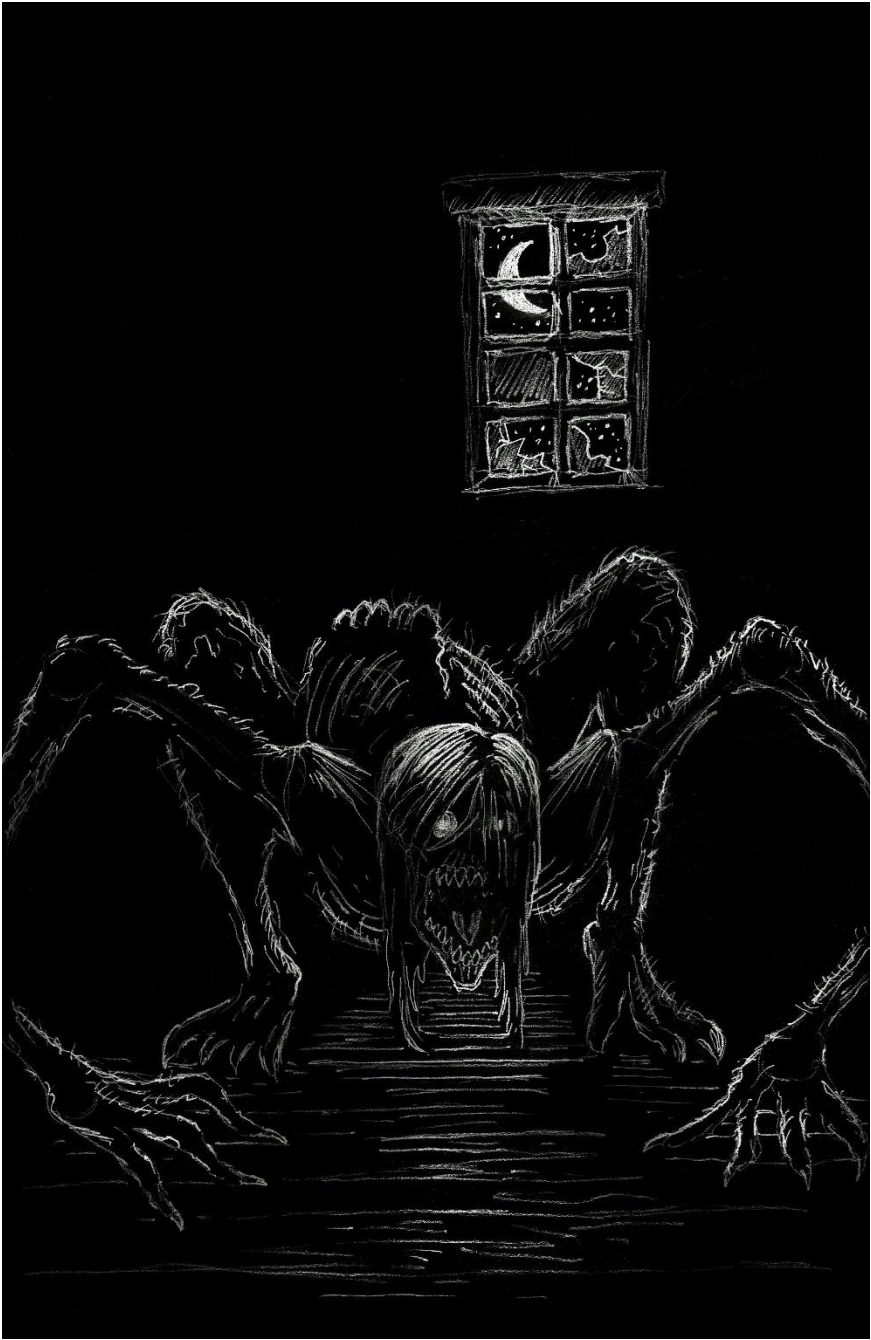
If you wait, God knows what will find you. If you move, the thing will surely hear your damp footsteps across the bare wood floor.

Just as the thing is reaching the final steps, its scampering young behind it, you quickly and quietly bound across the room towards the niche where the shotgun and its one bullet wait.

The cracked wooden door thankfully opens in your direction, so you do not have to see the things that patter out of the basement and into the bedroom where your son and wife lie dead.

You check out the back window. It only provides a small frame of view, but you do not see any wolves outside, only the endless nighted wilderness. You think that even if you do manage to get out, you will have to run long and far, and there is a better chance of you being found pale and frozen and dead of exhaustion in the morning than of you making it to the town. If you are even found. The wolves will probably get you first, devour you –

You become a block of ice when you hear the noises in the other room. Something is tousling your bedsheets, feeling around, probing, while revolting chewing and slopping comes from the corner. They have not eaten for so long,





they cannot be excused for being messy, noisy eaters. Splish-splash, splish-splash, something is on the bed now, and you hear the sheets rip. A louder splash, and it is moving across to the adjoining room, the room you are in.

You instinctively grope for the gun in its niche, and you have it, and then you lean over as far as you can and open the unused back door just a little – just enough for you to slip through. You shut your eyes, brace yourself for the biting woodland cold. You are about to dash for it when it happens.

You hear the absence of sound. It is not silence, no, you can hear the gentle pad of the intruder at the door, hear the beat-beat-beat of some organ in your chest – you forget what it is, now – it as if you, or your mind, are encapsulated in a bubble of quiet. The sound of the creature reaches your ear, your heart – was that it? – you can hear it, hear the vile noises in the other room. But you can't process them, understand them, and every sensory experience becomes strange and painful as your brain tries to process the noises it can't understand. It takes you aback, but your eyes remain shut and you focus on the sounds, your last hold on reality. Sounds. Sounds. What do you hear?

Something

is

padding

in

the

room.

It's in the middle of the room by now. Your eyes are shut. Focus on that. Keep your eyes shut. Eyes shut eyes shut eyes shut eyes shut

Eyes open

*Mmnn*

You choke back some sound. You feel like you're going to collapse. You didn't expect this.

The thing is on all fours. It is naked. Though human in general shape, the proportions seem wrong, odd, not right. The intruder is muscular, angular, larger, with shoulder blades jutting out like knives, a curving spine, and an enormous, bestial pelvis with the suggestion of a tail. Its head is bowed, and the long black hair of your wife – renewed in darkness instead of its normal grey – spills over it, obscuring features, brushing against the abnormally elongated arms (each has two elbows and myriad other joints that you cannot take in) that end in strong hands with long, curved fingernails and the withered breasts just out of vision. The skin, though of a dusky-looking texture, seems as pale-pink as it did in life.

And you realize, in this moment, that while this thing may once have been your wife, it isn't any longer. It's Hunger, Hunger itself, transformed by some unfathomable force, and it has forgotten it was anything other than Hunger. What must the face of Hunger itself look like? How could the primitive sight organs of man react to it? You don't want to find out.

It starts to stand up

*shut*

awkwardly, unsteadily, a toddler taking its first steps  
your

and when it regains some standing posture

eyes

it starts to look at you when –

*Everything here happens in a flash and it's as if the world has stopped to take a breath so you can process what's going on.*

There is a wolf slipping through the door, teeth bared, froth bubbling at its lips, sharp guttural growl emerging from its throat.

There is a gun with one bullet in your hand, and your hand clenches, and the one bullet erupts out of it without aim, lighting up the room with flashes and breaking the sound-bubble that you are trapped in.

There is a guttural noise coming from the naked thing in the center of the room, choking gurgle, shock, fear.

There is the way its many-jointed arms cover its unfathomable face.

There is the wolf receding, whimpering, startled by the gun.

There is the gun dropping to the floor.

And there is you, breaking free of Isaac's chains, madly dashing into the nighted woodland, hopeless, aimless, endless.

The one bullet. It's gone. You can't even shoot yourself now. You're at the mercy of anything that wants you. You don't care. You just need to get away from the damned cabin that God hungers for, the blood-filled cabin that harbors monsters and recluses and corpses and vile secrets.

You don't know how long you run until you realize that nothing seems to be pursuing you. It isn't a relief. You don't even register it. You are weak from lack of food, from lying in a blood-drenched bed for days, from fear, from grief. You curl up, fetal, in a clearing in the woods. It can have you now. It's been trying to have you since it destroyed your farm and dried up your well and bore children into a hellhole of misery and pain. It's won. You don't care.

Flickers around the edges of your vision. Blackness. Too tired. Just too tired. You can't do it anymore. So very weary.

You want to shut your eyes, but then you see the figure of the Hunger Wife looming in the trees. She's upright, leaning against a tree, naked as Eve, face still obscured by long hair. And you ignore the wrongness of the angles and the jutting bones and the huge form. You see her as she was when the woods wasn't there. When she was happy, and you were happy, and the children were happy.

She creeps over to your weakening frame and brushes the hair from her face. Pain racks your body, numbness shoots through your veins, teeth rapidly decay in your mouth, wrinkles form on your face. You don't notice it. You just stare at her, stare at how beautiful she is, how beautiful she's become.

She kisses you. You know she and your children will be waiting just on the other side of death, that they've been waiting for you all this time. Weary, hunger, dark. It's almost over. You just need to be born anew.

And so, longing for the relief it will bring, you let them carve the flesh from your soul.



*Three days later a group of hunters find the pale husk of an old, old man on the grass of the forest, dead of exhaustion. Some people in the small town recognize him as a homeless man that went about begging occasionally, though he had been much younger when they saw him. The body is buried in an unmarked grave without proper ceremonies. It forms some small talk for two or three days, but these rumors die quickly. He is not of interest to anyone.*

*When bodies like these start being found frequently, however, gossip does start up. Old, withered corpses, just after someone had gone missing, are found time after time in the woodland. Though they died of exhaustion, whispers of murder go about, and the woods are scoured by impromptu search parties for some cabin of reclusive backwoods killers. None are ever found and no killer is convicted, though one man does see an ancient, overgrown well in a small clearing of darkness.*

*None of this was of interest to you, of course. You and the family are beyond earthly matters now. Earthly matters are of the day, and you are of the Woodland, and in the Woodland it is always night. The darkness of that Atrophic World is an older god than any ranted about in the pathetic temples of man. It is old, and It is ancient, and you are Its servant.*

*But the best part is not the Woodland, not the Eye of It or the bloody deaths of men in which you revel. The best part is that finally, at long, long, last, you are able to feed your family.*

## MRS ELLSWORTH'S CAKES

— William J. Booker

THERE were griffins in our street – a plague of them. Young Tommy Shaw from number forty-two conjured them, if that's the word, after he found 'an eldritch relic' lying in the street, which, like Aladdin's lamp, worked by rubbing it. He didn't know that until he rubbed it, of course. Then he discovered it produced griffins.

Mrs Ellsworth gave me this tidbit of gossip when she called at my house that same morning with a cake, freshly baked. The cake was freshly baked, I mean, not Mrs Ellsworth – *hard-boiled* would be a more suitable epithet in her case. Hah! Handsome with it, I must say. A moist fruitcake. Robust. Despite my best efforts, I always become a five year old in Mrs Ellsworth's presence – and she addresses me in just the manner of a schoolteacher talking to a five year old. She said she was very, very busy, had to get back to her baking, hadn't time to stop and chat (though she did). Whenever Mrs Ellsworth departs, her absence takes some time to become complete because a kind of 'ghost Mrs Ellsworth' in the amorphous form of her lilac perfume, with an undertone of coal tar soap, lingers on, leaving me in a trance of affection and security.

Her visits brought me, to a marked degree, back to life. I have to admit I'd become something of a recluse since Gertie passed away. *Died*: there, I've said it. Retired GPs shouldn't beat about the bush after all, but somehow it's different when the shoe's on the other foot. Bit close to home, losing a wife after forty-five years of steady married life. And a much more difficult thing altogether to handing out grim diagnoses to my patients. 'Keeping a professional distance' is a different kettle of fish when there's a *personal* distance built-in with it. Losing Gertie's been a bitter pill to swallow – pun intended unapologetically – and there are no progeny to gather around me in my hour of need. Not that I'd want them, not now. Gertie, bless her, was as barren as the Arctic wastes. What you haven't had you don't miss – they'd be grown up now, probably visit only when they wanted something, allow their kids to smear bloody jam all over my golf clubs and bugar off again for another six months. Dependable was Gertie, 'my rock' I used to call her. Roedean girl. First time I saw her, I thought 'Jean Harlow.' Age wasn't kind. Gertie was my nickname for her. Her real name was Gabrielle. She was a steady old stick, not a bad cook either. Knew all her wifely duties: solid food on the table, shirts ironed and smelling of biological detergent.

Thanks. G and T. Double. Many thanks. Old Knott, look at him. He's always had it by the eighteenth. You know what his trouble is? Legs too long. Spindle shanks hopeless for the putting at his age. Centre of gravity too high up, causes that swaying when he addresses the ball, you see? Not like my sturdy pegs. Hah! Respectable handicap for all that, has old Knotty.

They weren't like the heraldic creatures, exactly. Your typical heraldic griffin has the head, talons and wings of an eagle, a lion's body and the tail of a snake. I looked that up in the OED the very next day after I'd seen the things. These mythical beasts are found in old 'bestiaries' alongside perfectly natural creatures. These compendiums were popular in the Middle Ages. Griffins are found in the art of Ancient Egypt, Greece and Persia. They love gold and sometimes are found guarding it or extracting it from deep below the ground. I like to get things right, you see. I can't abide sloppy thinking; a trait from my old profession I expect. To be precise, then, they were *griffin-like*, though quite human from a distance. Anyhow, the word 'griffin' sprang to mind when I first clapped eyes on them and somehow stuck. It works for me. If you want to choose your own name, go ahead. Cockatrice-like or wyvern-like would do almost as well. But don't blame me if you end up with 'griffins'. They had head, torso, arms and legs of roughly the same proportions as an average human. Well, an average scrawny, sinewy human. The wings and tails certainly set them apart, though. As did the little horns on their heads. I say 'horns', but they could have been long pointy ears; it was somehow difficult to see these details clearly, as if they were perhaps sometimes the one and other times the other, if you can understand that. Most ambiguous. Same with their beaks. They might've been beaks and they might've been beaky noses. Eyes like clouded marble with a sort of ... *amber* hue. They were quite demonic overall, as you can imagine. I almost forgot to tell you what colour they were; they came in two varieties: a dark coppery bronze and an equally dark metallic green. I have no idea why. Could be a racial characteristic or it could be what differentiated their sex. You're thinking I should be able to tell male from female by simply looking at their genitalia, breasts – or lack of. Well, obviously you wouldn't even need to be a doctor to tell the difference, but there was no evidence of either breasts or male sexual organs that I could see. They always seemed to be attended by an undue amount of shadow for one thing and that made it difficult to see their chests or groin areas in any detail. Also, they moved in a sort of *jerky* manner, making very quick movements – so fast that they got themselves from A to B before your eye could take in that they had even moved. Made it difficult to grasp the details, if you get what I mean.

I know what you're thinking. Well, I think I do anyway, although it depends on whether or not you saw the films. I expect you're thinking of how Ray Harryhausen's animated mythical beasts move and you've told yourself that this old buffer's spinning you a yarn and he's enrolled Harryhausen's creatures to star in it. Fair play to you. I'd draw the same conclusion myself if I was you. But before you pull the shutters down, let me explain something. Firstly, they didn't move like Harryhausen's wire and clay models (although they *did* look very vaguely like the Harpies in 'Jason and the Argonauts'), they moved, as I said, with quick, jerky movements *just like a squirrel*. Now do you get the picture? Secondly, they had a fondness for tea and cakes.

Eh? Ha! Does the Pope? Much obliged. Make it another double. No! G and T stands for *Gordon's* and tonic. Yes, Schweppes, thank you very much. Sarcastic sod.

Can't get the staff these days – all they know is Jock Daniels and Coke or those Belgian bottles of froth with a fancy label. Enough Antipodeans here to turn the world upside down. Club's not what it was. Reflects on the members, y'know.

Well, they were all down the street, these griffins were; in the road, weaving around the planes and sycamores lining the pavement, wandering into front gardens, up drives. A couple of them climbed into the Meacher's Audi RS 5 Cabriolet open-top and just sat there playing with the steering wheel and the controls. I noticed Tommy Shaw wandering along the pavement on the other side of the street. He was swatting at a butterfly, only a Cabbage White, with a tennis racquet – the wildest imagination would never consider a tennis racquet to be 'eldritch'! It was late on a Saturday afternoon. Just this last July, matter of fact, so quite recent enough. Gorgeous run of real summer days we were having – rare enough in these days of Global Raining. Been a hot day and it was just becoming a little more comfortable with the merest hint of a breeze getting up as the shadows began to elongate. The whole neighbourhood was redolent of freshly mown grass, Gertrude Jekyll roses and honeysuckle, the trees echoing with birdsong. The ideal time for a Pimm's on the patio. I don't know to this day how many griffins there were and I haven't heard from anyone else who did. Hardly surprising really.

They seemed to have thinned out somewhat by six o'clock but I know now that was because they weren't all in the road any more. I saw one of them wearing a lampshade on its head. There's always one. When you think about it, it's not in the least astonishing that it didn't take them long to wander inside the houses. After all, they seemed curious enough about Meacher's Audi RS 5 and it was only a matter of time before, as they jerked and scuttled about, they would happen upon open doors. It was lovely weather after all. Doors and windows were flung open up and down the street from before breakfast time. People had been out in their gardens mowing lawns, weeding flowerbeds or just lazing on patios. Most of the people in our street would have been out in the fresh air all day, having lunch and snacks alfresco, quaffing cold drinks, some no doubt taking a little less water with whatever it was they preferred. If you filmed a time-lapse movie from the air, you'd see a large proportion of the patio furniture moving around, keeping perfect time within the shade of umbrellas as the sun twirled its summery little dance over a sky of blue eternity; tranquil and cloudless. Happy weather so rare it brings out the poet in me when I think back to that day, despite the circumstances that made it so distinctly memorable.

They smelled strange, did these griffins, which was not unexpected I suppose, as they certainly *looked* strange, walking as they did in their hoppity way, without a stitch on; not one of them. The aroma of coal tar soap wafted up the street when the griffins were wandering about. I knew it had to be them as the street had never smelled of coal tar soap without griffins in it. By strange, I mean that I would never have dreamt that griffins would smell of coal tar soap. Or any kind of soap for that matter. Well, you wouldn't, would you?

Not that it bothered me unduly. As a retired GP – did I mention that I'm a retired GP? – I've seen some sights and smelled some smells in my time;

experiences I could happily have done without. I was surprised they didn't bother Mrs Ellsworth, though.

I didn't know a great deal about Mrs Ellsworth, because she didn't talk much about herself. She was a widow, that much she let slip. She moved into the house to the left of mine as you look from the street. Gertie was in hospital, I remember, when our new neighbour arrived and it wasn't long before she had called in and introduced herself. In a short time she organised my laundry and shopping, which, in effect, meant she organised me. I had long abandoned self-sufficiency in favour of marital domestic arrangements and by the time Gertie fell ill I was hopeless at the day-to-day running of a house – and my own life. This lady, Mrs Ellsworth, was a whirlwind of organising energy; she arranged for Mrs Warwick from number twenty one, another widow, to come in and clean twice a week (which she still does), Mrs Chalcroft from across the road at number fourteen to do my shopping and Mrs Erwood from The Gables to take in my washing and ironing, two more widows, coincidentally. By the time Gertie died, I was being kept in a style to which I had become accustomed. I didn't mind cooking for one, quite enjoyed it as a matter of fact.

I was hopeless in my new role as widower but, thankfully, the ladies' cosseting, sorry, *organising*, continued relentlessly. They saved me, frankly, because I'd been helpless as a newborn babe thrust into a forbidding, Gertie-less world. I was pathetic in my gratitude to Mrs Ellsworth and her companions, so much so that I allowed myself to be inducted into the Bowling Club, attend bridge parties and whist drives – I even volunteered to be one of the designated drivers for the ladies when they descended upon The Cedars Hotel for one of their long, mid-week gossip lunches. Never have been one for gossip. Whiled away the afternoon in my car with the *Telegraph* and the *Lancet*. Have to lie low at times like that – after a couple of schooners they insist on confiding their little 'problems' to me. Hazard of the job, always has been.

I'm coping quite well these days. Feel like my own man again. Still enjoying the ministrations of Mrs Ellsworth and her ladies though. I'm looking after myself well enough – look at this paunch. You don't get one of these by being frugal. I eat a healthy diet, mind you. I'm happy with a grilled lamb chop, boiled new potatoes, freshly shelled peas from Mrs Ellsworth's kitchen garden, mint sauce. *Splendid* meal! Spot of gardening keeps me limber enough. I like to spend my evenings sitting out of doors, doing the crossword and listening to whatever Mrs Ellsworth has on her Bang and Olafsen. Delius, Elgar, Vivaldi, *The Pearl Fishers*. Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*. Very sensual and passionate, that. Seems to be one of her favourites for a summer's evening. Hmm. Makes you think... Sorry, where was I? Walton's *Façade*. Do you know it? I think she plays that while she's dusting. Vivaldi's her favourite for baking. Goodness knows what she's up to with *Carmina Burana*...

Mrs Ellsworth is – Thank you. Another double. Very kind. – Mrs Ellsworth is a regular at St Mary's, our local church, attending services regularly, helping with

the flower arranging and cleaning. She supplies cakes for fund-raising activities and bakes and helps out with the First Sunday Breakfast.

Along with Mrs Warwick, Mrs Chalcroft, Mrs Erwood, Mrs Elwick, Mrs Meacher and several other ladies whose names I can't remember, Mrs Ellsworth is a member of the W I. That she is a very active member will, I'm sure, come as no surprise. Mrs Ellsworth's cakes are always in abundance on the cake-stall. A – bun – dance! Hah! Sorry, couldn't resist. Within the Women's Institute, in the last year, this industrious lady has organised play readings in the houses of various members, the Bat Walk (no comment), a visit to the Waterworks Open Day (again, no comment), the Scrabble Tournament and a trip to Glyndebourne. And more besides. Before Mrs Ellsworth arrived on the scene such social activities were pretty much moribund. I have it on good faith from Mrs Meacher (my main source of information regarding this formidable band) that in Mrs Ellsworth's gynarchy the choice of whether or not to participate is never an option. Mrs Ellsworth is not only deaf to the word 'no' but also to a thesaurus of other excuse-words and phrases. I do love golf, bit of a golf-nut actually, but this club is also my refuge – and please understand I'm *really not* being ungrateful, just feel tired now and then – my refuge when all the *cherishing* gets a little *too* much.

In short, my first impression was one of awe. I could only conclude that Mrs Ellsworth was an upright woman with a stout moral sensibility and a very clear idea of what was – and what was not – right and proper in the English Home Counties.

She seems to positively *thrive* on widowhood, does Mrs Ellsworth. You must've known ladies like that. Their husbands pass away and suddenly they're the centre of everything; all high spirits, good cheer and good deeds – but never a word about the dearly departed.

I have no idea why they did it, but I know they did it. Yes, the griffins, not the widows. At least...

Actually they did two things. Well ... two things I saw with my own eyes.

The first thing they did was to have tea and cakes on Mrs Ellsworth's lawn, as I believe I mentioned. Didn't I? Well then, *hinted at*, possibly?

What's that, my dear? Absolutely nothing wrong with my eye. *I* should know, *I am* a doctor. Was. Ah, I see – no, it wasn't a *squint*, it was...nothing. Speck of dust I should think.

It began with a group of three griffins wandering into Mrs Ellsworth's garden. Her garden is a picture, by the way. She has the most exquisite flowering borders full of blue hydrangea, foxglove, petunia, nicotiana in assorted colours, salvia, pansies, fuchsia, all *alive* with the hum of insects – *wonderful!* And the shrubs are a *delight!* Dogwood, berberis, rhodies, ceanothus, buddleia, well, I'm sure you get the idea. Lawn smooth as a snooker table, rolled to perfection. Mature trees. Elm, copper beech. Of course she has a gardener, Mr Dee, for the heavy work, but the rest is all her own doing. Down on the lawn stands Mrs Ellsworth's garden furniture, Country FSC and Lister teak with two parasols. It's just the kind of garden you see in the lifestyle magazines. Not like Gordon bloody Bellamy. Eh?



Oh, excuse my language, my dear! He's the chap at the end of my garden – lives there. I mean his garden is at the end of mine. Can't stand the fellow. His patio furniture is that *tubular* stuff from Argos. (Works in Environmental something. Such a bloody snob too. Thinks he's Julius Caesar. Drives a Merc S320 – *very* Green of him. He's the one on the Club Committee who would've voted against my membership, as I heard, but, hah, I saw him in his Jacuzzi with someone – never mind who – and a word in his ear smoothed *him* over all right). The griffins were suddenly *there* by the tables. Mrs Ellsworth's marching out hefting a large tray. The next thing she's depositing another large tray – and another, as if she's laying out a spread for the Vicarage Garden Fete. Angel cake, apple upside down cake, pound cake, chocolate torte, genoise, fruitcake – you name it. And two great teapots and a beautiful bone china teaset. I *distinctly* remember Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for Strings in C* wafting out of her French widows. Windows.

You're wondering how I know all this. I know *I* would be if I were you two. Or *one* of you at any rate. *Couldn't* be both. Ha! No, I could *never* be *you*, my dear, I'd have to be your young man. No! I didn't mean... Well, I mean *I'd* be *bursting* to ask if *you* were telling *me* this tale.

Well, I'll put your mind to rest. The truth is, as is often the case, quite simple and something of an anticlimax: I'm Mrs Ellsworth's *next-door neighbour!*

*Did* I already tell you that? I do apologise, it's an *age* thing, m'dear.

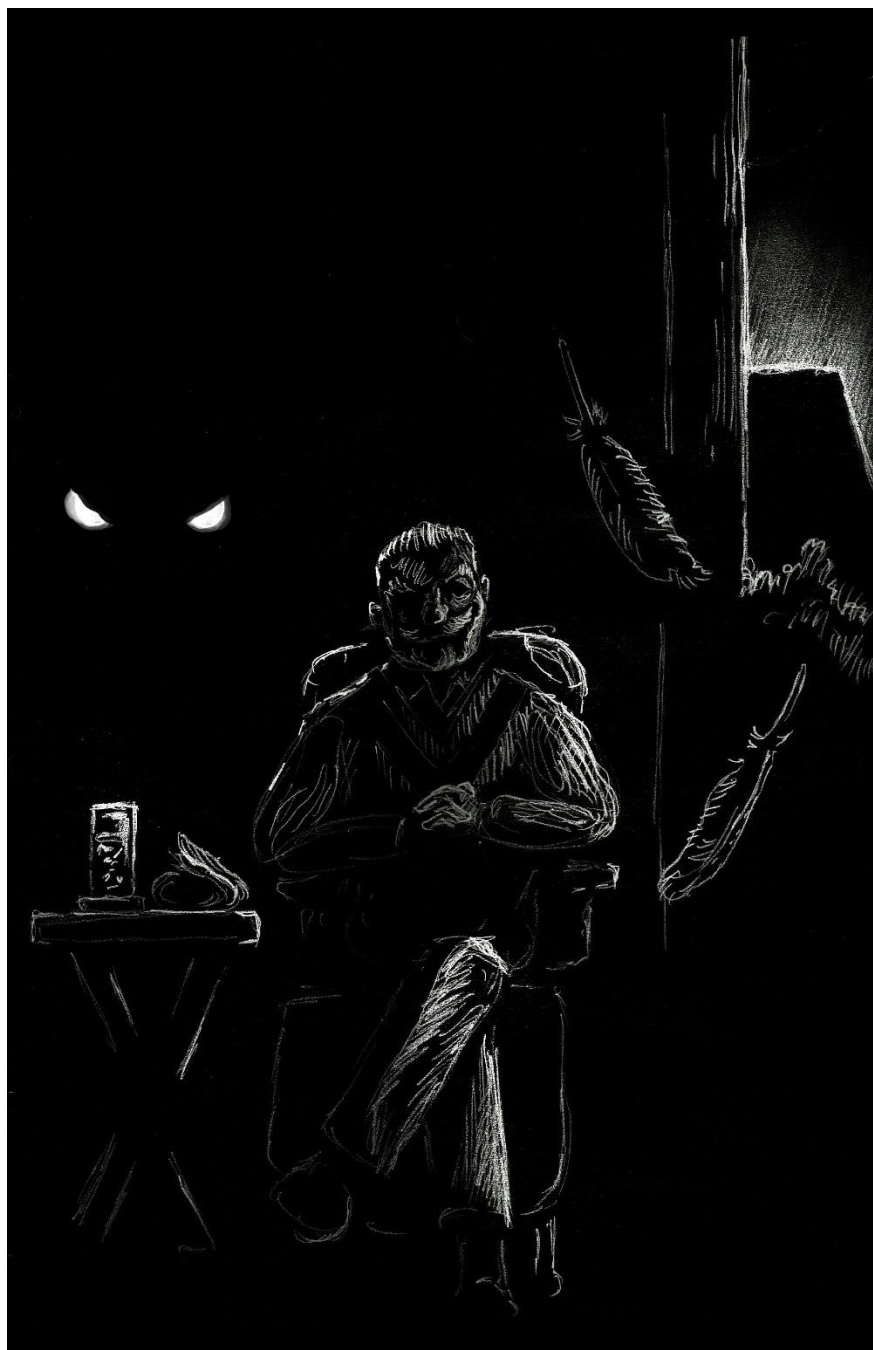
Well, this is how I remember it.

At six o'clock it was just cool enough to start watering my plants so that's what I did. I was watering my hanging baskets at the front of my house when a movement caught my eye, making me glance along the drive. That's when I saw a few griffins wandering in the road. I walked down the drive and saw a lot more of them, including those two sitting in Meacher's Audi. The scrape of their claws on the tarmac set my teeth on edge, I don't mind telling you.

The impatiens and trailing lobelia are *superb* this year! My baskets're a *blaze* of colour. I'm *not* the kind of person to stand gawping down the street. It's not polite. Anyhow, work ethic, eh? I sprinkled my diascia and the glorious aserina, geranium, petunia and so on and wandered back through the house, picked up my *Telegraph* and a small G and T and deposited my bulk in my very comfortable Lafuma Garden Relaxer –

Oh, you must allow *me* – *alright* then, next time, *definitely*. Wink? I hope I didn't, prob'ly an eyelash. Your eyes ... I see another dazzling pair of eyes ... and the sound of honey bees... Yes, thanks, a double.

So there I was, resting in my tubular recliner, casting a jaundiced eye over the crossword. It wasn't until the clomp of footsteps plucked me from my doze that I became aware of Mrs Ellsworth's tea party. From up on my patio I have a splendid view of the gardens on both sides and the one at the end, which, incidentally, belongs to that dreadful old bore, Gordon Bellamy. You may have heard of him. If you haven't, it won't be any lack of effort on his part.



Anyhow, when I saw Mrs Ellsworth struggling with those heavily-laden trays, the first thought that came into my doze-fogged brain was, did she need any help? There were only the three griffins there at that time, though, so I concluded that she could manage perfectly well on her own – I'd seen her perform at the Parish Lunch in the church hall, catering to over forty slavering parishioners without ruffling a feather on her hat, so I was confident she could satisfy the needs of three griffins. I allowed myself to resume dozing.

When I awoke again, I saw that it was now dusk, an owl hooted among the trees – and, by the light of a host of patio lanterns, I could see that there were many more griffins attending Mrs Ellsworth's garden soiree, and also I saw the other thing (remember I said I saw two things? Well this is the second thing), which was a couple of griffins ripping Gordon Bellamy's head off.

They squabbled over the head. The one holding it, a green one, snatched it out of the other's reach and promptly took a bite out of it. Its colleague, a bronze chap, made to snatch it and the green one holding it let it go – there *could* have been a look of distaste on its features. Anyway, the other one bit a chunk out of it then threw it into the pond forthwith. At least we shared *one* preference: Gordon Bellamy wasn't to my taste either.

The splash aroused little attention from the sizeable crowd tucking into Mrs Ellsworth's cakes. By the time 'Mr Bellamy's' griffins had hopped over into my garden then into Mrs Ellsworth's garden, I concluded that the whole contingent of griffins had assembled there. They may well have a penchant for gold but this crowd also had a passion for cakes.

It was then that I received the fright of my life.

It happened *exactly* like this, on my oath. First thing, right? Hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. Prickled. Know what I mean? No idea to this day as to *exactly* what made that happen. Might've been a sound. But I reckon it was my jungle sense kicking in. Survival instinct. Primitive part of the brain. In an instant I was positive there was someone – or *something* – behind me, between me and my patio doors. I didn't budge an inch. Tell the truth I couldn't move. Touch of the sun, prob'ly.

Anyway.

Anyway, as I was saying, I knew there was a presence behind me and I froze. Paralysed you see? Survival instinct had me playing possum. Then I *did* hear something. It was a harsh scraping on my patio slabs. *Real* flags. Not that that *reconstuted* stuff. Instantly I knew it was a claw scraping on my patio slabs. There was a whiff of coal tar soap in the air.

I admit to going to the toilet in my bowling whites. Imagination you see? After watching old Bellamy. Couldn't be helped. Perfectly understandable when you know what's behind you. Scenario like that, eh? Natural reaction.

Next thing, this griffin skitters right up to me. Thought my heart was about to burst. I just stared at the book reviews page and held my breath. I knew that I was as good as Bellamy. Any second now...

The griffin hopped and scraped by me without a look.

Bloody creature had its face in my cake.

It must've walked in the front door, through the hall. Then through the dining room into my kitchen, found the cake sat on the table exactly where Mrs Ellsworth had put it when she called in that morning. It took the cake and joined the party next door. Just scampered over the fence. (I don't mind admitting that I went to the toilet in my trousers again – number *two* this time. Probably with relief).

Still holding the *Telegraph*, although I hadn't read a word of it, I half-closed my eyes and surreptitiously watched the goings-on next door.

Just as I thought: Mrs Ellsworth was coping perfectly well. She'd accommodated herself to the increased numbers without a qualm. By now strains of Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance* dignified the evening.

Much later I awoke briefly, I think, and there was a large white van backed up to the lawn, though I *may* have been dreaming, and I *think* I saw Mrs Ellsworth pushing a clawed foot into the back and slamming the door quietly.

Here's the thing!

The next time I awoke, it was full dark. Nothing but silence. I stared at Mrs Ellsworth's lawn until my eyes grew enough accustomed to the dark to see that the lawn was empty except for the tables and chairs.

I was very stiff and cold. My joints complained when I stirred, I assure you. I had a shock, too, when I got up out of my chair and was quickly reminded of the contents of my trousers. My back ached, which didn't reflect well on my Lafuma Garden Relaxer Chair, the design of which was, apparently, based on NASA's recommended reclining position. In all fairness, it was probably the damp. Suffice to say, I managed to get back inside my house, lock and bolt the doors and windows, get my trousers off, get into bed and sleep like the dead. Never did find out what happened to those trousers.

No! No! I *insist* this one's on me! Let me just ge...oof! Would you mind awfully going to the bar? Here's a twen...no, it's a ten...a fiver. Oh, here's another ten. Damn, it's all falling out! Not at all, you're very welcome! Dreadfully sorry to have to ask. Would you be so kind as to pick up that fifty pence piece, I can't quite reach... Much obliged.

In the morning I looked, tentatively as you might expect, out of the bed backroom window. Sorry, the back *bedroom*. There was the lawn. There were the tables and chairs, Country FSC and Lister teak. Not a griffin in sight. I rubbed my eyes and went and fetched my specs. Had another, better, look. It was just that: tables, chairs, canvas brollies, lawn. Otherwise empty. Then I saw something on the table. There were trays and plates still there. Cups and saucers, teapots. Nothing unusual about that. Except I would've expected Mrs Ellsworth to clear up after a party the same night, not leave it until the next day. She's far too organised and fastidious and *wilful* for that sort of sloppiness. In her defence I believe she may have had rather a lot on her plate at the time.

Then I noticed some birds on the table, feet in the air, dead. Some more diligent observation on my part revealed several more birds on the lawn, scattered

around the tables. There was a supine squirrel too. I couldn't for the life of me have believed that Mr Dee, the gardener, had made such such a random mess of the lawn with his, what-do-you-call-it, lawn pricker thingy. *Aerator*. That's it! Mrs Ellsworth's plant tubs positively *glowed* in the early morning sunlight: Busy Lizzie Spellbound Purple Star! Anagalis Blue Cascade! *Marvellous!*

Much later in the morning, after boiled eggs, Marmite soldiers and a nice pot of tea, sitting comfortably in my Lafuma Garden Relaxer Chair with the *Sunday Telegraph* open at the crossword, I happened to glance up, as I'm wont to do when pondering a sticky cryptic – and my gaze alighted on Bellamy's pond – *and it all came back to me.*

I strode down the steps to my lawn and all the way to the bottom and peered through the fence, looking for Bellamy's corpse. There was no sign of it. I couldn't see his head in the pond, either. I didn't know if it should float or sink anyway – or how deep the pond was. Shallow at a guess, if it was anything like its late owner.

That's the long and the short of it, really. A week or so afterwards the police arrived. Buggers used up all my teabags. It turned out that Bellamy was not the *only* missing male res'dent in the area. Mr Meacher, him with the Audi RS 5, was never seen again. Or young Tommy Shaw and his 'eldritch relic'. Post griffins, I mean. In our neighbourhood nowadays there's only Mr Dee the gardener and myself to represent the male of the species. Naturally, there was no mention of griffins. Mrs Ellsworth sailed through the aftermath, such as it was, as stately as the Royal Yacht *Britannia*.

I don't like to gossip, but... No, *every* gossip says that! Hmm... In order to give you the full story I'll have to break my rule. I'm sorry m'dear. I hope you don't think less of me for passing on what are in fact nothing but rumours?

Well, without exception, Mrs Ellsworth's ladies, that happy band of widows, had been in possession of philandering husbands.

I know. I *know!* All rumours. I had no intention of eavesdropping at the newsagent and the supermarket but, you see, what one overhears at the counter and in the aisles cannot be *unheard*.

Just as Bellamy was carrying on with his fancy woman it seems Meacher and the others, most of them old enough to know better or just too old anyway, were up to *exac'ly* the same kind of thing – or attempting to be! But as I said, it's all hearsay.

Ladies of a certain age come to expect such things from their husbands but it doesn't mean someone like Mrs Ellsworth would let them put up with it, for she, like me, had known true love until mortality intervened. Does that serpent of the singing midnight visit her in her slumbers and anoint her with its elixir of eternity, that dew of starry skies and morns of grey seas foaming?

I could...

Where was I? Ah...

And it's been very nice talking to *you* both! Time I was on *my* way too! Don't worry, I'll call a taxi. Sorry, *who* did you say you were? Mrs Ellsworth's *niece*? You're *visiting* her? Good heavens! I say, any chance of a lift? I'm right next-door to your aunt. Did I mention that?

# THE JACOB MOTEL

— Geoff Woodbridge

ASPHALT tyres glided us along the black sea of the Interstate. My vision had become blurry, tired from the constant repetition of the white line, a dotted Morse code along the centre of our path. We'd spent several days in Memphis: tourists indulging in the atmosphere, visiting Graceland, Heartbreak Hotel, Sun Studios and Stax. We enjoyed the Tennessee whiskey and danced every night, drinking deep the vibrant activities of Beal Street. This was our reward for a summer of hard work and something for us to remember when we were back in our classes in England. It was perfect and Jenni loved every minute. It was great to see her smile and forget about her life at home for a while. We planned to travel South East, heading into Alabama, calling at Tupelo, the childhood town of Elvis; a small, humble, simple home for the seed of Rock and Roll. We took photos; Jenni on the swing chair out front on the porch, another with one of the ladies who gave the tour of the home. She and Jenni talked and talked about Elvis. I could see it was getting late but couldn't bring myself to pull her away. We still had a big journey ahead. The car was full of souvenirs: plush toys, Elvis sunglasses, t-shirts, CDs and tour-guides for every attraction. There was also the guilty evidence from numerous fast food outlets, crumpled cartons, boxes and polystyrene cups. That was all 600 miles behind us and the Smokey Mountains were near.

The journey should have taken much less time, but at some point we'd taken a wrong turn sending us through the countryside. It was dark now. For the past few miles we'd been following a pickup truck. Jenni was concerned as she pointed out the wide brimmed Stetson and the shotgun visible through the rear window of the truck in front, a silhouette somewhat comical but creating a deep unsettling feeling in my stomach. I decided to drop back a little, giving distance between the possible threat and us, the innocent victims. I was glad to see the sugar-pink neon lights up ahead. The Jacob Motel came into view as we swung our car off the road and onto the forecourt. The Stetson travelled into the distance.

The car park was busy, surprising as we were in what seemed to be the middle of nowhere. A honeypot for lost tourists. I left Jenni in the car and headed for the reception. The room was sparse and looked unchanged from when it would have been originally built some 40 years earlier. A portable TV hummed the soft tune of memorable adverts although the counter was deserted. I strolled in and dinged the bell. The receptionist startled me as he stepped from the back room, gaunt and looking slightly deranged, staring with large bulbous eyes. He was a young man, early twenties. He took his seat behind the counter, eyes circular and glazed, glued to the TV; a distraction from his course work which he had sprawled out across the counter, a landscape of literature. He looked up at me and said, "Yup?"

I cleared my throat and spoke out. 'Evening, can I get a room for the night?' The Americanism of 'get' spilled from my mouth. Jenni pulled me up on my speech constantly. "It's 'can I have', not 'can I get', you're not an American", she would say.

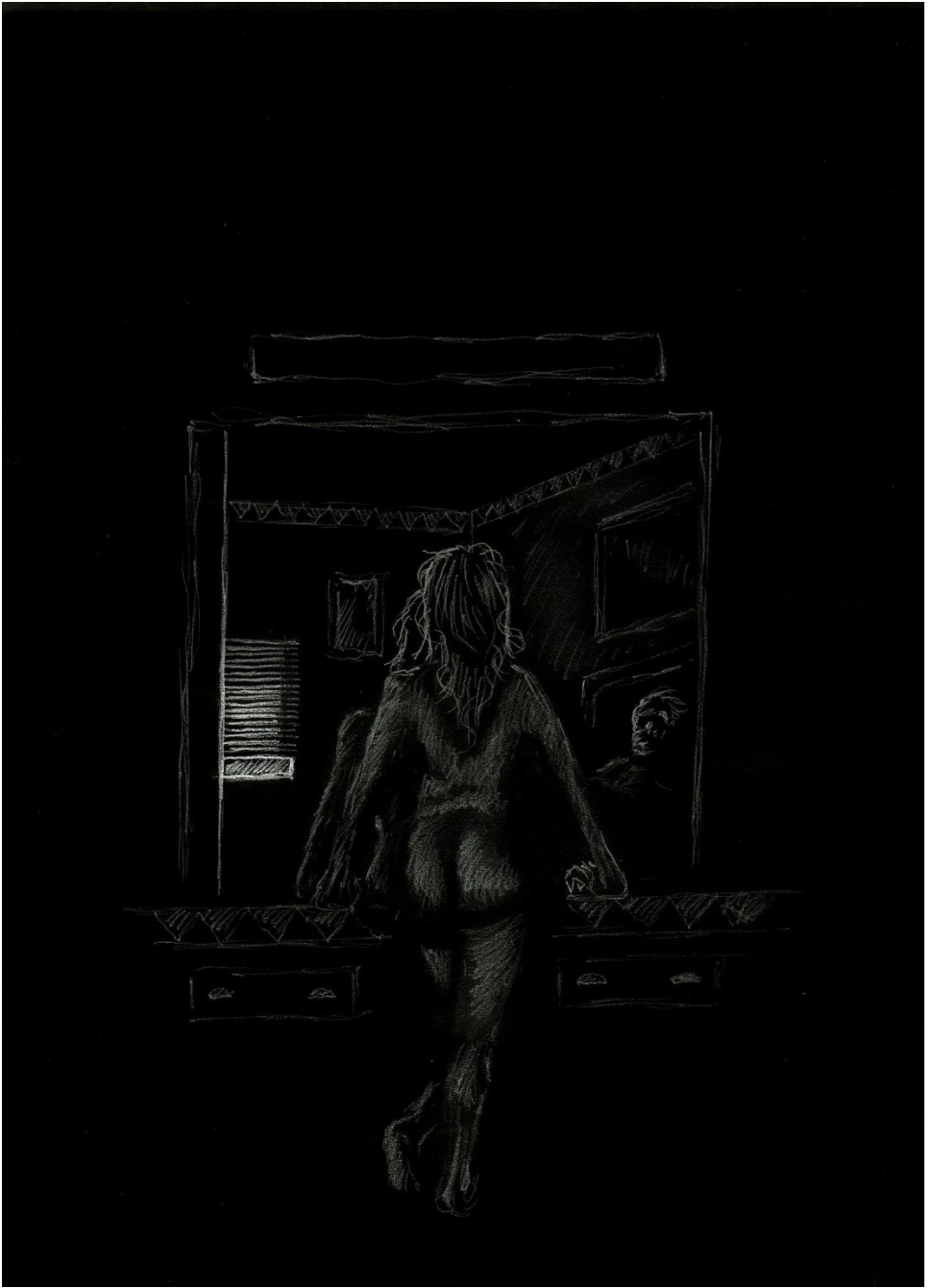
The receptionist placed his hand in the return key box, rummaging around for the lucky fob, the Motel tombola, producing a single winning key. 'Room 23, that's thirty bucks. No pets, no smoking, leave the room by 11am.' The words flowed like a script, rehearsed and repeated, spoken without thought or any kind of interest. I placed the notes on the counter, took the key, turned and walked toward the door.

'Hey' shouted the receptionist. 'You have a good evening now.' A full smile filled his young face, mischievous and menacing, which encouraged an uncomfortable feeling. I thanked him, turned the handle and left the reception. Walking briskly back to the car I found Jenni had created a small collection of cases, some open, with clothes migrating from one to the other. 'I thought we could just take in the things we need for the night,' she said. 'Did you get the room ok?' I nodded a silent reply.

The room was the same as every other we'd stayed in across Tennessee. I couldn't help but be surprised at how similar these hotels were, regardless of how much you pay for the room. Ninety or twenty dollars. You get the same pair of double beds, a huge wooden encased TV, a sink, an impossibly low powered hair dryer, an oversized ironing board and a highly overused, worn bathroom. When I say overused, I mean, these places have been used and cleaned and used and cleaned to the point that enamel was wearing from the tub, the colour was bleached from the lino flooring and the taps had a smoothness only gained from years of erosion, kind of like a weathered effect. They don't seem unclean, just overused. What did differ was the level of cleanliness. This room came in mid table; the bath had hair in the plug hole, but the sheets look freshly changed. It'll do.

Jenni went straight for the shower whilst I switched on the TV, remote in one hand, Tennessee fire water in the other. Late night chat shows with celebrities unknown to UK viewers shouted and smiled whilst the gossip and scandal of their lives spread across cable networks for all to see. Some time later I awoke. The room was in darkness. I was still in the same position, whiskey bottle firmly in my grip. The remote had long since gone, vanished into the room. I tried to move. My neck was stiff, maybe from the long drive or the awkward position I had slept in. Pulling off my t-shirt, I climbed under the duvet, looking over at the Jenni shape in the bed, like a small mountain range in the world of bedding. I lay there, staring into the darkness, watching the shadows and listening to the night outside. Silence becomes loud and deafening when given an ear. Creaking and whispering of trees, the wind, the breathing of the wood, the soft hum of an electrical device. Clicking, buzzing and whispering. Then I felt it.

A slight movement, right next to my thigh. It felt like a cat, circling to make its own bed, pushing ever so gently with its paws. I froze and held my breath.





Lifting my head slightly, I tried to look at the thing on the bed. I envisioned a rat or a raccoon or some other creature from the wilderness which creeps in each night. 'How do I fend off a raccoon?' I thought. I squinted, struggling to see in the darkness. There was nothing there, just the linen pressed against my leg. I turned over, taking a deep breath, and closed my eyes. Then the feeling came again, this time on the other side of my legs. I froze, no breathing or movement, just waiting. Again, it circled and sat, pressing against me, warm and persistent, then it moved again to the other side of my body. I began to panic. I was burning up. My heart was pounding as the animal, or whatever it was, stepped out its own song, pressing it's feet and body in time with my heartbeat. Then it stopped. I felt it fall off the side of the bed. I could hear the scratching as it pulled itself across the carpeted floor, catching its claws in the flock. I sat up slowly, trying to focus in the darkness. There was someone standing in the bathroom, facing the mirror. I could make out an outline, a shadow, the figure of a woman; she looked naked. She was just standing, staring. I looked back at the bed. The outline of Jenni was still next to me. I reached over slowly to touch her, to wake her up. My heart raced as sweat drenched my chest. She didn't move. I reached over for the bedside lamp. Click. A burst of brightness filled the room leaving white spots in my eyes, blinded. The bathroom was empty. No figure in the doorway, nothing on my bed. 'Christ' I said. I checked the bathroom, under the sink and behind the TV just to check there were no animals. I smiled feeling quite annoyed with myself, and then I noticed that the bed was empty.

I called her name, lifting the duvet, looking under the bed, in the bathroom. Empty. I looked at the un-opened cases. My cases. Where was Jenni's blue polka dot bag? I turned the room upside down before running over to the reception. The room was empty once again. I hit the bell on the counter before stepping back to the safety of the doorway. Only then did I realise I was wearing no shoes or T-shirt and for a moment felt embarrassed. The bulbous eyed man appeared once again from the back room. 'What's all this about?' he asked, pointing at my lack of clothing. 'Hey, I'm sorry, but have you seen my girlfriend?' I blurted out.

The young guy tilted his head and threw me a shrug as he chewed on something, I presume tobacco. 'What the hell happened to your clothes buddy?' 'I've been asleep, my girlfriend, she's not...' I stopped

'You only paid for a single. You got your girlfriend with you mister?' he said, prodding a finger into a ledger where the number 23 was scrawled with a ballpoint pen.

'She's missing, did you see her?'

'You need to pay another 20 bucks mister. You have girls in your room, you gotta pay extra.' His face changed, smiling as his fat tongue slipped across his lower lip.

'No, it's not like that'

'I know your type. Now put on some god damn clothes.' The smile was gone, replaced with a force of authority.

An overwhelming feeling of loss came over me as I stumbled back out of the reception and into the night air. I checked the car. It was full of pizza boxes, crusts, doughnuts and drink cartons. No sign of Jenni. My mind was racing, questioning reality, the woman in the room, the thing on the bed, Jenni taking a shower, my last thoughts as she closed the bathroom door. 'Think, just think,' I told myself.

The stairway up to the room was dimly lit, a single bulb blinked, flickered as it struggled for life. I stood on the first floor balcony looking out into the woods, so dark and deep with the unknown. A slow build up of sound filled my ears with the night. The forest was alive, crawling, scratching, creaking, breathing. I watched the night through shadows and darkness and listened to the deafening sound. I could feel something watching from within the wood – a kind of 6<sup>th</sup> sense that someone was glaring. It sounds like such a cliché, but I felt a shiver run down my spine. The bulb flickered, buzzing and crackling. I turned quickly, grabbing the handle of our room, the feeling of something from the wood moving towards me. I entered the room. Jenni was standing with damp hair wearing a nightgown, smiling. 'Hi, I wondered where you'd gone.'

'My god!' I said, falling onto the bed. 'I've been out looking everywhere for you.' I told Jenni all about it. She just laughed.

'Too much fire water' she said, still smiling that gorgeous smile of hers.

I shook my head, grabbing a towel. I took a shower before getting back into bed. Jenni was warm under the sheets; I could feel her soft skin and the purring of happiness. I inhaled her scent as I nuzzled into her neck and held her tight: content and safe. I'm not sure how long I stayed like that. It could have been minutes or hours. I could hear the wind whistling through the slight gap under the door, and the sound of the TV, buzzing quietly as it slept in darkness. Then my skin turned cold. My heart froze as I felt the circling, spiral movement; warm, prodding, leaning against the side of my leg once more.

# WAR CRIMES

— *Edward Moore*

MANY of its residents believed St. Charles had been abandoned by God. The former capital of Missouri's local harvest had been devastated by a summer's heat that baked once rich topsoil into brick like clay. Sick and wounded; casualties of war, spread lice, dysentery and cholera amongst them – killing hundreds before the end of September.

War's genesis is often praised, ridiculed, manipulated but ultimately left to historians to argue their significance. For the losers, the reasons are never as compelling as the aftermath. Humbled, humiliated, their bravado turns to animus; animus easily morphs into barbarism.

There was air of expectancy gripping the crowd assembled at the Fifth Street Methodist Church. Many leaned forward to catch a glimpse of a 5 foot 9 inch man with a slight frame, reddish hair and gray slate eyes - William Clarke Quantrill. His grey captain's uniform was crisp and clean as opposed to the tattered fatigues worn by several men flanking his sides. With military precision they ascended the steps leading to the altar and from its center a confident Quantrill strode to stand before a splintered wooden pulpit. On that day, Friday, October 5, 1866, just before 4:00 p.m., a man of violence, drunk on hatred cultivated in the womb of a war the Devil relished, took his position behind a pillar of worship – poised to address an audience still reeling from the aftermath of a war that had split a nation.

A war whose aftermath he hated ... sickness and filth from refugees littered throughout the countryside; fields once rich with livestock and crops - covered with the dead and mutilated, many, young boys wishing death had claimed them as it had some of their compatriots. Most of all he hated seeing corrosive consequences of losers depression hanging over his beloved confederacy.

He was once a child who enjoyed nailing snakes to trees, shooting pig ears to make them squeal, and tying cat's tails together so he could watch them claw each other to death. Later in life he lived amongst thieves, murderers and brigands throughout Missouri and Kansas, honing the skills that made him one of the most feared and reviled men in military history.

Resting his elbows on the pulpit, he steepled his fingers beneath his nose and with pursed lips scanned his admiring audience. He didn't say anything, just stood there staring at them. The crowd murmurs of anticipation were pleasing but ceased when he raised a hand to request silence. Everyone grew quiet as Quantrill pretended to fumble around his right pocket before withdrawing a small black object - a single shot derringer, distinct for its black walnut grain stock inlaid with silver. Holding it above his head with his right hand and waving a bible with his left he began addressing the crowd.

“Patriots and men of God, I thank you for being here. I know what you’re wondering and yes this is what you think it is; the instrument of JUSTICE used to purge a devil from our land, a coward and morally bankrupt maggot from hell; Abraham Lincoln.”

With his sweaty hand thumping the Bible against the pulpit he continued, “The war isn’t over ... OUR confederacy will never die. It lives forever in the hearts and souls of men, women and CHILDREN like you. Those who know right from wrong, willing to die to preserve our way of life; who’ll do anything to protect our families; our brethren.”

Pausing to wipe sweat off his brow he continued, “Now listen up. Evil is amongst us. You know what I’m talking about, a nigrass who shuns God, making mockery of the blood spilled by kinfolk – YOUR kinfolk to defend our sovereign confederacy, Molly Crenshaw.”

The crowd stared at him with rapt attention. His eyes bulging and face red with animated fervor he continued.

“She practices voodoo, and we ... no YOU have allowed it. THIS drought, those rotting corpses littering your streets is God’s message that her foulness must be crushed and this land returned to his graces.”

Many jumped to their feet – women’s ecstatic squeals competed with pleas begging to touch Quantrill’s hand. Not all attendees were in awe of Quantrill. One in particular stood at the rear of the church with furrows of concern knitting his brow. At forty-two, Thomas Bates was a pale man with stout features and eyes blacker than Quantrill’s soul. He shivered as he watched floors and rafters shake as his congregation stomped and danced as if they were attending a revival sermon.



A few days shy of sixteen; she was presented as a twenty-first birthday present to her master’s son. Molly Crenshaw, drenching with fever, was curled up at the foot of a brass bed shaking like a dog hoping to avoid a beating.

“Daddy this is wrong, look at her – she’s feverish, not ready for man.”

His father flicked a toothpick used to clean his teeth at him, took two swigs from a silver flask, and with bloody spittle spraying from his mouth yelled, “Boy, you wear drawers or bloomers? Today you’re a man – a goddamn man who gots to know how to run things. Make this *woman* well, MAKE her yield to your will or you’ll never be man enough to run this plantation.”

Thomas was wiping spittle from his cheek when his father grabbed his shoulders, flung him to the floor and shoved the flask under his nose. “Here, take this it’ll stiffen that spine of yours.”

After using a silk handkerchief to wipe spittle from its mouth, Thomas pinched his nose and took a swig. It burned as it washed across his tongue before slipping down his gullet. He almost threw up as his stomach convulsed before his hands felt limp and lifeless as the laudanum and moonshine concoction took effect. Hunched over and gasping for air, a calming - an almost out of body

experience consumed him, and as ordered; he deflowered Molly Crenshaw with his father whistling and cheering between puffs of cigar smoke.

Three months later oral cancer claimed his father; months afterwards Molly gave birth to a light skinned boy named Ethan.



The voodoo religion thrived amongst Caribbean born slaves. From her early years Molly knew she was different. Born with a split eye, half jade half ruby colored, her parents raised her in the way of the Ghede. From the age of two through ten she lived in Haiti where she often prayed to them, sacrificed animals, and at one time, a new born to them. At age eleven she was sold to the Bates family. Three years before the war she caught her first glimpse of them. Their voices were as soft as a serpents tongue and spoke of love, honor - retribution. She learned many things from them, including training ghost walkers, those with an ability to blend into any space without being seen; one only a few could master.

She got Ethan to master it.

As Ethan became proficient at ghost walking he discovered how much he loved to run. Going in any direction, fast or as slow as he wanted, fighting the wind when he felt like it; seeking out new sights on the strength of his legs and the stamina of his lungs. It was something he could do alone, under his own power, and no one could stop him.

Two years before the war Thomas Bates liquidated his holdings, emancipated his slaves, and moved to St. Charles. He began life again as a Methodist pastor and owner of a tailor shop. Molly and Ethan left Lexington, walking over two hundred miles to St. Charles. She found work as a seamstress for Bates Tailor Shop.



When Ethan heard about a "special" meeting at the Fifth Street Methodist Church he decided to see what was so special about it. He ghost walked into the church and stood next to his father. Within minutes had seen enough to know he had to get home. He left the Fifth Street Methodist Church and headed straight for the woods, a shortcut to his home.

It was dusky when he entered the woods but blacker than squid ink by the time he was amongst the trees at the bottom of the gully. The moon was large and orange as he exited the woods. Nearby fields appeared benign and peaceful and he could see the glow of light from a farmhouse on the prow of a hill looking warm and cozy. It almost made him feel as if Quantrill's words were a faint echo of something he should forget. The sight of the disjointed three room hovel he shared with his mother quickly dismissed that thought from his mind.

His mother was warming her hands in the hearth – praying and singing when Ethan burst through the front door.

"Momma, momma we gotta go. Men with devil in dey soul comin' for you. We gotta git from here."

Without turning to address him she said, "They come for me but I don't run. Where do I go, how do we live? I free woman, Ghede woman – they best leave me be."

"They blame you for dey life rot... bad harvest... dead folks – dey blame you."

Molly sighed and shook her head.

"Blame me, hell boy, they should blame themselves. Ghede warned me of rain and sun. Ghede love me, loves you. We their children. They protect they kind from those who mean harm. Every night I pray to them and they tell me I am of them. We be of them. Our blood, our lives are for them to serve. Remember that and you'll never die."

A knock on the door interrupted their conversation. As Molly rose to answer Ethan grabbed her arm and said, "Don't, could be men come to kill us."

After slapping his hand from her arm Molly opened the door allowing Thomas Bates to enter their home. Thomas told her how Quantrill had whipped the crowd into a frenzy and men fueled by alcohol and malice were coming to kill her. Both pleaded with her to leave, to gather whatever belongings they could and run into the woods. The look in their eyes melted her resolve and Molly reluctantly started looking around to see what she could take when it happened.

The forest sounds gave way to a tranquil silence, quickly followed by the sound of barking dogs. Sounds soon followed by the clamor of men shouting and women trying to quite wailing infants. Tears puddled in Ethan's eyes as his mother clasped his face and told him she loved him.

"You don't have to die. You ghost walker. Git out, go to woods ... hide."

"Molly, it's too late. They're on all sides of the house, there's nowhere for him to run."

"Son, me sorry. These men, dey claim dey God is just but just for them. Liars and devils. You no die tonight. I die... not you."

"Wait, give me a moment to talk to them. Tell them you'll leave tonight," Thomas said.

"No, no. My time is done, but not you. Both hide here," Molly said as she lifted the door to a crawlspace beneath the house."

"There's not enough room for both of us. Listen we still have a chance, I'll talk to them, stall while you use the crawlspace to escape into the woods."

Molly shook her head. "Go if you must, Ethan git down there. Hide and remember the Ghede love you. Momma loves you."

Thomas nodded and pointed to the crawlspace. Red tears streaked Ethan's cheeks as he kissed his mother's forehead before entering the crawlspace. It wasn't just the chill of the frosty air or the horror he imagined was coming that made him shiver, it was the touch of calloused reptilian like hands covering his face, hands that came from a darkness surrounding purplish yellow eyes. Its mouth looked like it had a thousand teeth and its serpent like tongue felt wet against his ears. A black cocoon enveloped them, muting the sights and sounds of his world as if filtered through sacks of heavy cloth.

Peering out the window Thomas could see past them. Past crisp copper leaves strewn from branches swaying in autumn winds; Quantrill, on horseback, his men carrying sabers and guns - locals gripping guns, clubs and knives taken from home. Bloodhounds trotted alongside horses barking and growling as they strained against their leashes. Fifty paces from the house Thomas Bates stood before a sight he'd hope to never see. Members of his congregation wild eyed and yelling as if all of their frustrations had come to bear on a crisp October evening outside the home of Molly Crenshaw.

"And who might you be," Quantrill asked as he dismounted.

"Thomas Bates and I'm here to tell you..."

"Are you the Lexington Thomas Bates? The one who let his Negro's go before moving here?"

"I ... am."

Quantrill stroked his chin in contemplation before snapping his fingers beckoning Artie Clement to dismount and stand beside him. Turning his back to Thomas he whispered to his former lieutenant who nodded his head in understanding.

"Damn bluecoat. Traitor ... niggers lover," yelled Artie.

Wild eye and almost snarling Artie Clement backhanded Thomas Bates before slamming his softball sized fist into his stomach. Showing no emotion Quantrill watched Thomas drop to his knees. Hands clasped behind his back Quantrill circled Thomas spitting and kicking dirt on him. Licking his lower lip he paused to pinch a snuffle from his nose then raised his left forefinger. A panting Artie Clement withdrew his sabre from its scabbard.

"Thomas Bates, as a niggers lover and sinner, I, William Clarke Quantrill, hereby condemn you to hell for being a traitor to the Confederacy and the teachings of our glorious Lord."

Kneeling amongst a swirl of leaves tumbling and pirouetting into a speckled montage of browns, gold, and reds Thomas spat on Quantrill's boots before telling him that the Confederacy was dead and that he should have died along with it. Without saying a word Quantrill kicked Thomas in the ribs, withdrew the derringer from his pocket and pointed it at Thomas's face.

"Look at me you bastard. Look at the man who will cleanse this land of your kind and beg, damn it beg, forgiveness for a life lost to the way of the Confederacy."

Rising to his feet, Thomas looked Quantrill in the eye, told him the equivalent of f-you before blackening his left eye with a perfectly thrown right jab. Before Quantrill could react Artie's sword began its descent. It made a whistling sound as it sliced through the air to embed itself between Thomas Bates neck and breastbone. With his ears ringing from screams of pain Thomas never heard the roar of the .44 caliber "pocket cannon," Quantrill used to shatter his spine before opening a grapefruit size hole in his sternum.

His body fell; not with the grace of a feather, or as direct as a stone dropped from a child's hand. It offered little resistance, just enough to give it that

motion – one almost predictable but with the right twinge of chaos Quantrill found enchanting. Thomas's congregation watched in quiet fascination as his body came to rest amongst a bed of red and gold leaves. Some turned their heads and cried while others calmly watched Quantrill twitch his nose before reloading the derringer.

Molly's eyes widened as she watched Thomas's body thump to the ground. Anger like she had never felt brought tears to her eyes. She continued praying and chanting as some mob members turned to move on from Thomas's murder to their original agenda.

He saw her standing in the doorway – the light of the hearth giving the appearance of a living shadow. Stopping to stare at the woman he'd come to kill; surprised she wasn't anything like he expected. Not cowering in fright or trying to flee into the woods, but standing in the doorway screaming words Quantrill didn't understand.

The sight unnerved him.

"She's trying to curse us," yelled Quantrill, "but we are men of God and he along with the righteousness of our cause will protect us from her evil."

With a grunt Artie Clement hurled a fist sized stone at Molly then stood dumbfounded after it shattered against her shoulder barely caused her to flinch. Many stood as dumbfounded as Artie and Quantrill observed some beginning to inch away, hesitate as if having second thoughts about what they came to do that night. Sensing splintering within the ranks Quantrill began urging the mob to rush the house. Clement led the way as several men rushed towards Molly.

Clement was the first to reach her and as he tried forcing her into the house Molly thumbed his eye. He dropped to his knees blocking the doorway. Using knives and furniture in her home, she struck and stabbed several men wedged in her doorway. Others screamed when she threw scalding kettle water on them. Artie, covering his thumbed eye with his left hand, grabbed his sabre and rushed to impale Molly. She sidestepped and tripped him, sending him tumbling into the hearth. The stench of burning flesh filled the room as the fire licked its way across his body. Some mob members pushed the screaming Artie out of the house and began rolling him in the dirt.

Ethan felt her pain as men began kicking and beating Molly. The cocoon made him almost oblivious to the sounds of fists, feet and clubs striking his mother ...of bones snapping and shattering from the assault taking place above him.

With the assault reaching its crescendo Quantrill stormed into the house. Breathing hard and shaking with rage he stomped on Molly's left hand, grinding his heel to shatter her fingers. "Witch ... harlot of Satan, you will never hurt another son of the Confederacy ever again."

Kneeling beside her Quantrill, held the derringer in his right hand and using his left reached to grab her hair. Barring brown broken teeth, Molly grabbed his left pinkie finger and snapped it, making him jump about squealing like the pigs whose ears he enjoyed shooting. Wild eyed and delirious with pain he swore



with the verve of a military man as he used the derringer to open a gash on Molly's forehead. He continued pistol whipping her until he began gasping for air.

Rising from her beating Quantrill's smirk disappeared when the soft laughter from Molly's lips reached his ears. Her eyes were bruised and swollen shut but through swollen lips and broken teeth she told him she would rise from the dead to hold his soul in her hands before casting it into the devil's latrine. Told him death would follow him and his followers into a hell they never imagined, to become something feared by his god and all the gods of the world.

A burning sensation rippled across her son's stomach as the heat of a 44 caliber slug tore through her body, and as her soul began drifting from life. Ethan started crying as he felt her leaving him one last time, her body at rest on a splintered pinewood floor, inches thick, separating him from those who took her life. His bones felt as if they were going to burst from his body after he heard Quantrill order his men to dismember her, and to scatter her body throughout Missouri saying it would prevent the fate Molly spoke of.

The cocoon wouldn't let him make a sound. Wouldn't let him try to stop the whistling thumps of axes dismembering his mother. It shut out all lights and sounds from above and made him sleep; sleep beneath the carnage happening above him.

Quantrill heard it first. Wood sounds, cooing and caterwauling rising in unison as if protesting the nights work. Dumbstruck many looked to him for direction. Sweating and seething with pain from a broken finger and blacking eye, Quantrill said, "Gather what you have and let's get out of here. The devil is sending his flock for us. Someone help Artie to his horse."

The forest sounds dwindled away as the mob dispersed; while beneath blood stained floorboards a comforting flow of quite caressed a sleeping Ethan. He quietly laid in the cocoon, sleeping as his mother's life fluids seeped through the floorboards and into his body.



He awoke to find himself sitting at his mother's table, and standing at the other end was a man wearing a charcoal colored suit and a black felt hat.

"Are you ...?"

"Maybe, maybe not," he replied with a deep Caribbean accent. The man came to stand next to Ethan, towering over him with a long muscular frame. Tapping the table to grab Ethan's attention he swept his hand across it stopping above a plate of food Ethan hadn't seen. There were roasted vegetables, biscuits, buttered potatoes and what looked like petite roasted steaks, set upon a serpentine trimmed blue plate next to a glass of ice tea.

"I know what you're thinking, but we'll get to that soon. For now eat and listen, while I tell you how to honor your parents and rectify the injustices done to you ... throughout your life."

"Where youse from 'cause you sure don't sound like anyone from here?"

"I'm not, but that's okay. I'm here now and together, oh believe me, together, the world won't believe what we're going to do."

Ethan wanted to ask more questions, but his growling stomach was too great to ignore. He quickly devoured his food and moments afterwards drifted off to sleep.

The man was pleased that Ethan ate everything, especially the steaks. As Ethan slept the Jamaican placed a patch of red cloth over Ethan's heart and began placing various Molly's possessions into a snakeskin sack. The cloth hummed, hissed and twisted itself into knotty shapes before sinking into Ethan's chest. A pleasing smile graced his face when he placed the cloth into the snakeskin sack after it had emerged from Ethan's body.



The room was elegant and appropriate for its visitor, a man who spent most of the day watching the comings and goings of writers and soldiers staying at a hotel down from the jail. He raised the shade only to reveal so much, shoulders, chin, hint of killer hands, it's what his anonymous nature allowed him to do. All day pieces of faces passed by his window, but one stood out. A boy, maybe ten, wearing a tattered wool coat pedaled by his window, his basket loaded with goods from the market.

Quantrill's nephew.

He wore a grey single breasted frock coat with three gold buttons highlighting the smoothness of the fabric. The sleeves had a short vent at the hands, a white drill collar vest with drab Angola trousers completed the day's attire. In his frock pocket was a red cloth patch, one he clutched with the tightness of a python strangling its prey. He had already used it three times that day, but the next time would be the best one. For Ethan was in Rolla, Mo to see a man who, in spite of his bluster and bravado, failed to achieve a lasting historical presence.

The June sky was strung with stars and the local street littered with black leaves barely rustling in the wind as he left his hotel room. He shuddered slightly walking through the humid air. To those he passed, they only noticed his clothes, those of a well-regarded southern gentleman. His features masked from them such that they'd see whatever they thought was appropriate for a man dressed like him. With his mentor's help, Ethan had mastered more subtle aspects of ghost walking such as creating suggestive illusions for people around him.

He entered the jail to see a heavy set man with a soft belly but hard thick arms and shoulders. A man who had the red nose of a hard drinker and slack grainy skin around a protruding pinprick eye, the other eye missing due to a struggle he hadn't expected. In addition to the ruined eye Molly gave him, Artie Clément's skin had become waxy and along with the loss of most of his hair, he only had three teeth, one black with rot.

"I'm from the Rolla Gazette and I'm here to interview a genuine war hero, hopefully one to be spared by our Governor, Mr. Thomas Fletcher."

“Well you just be respectful ...down there IS a genuine war hero, Mr. William Clarke Quantrill himself. I tell you ain’t no stinking carpetbagger gonna lay a hand on that man as long as Artie T. Clement is around, I tell you, no one, I don’t care if President Johnson himself came to do it, I won’t allow it.”

Artie stood in front of Ethan with his chest puffed out, smiling at himself for letting this “newspaper” man know how things were going to be. Mentally patting himself on the back he didn’t notice the smile turn into a frown before Ethan’s backhand broke his jaw. Artie felt a rib crack when he landed against a brick wall, but before he could catch his breath to holler he doubled over as Ethan’s fist slammed into his soft belly. Ethan circled Artie with his hands clasped behind his back, humming a Haitian melody. Artie was grasping and struggling to stand when Ethan lifted him by the scruff of his neck, thumbed his pinprick eye then body slammed him back to the floor. Artie felt two more ribs crack and a spasm of bile building in his stomach. His face took on a purplish hue as he thrashed about the floor trying to steady himself. Ethan, his hands clasped behind his back, used his left foot to pin Artie to the floor like a flopping fish and hissed, “Look at me.”

Kneeling and holding Artie’s head with both hands he said, “Death doesn’t want you, has no use for you, but I do you worthless piece of shit.”



The Phelps County Jail was a single story sandstone building. The ground floor had a single room with cages made from iron bars to hold multiple prisoners, and below them were solitary confinement cells, gloomy and dungeon like, with pools of fetid water filled with spiders and dead worms. The killer laid upon a soiled hemp mattress, winching from the pain of a broken leg. One he sustained after his horse was shot out from under him while trying to escape a posse that had trapped him in the barn of a local sympathizer. Despite his urgings, his jailers hadn’t seen fit to supply him laudanum for the pain from his broken leg.

The sound of footsteps descending creaking wooden steps made him sit up.

“Artie, that you,” he said with a hint of hope in his voice.

“Afraid not, Mr. Quantrill.”

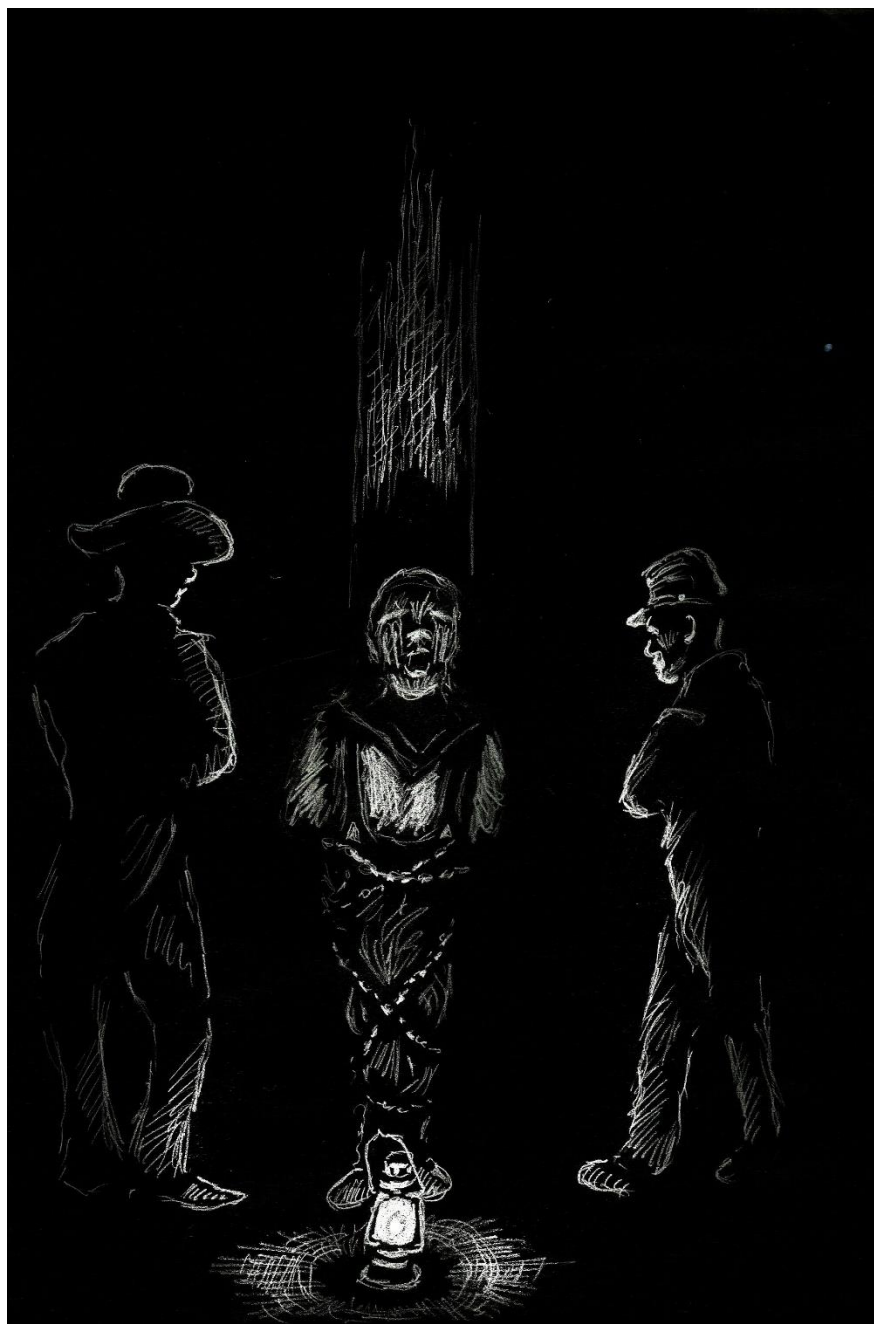
“Who’s that? What you want?”

There were no answers. Just the sound of street traffic - horses clomping down dirt streets, women scolding children running about; soldiers complaining about the unenviable task of “protecting a bushwhacker.”

Quantrill, the jail’s sole prisoner, limped over to the bars to see who was coming down the stairs. He didn’t see anyone but a slap to the back of his head let him know he wasn’t alone.

“Who the hell are...?”

Ethan’s two finger throat jab made Quantrill drop to his knees and fall face first into a puddle of spider infested water. He shrieked as Ethan’s boot repeatedly slammed into the shin of his broken leg. Through a thin film of filthy



water his eyes tracked the first fist arc that landed flush with his jaw; scattering five teeth about the cell. Ethan repeatedly hit him as years' worth of anger and frustration were released and his fists became as effective as the laudanum Quantrill desired to help him sleep.



He awoke with a throbbing headache and a vague feeling of immobility. His right eye socket was broken leaving his left eye to adjust to the room light. Quantrill moved his head from side to side and saw that he was chained to a thick wooden column in the middle of a pastel carpeted room, sparsely furnished with two brown chairs, upon which sat two men, one he recognized from the jail.

Through split lips he tried to hissed, "What do you want," but couldn't because he didn't have any teeth,

Ethan and a tall Jamaican wearing a charcoal suit and a black felt hat didn't respond, instead leaning between their chairs to whisper something Quantrill couldn't hear.

"Bet you're wondering what we're talking about," Ethan said.

Quantrill's head jerked in recognition of Thomas Bates voice.

"You're wondering why you're here and what are we going to do with you. Don't worry, you'll find out soon enough."

Quantrill's eyes widened when Ethan rose from his chair to stand inches from him.

"Ah, I can see the wonder in your eyes. You're thinking "How in the world is he talking such proper English?" Ask my friend here, no better yet let me tell you. You know I got a lot of things from my parents, you remember them; the ones you shot and butchered back in St. Charles."

Using Molly's voice, he went on to explain how after consuming his parents hearts he learned all that they had known over their lifetimes. "Even things they had forgotten," he said.

"Did you know a lot of your family, including that young nephew who admires you so much, are here? Or should I say were here? Anyway, they *had* a nice plan to free you - take you to Texas to live out your final days. Well guess what? Like that plan, they're all dead, just like my folks."

Quantrill struggled against his restraints, grunting and snorting as he tried to free himself. Ethan punched him in the stomach to silence him, then spat in his face before removing a square of red cloth from his breast pocket. Quantrill could see broken and fractured white teeth glistening in Ethan's left palm. His teeth. With his right hand Ethan dangled the cloth like a gyrating serpent inches from Quantrill's face.

When Ethan clenched his left hand Quantrill heard a crunching sound, like someone crushing stones beneath the heel of their shoes. Listening to the crushing of his teeth, his mouth burned as if someone had poured alcohol on an open wound. Upon opening his hand Quantrill saw a fine powdery substance, his pulverized teeth, glowing in Ethan's hand. Grinning like someone who found the

Holy Grail, Ethan blew the pulverized teeth into Quantrill's face, and with Quantrill coughing and gagging placed the red cloth over his face.

Quantrill felt an icy breath slowly slide down his body. Slight at first, but just enough for him to know it wasn't good. A scream began birthing in the hollow of his gut, growing and rising to fill his lungs. Just as it was ready for release his vision began to narrow, and the first slivers of life began to flicker by. Images of battles waged, Molly Crenshaw and Thomas Bates bodies covered with a thin white layer of October frost, animals and civilian pleading for mercy dangled as fragments and shards laughing at him - Molly and Thomas's faces mocking him as a charlatan and failure.

Sweat poured from his face as his body became bright with fever and his spine, bent like a bow, arched into angles Ethan thought impossible. Then it happened. A muffled gurgle of pain before slumping against the pillar, blood pouring from his nose and throat. From deep within came a soft moan, the death rattle, followed by a gentle sigh.

As the last wisps of life left Quantrill's body, Ethan felt the small hairs of his knuckles sway and the nape of his neck relax in the comfort of satisfaction.

The soul is like a firefly, a small luminous thing fluttering away as life comes to an end. Unfortunately for Quantrill, Ethan had plans for his, none involving a world of eternal light or fire. The red cloth floated from Quantrill's face and like a crow snatching a fly from the sky, grasped Quantrill's soul and squeezed it until it disappeared into it folds.

Rolla Gazette headline: DEATH VISITS ROLLA – On Wednesday, June 13, 1869, eleven members of the Quantrill family, including the infamous William Clarke Quantrill, were found dead throughout Phelps County. All appeared to have died of “mysterious” causes, but an investigation on how a war criminal with a broken leg, William Quantrill, was taken from the Phelps County Jail to Miss Elizabeth Pincrell's boarding house where his body was discovered, has been initiated.

In addition to the demise of the Quantrill clan, the body of a Mr. Artie Clement was found on the floor of the Phelps County Jail. No connection has been established between the death of Mr. Clement and the possible escape attempt of Mr. Quantrill.



August 1980

Shortly after avenging his parent's murder, the ageless Ethan began traveling the world. An active participant in every American conflict from World War I through Vietnam, ghost walking as ally or foe, slowly and methodically hunting the lynch mob relatives, collecting souls from bodies that had lost their capacity to live. Throughout his crusade, Ethan and his Ghede mentors recruited others to their cause. Others such as Elizabeth Pincrell, owner of the Grey Fox.

The Grey Fox - a bar and strip club on the north side of Saint Louis. From the outside it was nothing more than a painted steel door set in a brick wall, above

which shone a neon sign of a crimson fox. Whenever the door opened, even for a moment, people would glimpse the blackness of its interior and crinkle their noses at the stench of stale beer and cigarette smoke. At night the neighborhood had a seductive charm to it, like third world vice dens shown in film noir movies, but in daylight was nothing more than a scab of ethnic markets and sun bleached tenements, massage parlors, failing restaurants and thriving adult shops.

This was where the resurrection would begin.

Throughout his life Ethan never lost his love for running. He liked zipping through the odors of the night, feeling the rush of air off the Mississippi filling his rapidly working lungs and savored images of neon lights flickering off leftover puddles of rainwater. It relaxed him and helped him think. At night he'd look upward and wonder if perhaps they weren't stars, but rather openings in Heaven where the love of loved ones pours through to let the living know they were happy. He wondered if his parent's souls were one of the stars he'd seen on his nightly runs. By the time he reached the corner across from the Grey Fox he could see Elizabeth in the glow of the neon sign waiting for him.

He jogged over and kept running in place, "Whatcha doing?"

"Waiting for you."

He stopped running in place, bent over, and placed his hands on his knees while gulping for air. When he'd caught his breath, he stood up and said, "Alright, I'm ready."

Shrugging off his windbreaker, Ethan felt the last of his thoughts dissolve beneath the club's hot lights and screaming music. A hostess, a thin freckled face girl of maybe twenty, handed him a glass of vodka, hooked his arm and led him along the edge of an empty stage to a private area of velvet-covered couches and soft ottomans.

He sighed as he relaxed amongst the cushions. The warmth of the liquor made his fingertips tingle.

He was resting his head with his eyes closed amongst velvet cushions when Elizabeth and two Ghedes entered the room. One Ghede was unlike any he'd ever seen, older with an air of aristocracy about him. Elizabeth gave her brother a peck on the cheek before settling onto a couch next to him. The Ghedes sat on the other side, the new one dangling a turquoise vial the size of a tube of superglue in his face, saying, "Final piece, Ethan. Over hundred years and now we're almost there."

"Daddy would be proud of what we're about to do," Elizabeth squealed. For over 100 years she harbored a hatred for the families of the mob that murdered her father. With the Ghede and Ethan by her side, she traveled the world helping them extinguish the last light of life from those whose ancestors murdered her father.

The thin freckled face girl, his niece, parted the curtains as she carried a snakeskin sack into the room. He thought the sack smelled like coconuts and imitation Armani. After shrugging it off her shoulder the sack was placed on a black and crimson rug the elder Ghede stood upon.

Inside the sack were Molly Crenshaw's bones.

After a few moments of looking at his mother's remains, Ethan doubled over and fell to the floor. Chest pain fluttered like a moth as it tore his muscles sliver by sliver from the inside. Others could see a single blue vein throbbing lengthwise bisecting his forehead as the pain continued growing outward in pulsating circles - turning Ethan's insides into slippery fire.

His chest became gluey from pools of sweat bubbling beneath his shirt and his body continued to convulse as his chest muscles strained against the forces clawing beneath them. Elizabeth's dark saucer eyes were frozen in fear as she watch her brother's suffering. She reached out to hold him but before she could cradle his head in her arms, a raw animal like sound came from his throat followed by the smell of mulched vegetables filling the room.

Meanwhile the new Ghede was rubbing the contents of the turquoise vial into his palms. Standing above the sweating and feral smelling man who felt like a son to him, a sad smile played across his lips as he watched the quivering Ethan thrash about the rug. The vial contents felt like warm oil as the Ghede rubbed it across Ethan's chest, all the while telling him all would be well.

For Ethan time rippled in flashes of white shadows showing plump orange and green flakes drifting from black clouds to land on his mother's remains. His pain was like a red-yellow flame licking at the edges of everything. Time slowed; walls and shadows faded away and he found himself lying on velvet cushions listening to voices that sounded as if they came from the end of a long tunnel. His skin felt cool and dry, like the aftermath of an elite spa treatment. When his vision cleared he saw several Ghedes, Elizabeth and his niece staring down at him.

"What happened? Where's my mother?"

The voice was tinged with a deep Haitian accent, "Turn around."

His heart starting racing and his breathing became short and rapid when he saw his mother sitting on a cushion behind him. Her face unblemished, looking like the woman who nursed him as a little boy. Tears welled in his eyes and he fell to knees before her.

Her petite hands held his face the same way she held it when she told him she loved him before sending him into the crawlspace beneath their home.

"How...," he stammered.

"Ethan, remember that dinner you had the day after I died?" she asked.

He just stared at her in dazed confusion.

The elder Ghede responded, "Don't let it bother you. The soul is in the heart and once it goes, it can never return. We hid her heart and soul in you, and that's how we were able to bring her back."

"Child remember what I told you about how the Ghede love us, loves all of us, and will do right by us."

Ethan nodded.

"Well now is the time, our time. A war's coming and we're going to have an army the likes no one has ever seen."



“What kind of army are you talking about and who are we going to war with? Not the United States of America. This nation will crush any army crazy enough to start a fight.”

“Son, I’m talking about a stealth war, from the inside with an army that can’t be destroyed.”

“What kind of army can’t be destroyed?”

The elder Ghede came over to stand beside Molly and whispered something to her. Molly smiled as the Ghede turned to Ethan and said, “Child, the secret of an invincible army is having the ultimate weapon. One your enemies can’t beat.”

“This country has the atomic bomb and who knows what else? What can top that?”

By now the elder Ghede was cradling the soul sack in the crock of his arm as if it were a child. Rubbing it against his face making him feel warm and tingly. The Ghede twirled the string of the soul sack around his finger before dangling the twisting and pulsating sack inches from Ethan’s face.

“Brains, planning, patience are what’s needed. Also the ultimate weapon. Let me ask you something... what do you know about zombies?”

The Ghedes and Molly smiled as they looked at the soul sack quivering inches from Ethan’s face.

# SHADOW AND DUST

— *M. Grant Kellersmeier*

WE moved to our old home on North A— Boulevard in a very mild April during a very mild year. The matter of moving the contents of our three-room apartment to the two-story colonial was quick and painless, and the morning was cool but not cold. By noon we had transferred all of the cardboard boxes from the van into their respective chambers, and by two in the afternoon – while the sun gazed lazily into the western windows – the last article of furniture had been deposited. My friends and family sat on the porch and shared the pizza that we laid out on card tables. Coke bottles were passed around and someone opened a bottle of wine that was quickly decanted into blue plastic cups. The house we were moving into was a grey colonial revival with a wide front porch and a cozy backyard where garden lay fallow under a bed of snow-blackened leaves, and a clothes line – two T-shaped wooden frames facing each other, with three ropes slung from one to the other – all under the shade of a grey-skinned silver maple. It came to us as a steal – some \$30,000 under the value of most homes in the neighborhood, with a clean bill of health from the inspector, and scads of perks: brand new lifetime warranty windows, new carpet in the living room, original molding from 1925, hard wood floors in the dining room, and exposed brick walls in the bathroom. It was small – three beds and one bath – but it had all of the charm of a character-drenched fixer-upper with none of the fixes required. The porch needed a rail, and the roof would need shingles in a decade, but it was otherwise in mint condition. The previous owners had poured a shocking amount of care into it before what happened to them. In a quiet place of my heart I almost regretted reaping the rewards of their hard labor so shortly after they had suffered so much. We never met him, of course, but she seemed like a haunted woman when we signed the papers at the lender's, with a look in her eyes like a fish in a trawler looking up at a mallet.

The chatter on our porch had increased its volume incrementally until it poured out into the quiet street and had begun bouncing off of the houses opposite us in gregarious echoes. I looked across the boulevard and was struck by the guarded feeling that these houses had – something sensed, not seen – as if they were standing shoulder to shoulder, watchfully considering us like sentinels who have other thoughts in their minds, but who are never so distracted as to forget the seriousness of their jobs. Something about this impression deeply upset me, and I walked into the house to get away from the juxtaposition of our lively company and the stoic neighborhood.

The door lead into the living room which occupied the right half of the house. To the left was the dining room which lead to the kitchen, and thence to the breakfast nook. The nook jutted from the body of the house, so that the left half of the building was divided into these two rooms. I walked through them, past the boxes, seeking the cool quiet of the basement. The stairs leading down were off of

the kitchen. Like so much in the house, they bore the marks of our predecessors: they were made from brand new 2x8 boards and supported by 4x4s with a level of skill that bespoke excellent carpentry. The stairs ended at the far right side of the house – under the living room. The basement consisted of three rooms: a large, open, unfinished, concrete space that precisely replicated the main rectangle of the house excluding the porch and nook. It was here that the heater, washer, dryer, and boiler were. The unfinished ceiling revealed the intricate systems of copper piping, electrical wiring, and aluminum ductwork that fed life into our home – matted in webs and darkened by dust. Directly across from the stairs is a long, rectangular room that corresponds the porch. Four feet above the ceiling, my family were breaking bread and laughing. It was a dark, old room – a root cellar with a crooked doorway that barely held shut the antique door with its crackled white paint and rusted hinges. It was this room that we had selected for a storage area for Christmas decorations and winter coats. Under the stairs, corresponding precisely with the breakfast nook, was a second, smaller room. It would work well as a pantry, we thought, being too small for regular storage, but too big to be a coat closet. I hadn't looked closely at it during any of the previous times we had been in the home, and something about its removal from my shouting family – being at the most opposite end of the house – and about its fastened door drew my attention. The door was newer than its counterpart in the root cellar, but not by much: the deadbolt looked to be from the '50s, and the blue paint was not as crackled, but it was thin and peeling. Something fell on the porch with a shaking thud and I heard a carillon of laughter. I was reminded of the wine. Turning again to the door, I twisted the bolt back, and it receded with a sharp scrape. I pulled the handle, and the hinges pivoted wearily, exposing the black room to the fresh air. The odor of mushrooms and dampness hung lazily on the other side of the jambs, as if too comfortable to move, but I followed it.

I turned on the light which revealed the pantry cabinets that we had so briefly glanced at during our first walkthrough; we avoided the basement on the second pass – my wife said it seemed dark after a long pause when the realtor asked her (I later learned that this was the room where they found him, with his brains on the wall). They still carried a meager collection of rubbish: empty paint cans, a box of screws – half-empty, a jar of decade-old wax polish – full, several shoeboxes filled with the sort of miscellany that handy men tend to collect in their garages or workshops, three used paintbrushes, baby food jars filled with nuts and bolts, a rusted screw driver, a cardboard Budweiser coaster, a mostly empty can of WD40, half a dozen lighters, a pack of cigarettes, and well-worn rosary. I also found – tucked away, almost hidden on top of the cabinet – a large, black felt hat with a round crown and a wide, circular brim – a slouch hat that reminded me of the Amish men from my hometown in northeastern Indiana. I thought about trying it on. I am glad that I did not. Heavy, awkward, and tediously large – certainly eccentric, almost sinister – I knew that I would never wear it I mentally noted which articles would be pitched, which preserved, and which sold or given away. The hat went into the trash with the lighters and cigarettes and coaster.

As I closed the cabinet doors, I noticed that they still stuck out a bit, as if something was keeping them from shutting all the way. Of course, they were empty now, so I opened them back up and peered inside. After rubbing my hands along the shelves, I noticed that the topmost one was sticking out by a few centimeters. When I couldn't push it back in, I pulled it out towards me, and something soft fell down – which had been wedged between the shelf and the back of the cabinet: a small composition book with marbled black and white covers. The notebook initially fell into the pitching pile; it was warped by moisture – the pages rippled in a serpentine harmony – and the paper was thin and cheap, yellowed with damp, and of no apparent use. It was with a sense of whimsy that I opened it to the first blank page, and perhaps of perversion that I turned over the third, fourth, and fifth blank pages. I knew that there was nothing to be found here – like most notebooks, the first pages had been written on and torn out as needed – but something pushed me to explore beyond the threshold of what seemed realistic or even interesting. I pictured some off-color doodle, some list of people to never speak to again, some confession to a hateful act of vandalism. Or arson. Or murder. I don't know what drove me to anticipate such unwholesome things from such a nondescript pad of paper, but on the twelfth page I found handwriting. I read the first pages in the basement under the yellow glow of the pantry bulb. The rest I read outside in the sunshine a few days later when I was able to go back into the basement again, but was entirely unwilling to read such words in such a place so intimately related to the other. I have reproduced it, and preface it with a standard warning: what happened to Steve Horton or didn't is not entirely clear, and people under great stress are not the most reliable narrators. In earlier centuries we spoke of madness. Later we used the term nervous breakdown. Most recently we call it a period of mental crisis caused by stress-induced anxiety. I don't know why I feel compelled to qualify his words, and maybe I shouldn't. Maybe I do it because I think his tragedy shouldn't become the object of titillation and morbid glee – a tragedy that may merely be the ramblings of a sick man. Or maybe it's because, after all, I still live in his house.



AUG 13

Doctor Jessica told me I should try this. She thinks that writing out my feelings might help the marriage. It was a while ago that she said that, but me and Ashley just had a pretty bad fight. Sometimes – I'll try this, I guess – I feel like she doesn't care about who I am. It's like she wants me to be a different guy. It frustrates me because I know that her last husband is more what she wants. Someone tough and emotional and loud. But he knocked her around, and I'd never do that. I'd never try to hurt her. Sometimes I get a feeling like I could smack her in the head, but I'll never do that, and it's only when she's screaming at me with that face that she makes. It's not all human. And there's something that really

disgusts me about it. It's just kind of half human and half stray dog. If it were just a stray dog, or even a rabid, mad dog, I would be afraid. If it were a fully, human, fully sympathetic face, I would admire it, or even love it. But it's that combination that happens when the screaming is so loud that my ears ring and I stop hearing words. It's a kind of revolting hybrid that I could understand another person seeing and wanting to smack her with a shovel to get her to be quiet and stop making that face. My mom would do that to my dad, and he just sat there like a man being spat all over on by his drill sergeant. Dad was in the Army during Vietnam, and I wonder if that's where he got it. He just sat there and his eyes seemed to recede back into his head like he was going away for a while, and that he would probably be back soon – but maybe he wouldn't. And then there was a day when he didn't. He took a reaming from mom one night while us kids were in bed. God it was loud. And then the door slammed. Now, I thought it was him leaving, but it was really her. We woke up the next day and the house was empty. Mom came home a few hours later, looking really put together and sort of fake-happy. She grinned at us and asked all cheerily where dad was. We didn't know, of course. No one was in the bed or the living room or the bathroom. That's when the cheeriness went away, and her face went sort of white. So she ran out to the backyard to look for his car. I thought he was maybe doing laundry, so I went to the basement – down the steps into the dark. Maybe I'll be able to talk more about this later. I'm going to try to write a little bit whenever I feel like I'm really bottled up. I don't ever like shouting around the kids, and since they're just about never out of earshot (I guess Dr. Jessica is right), I have a lot of things that just go down inside of me and never get aired.

AUG 22

I'm back. I'm keeping this down here because no one likes the basement besides me. Ashley can only do laundry in the middle of the day, and she always has the kids come with her. They don't like it either. It was really weird, actually, when, yesterday, Carly told me that she was worried that the man with the hat wouldn't let her leave the basement if he found her there alone. Now, she's four, so I thought it was pretty hilarious – she watches a lot of Curious George, so I figured it was the Man in the Yellow Hat that she was imagining – but Ashley got really still and her face got sort of green-grey. I didn't come down here to write about this, so I'm not going to ramble too much more, but it did start the fight, so it's pertinent, or whatever. Ashley grabbed Carly's arm really tight and started asking her a ton of weird questions – how tall was he, what color were his clothes, what did his voice sound like, where did she see him – and that last one really was a big deal to her. She kept asking where she saw him, like it was a lost dog that the whole neighborhood was looking for. Carly doesn't have a great vocabulary, but without taking Ashley there (Ashley refused when I suggested they go down together), Carly indicated she was talking about the root cellar under the porch, opposite of the stairs. I kept shushing Ashley, and tried to pull her away from Carly – the skin of Carly's arms under Ashley's double grip was turning white, and the girl was starting to cry from the pain – but she wouldn't understand that a four

year old has an active imagination. Ashley's always been kind of spooky – kind of mystical in a way that tilts between silliness and concern. She has feelings about what people are doing that cause her a lot of stress. One time at the movies she made us leave halfway through because she was really worried about her mom. The woman was in perfect health, and I was almost furious with her for rushing us out of there for such a stupid reason. Coincidentally, her mom had actually been in a car accident just a minute or two after we got in the car. Now she was fine – the car got totaled, but she was all right – but this really bothered me. I think Ashley's too sensitive. Gets too worked up about things.

This kind of so-called “proof” just makes things worse. Last year, when she and the kids moved into this house on North A— (I bought it in a foreclosure three years back, and I've been renovating it ever since), she woke up screaming and begged me not to let the kids go to school that morning. This was the worst “feeling” episode that she ever had, because it seemed to prove to her that she had some second sight. What happened was that the Maumee River overflowed its banks that morning, and the kids' bus was washed off the road. Five kids went to the hospital, and one didn't make it. I told her that it had been storming all night, and everyone knew the roads were bad, and that probably hundreds of mothers had “premonitions” that day, but it just made her worse. So we really got into it over this “man with the hat” thing. I told that it was irresponsible – maybe even dangerous – to frighten the girl. Her eyes just went wide, stupefied by my answer it seemed, like I was saying “go ahead, let the kids play tag with the steak knives.” For a second her eyes seemed to tremble, and then it all bubbled up into her hand. I think I heard the slap before I felt it, but it brought me to the ground, and Carly started screaming. I struggled to get up, and looked over to Ashley, who was holding Carly's face in her hands with a grip that twisted her skin like a melted rubber mask. “Never, ever let me ever hear that you went down there alone. Do you hear me? If I ever, ever find out that you went down there, I'll make sure you can't sit on your ass for a week. Do you hear me, girl?” Carly's head jiggled up and down between the vice of Ashley's hands. “He's a bad man, Carly. He's a very, very bad man, and he does very, very bad things. He will do bad things to you if you don't let me protect you. If you ever see him again – and if you EVER see him upstairs – you have to tell me. You have to tell me, or he might do bad things to you and the babies.” Carly's eyes got big. “And Ethan, too?” Her six year old brother was upstairs with our newborn and the toddler. Ashley got really quiet. I saw the animal come out in her, but in a different way. In a way I had seen in cats who are chased into a corner after angering their owner, or in the rabbit which I found cowering from me when I accidentally blocked its exit route from my garage. It was a type of animal fear. “Yes, Ethan too. And you and Jackie, and even little Owen.” Her grip relaxed on the girl's face. Carly looked over to me. “What about daddy? Will the man do a bad thing to daddy?” I've seen many strange, complicated expression on my wife's face.

She is a passionate woman and has a way of driving me crazy in all sorts of ways. Her great-grandmother came over here from the dark Welsh mountains, her

great-great-grandfather from the dry hill country of Northern Spain, and her paternal great-great-grandparents left the lonely pine forests of Hungary. One of her ancestors was a French gypsy who disappeared without a trace in the Appalachian Mountains (they said he heard a call and left to answer it), and one was an Egyptian doctor in Napoleon's army who escaped to Louisiana after the British beat them at the Nile. There's very hot blood in her. I don't really know why I even said that, but looking at her in that moment, I felt like generations of evolution and instinct and self-preservation flashed in her eyes. Her face was this odd mixture of emotions. After a really tense silence, she looked away from me and said "I hope not." I had almost forgotten that I was recently knocked to the kitchen floor. Something in her was so odd and frightening and confident. I felt like another one of her children, as if the slap had been a cautionary spanking. I left the room and felt my own emotions kind of drain into my heart. I came down here tonight because I realized that I've promised myself not to let that happen. So I've written about it. But I can hear the kids calling for me, and Ashley would really not like to know that I was down here for so long by myself (I know it's silly, but "happy wife, happy life," right? And even if she's superstitious, I'd rather she have peace of mind than be a jumble of nerves).

SEPT 1

It was Labor Day today. I don't have much to write about. Our families came over for a cookout and Ashley really embarrassed me when my mom asked to see the basement. She said that it isn't a healthy place. I don't know why she tells people weird shit like that. My mom asked if it had mold. I does – some. Ashley doesn't know that, though. I write these notes down here in the little room where I keep my tools and knickknacks. She never comes here – hint, hint – so I figure it's a safe spot to keep my "feeling journal" (by the way, I talked to Dr. Jessica about it while Ashley was paying our counselling bill, and she thought it was a good idea; she wants me to not hide it from Ashley, but she said it might be good for me to have an emotional outlet, she called it). This place has mildew and mold and stuff on the walls, so I don't stick around very long, but – like I was saying – she doesn't know that. She looks at my mom and says "it has a poisonous energy." What the hell does that mean? My mom turns around and nods like it makes sense – she and my mom have a lot in common, and even though my mom isn't the mystical type, she has a weird respect for Ashley's random whims – but my sister gave her a look that said everything I was thinking. Later she asked me if we have considered medication for her bipolar disorder. We have, and sometimes we do, but right now the insurance isn't there for it, and so she's off the dope. My sister urged me to do something about it. She thinks that the basement has become what she called an "I.D. fix" [sic], or a fixating obsession, and that she might do some harm if she isn't dealt with. My sister of course remembers what happened to dad, and even though she isn't a psychiatrist, she is a nurse who works with some pretty messed up people. I didn't tell Ashley about any of this. I never would. I need them to get along. The families left and everything seemed all right, but I think I'm really annoyed about something. I couldn't fall asleep, so I waited until I heard her

snoring, and I left the bed to come down here. After all of Ashley's nuttiness it makes me feel brave in a half-joking way to come down here in the wee hours while everyone else is asleep. But not really. It's dark even with the lights on, but it's just a basement after all. No sign of the man with the hat, haha. That's about it. I should wrap this up and go back upstairs. If Ashley ever found out that I went down here she would – well, I don't know what. But she'd not be pleasant to be around.

#### SEPT 9

I came down here tonight because I couldn't sleep. Everything is going well between Ashley and I since Labor Day, so I don't know if there's really anything worth reporting. Maybe that is worth reporting – that we might be happy right now, and maybe we have a chance. I keep asking myself why I can't sleep, though. I'm worried, but I don't know about what. There's this sense that I have that we are being cased. I keep the .38 in my bedside table, and whenever I come down here (I come down a few nights each week and just sit. I don't always write, but tonight my mind seems like it's on the brink of something) I bring it with me – just in case. When I first bought the house I was mugged in the driveway, and I've never gone outside at night without my pistol. It has a sort of comfortable weight even though it's so small. That's the part about it that gives me the most peace whenever I think I'm seeing shadows moving along our fence, or hear slow steps easing along the flower beds – the weight of it. It's a reassuring thing to know that if a face were to slowly slide past the jamb of the door – I have such a clear picture of it (it starts out as just a bit of wispy hair that I barely notice, then a scalp catches the corner of my eye, then a grey, dry forehead followed by... God, I can't even talk about the eyes and what expression the mouth has). I guess it's nice to know that when I look up from writing to see him watching me like an escaped convict peering into a girl's steamy shower – God, I even thought I saw a shadow on this paper, like something was reading over my shoulder – I could smash its face open with a good squeeze of my finger.

#### SEPT 11

I honestly think Ashley's becoming contagious to the kids. As much as we're getting along, I have to say it pisses me off when they get scared because of her delusions. None of them will go downstairs to play when I tell them to clear out. It's too hot outside for them to mess around in the backyard, and the basement is like an ice box even in August, so I told them to stop running underfoot and to take their games to the basement. I can't even describe the way they reacted. I hate to think of the expression Ethan gave me – and I had expected him to have a head on his shoulders, being older and a boy. But his face – it was a look that I don't think I want to put words to. Something to forget. Something wrong for a boy his age to be feeling in a circumstance like that. It was as if – this is the only way I can express it – he was standing on a gallows and the noose had just been fit around his throat. The girl was even worse. I left the house. I've never been so ashamed of them.

#### SEPT 21



I came down here as soon as I heard her start to snore. It's becoming a bit of a nightly ritual. That might sound weird, but I'm sure that most men with a family will understand. My backyard neighbor spends all of his time in his tool shed, even in the winter. He plays a revolting country station, drinks beer and whiskey by himself, and keeps the door open. I hope he has some kind of a heater in that 10x4 clubhouse of his. There is no heater down here, though, so I don't know why I'm teasing him. It's cold, even in the summer it's enough to give you goosebumps. But I need a pressure valve, or I don't know what I'd do. I sometimes think I never really became a man – that I'm inadequate, a kind of half-developed child. I still feel the same way I did when my mom went outside to look for my dad and I went into the basement. I turn on the light and walk down the steps, and I can already smell his waste, and I know that I'm about to know something that my momma is supposed to protect me from, but I want to be big, I want to shoulder the pain that I somehow know is supposed to be kept from me, and even though every nerve in my body is revolting against the action, every muscle under my flesh keeps moving me forward, forward, down the steps, one by one, and I want to protect my mom from the feeling that has prickled my skin with terror, but I also want to be protected. I still haven't grown up from that day. I was half child and half man, and even though it was a huge leap then – I felt like a giant compared to my friends – it seems like such a depreciation now. I feel dwarfed and unmanned. I think I'm going to just turn the light out and try meditating down here. Dr. Jessica said that could help me when I feel these things.

OCT 2

This evening Ashley and I sent the kids to my mom's. We had the house all to ourselves, for the first time in six months, and we made love in a way that seemed to open all of the closed doors in our minds. It felt like airing out a house on the first warm day of spring, like fresh, dry, clean air was rushing through the stuffy rooms that have been locking up our relationship. Like sunlight was drying up all the mildew and rot and new air was gushing in through our pores. I felt the blood bursting through my arms and face and heart, bringing in oxygen and life to the flesh of my body that has been feeling so cold and dead for months. I've felt like a dirty shirt that gets dropped in the back of a closet and lays there for weeks in the shadow and dust, and for the first time in ages it was like I had been found, shaken out, washed, and pinned up on the clothesline in the summer air. She fell asleep an hour ago, and I left her naked in our bed to write about this wonderful feeling. I slipped into my robe and came down here after thinking about it for awhile – I figured since it was such a strong feeling that I should write about it – but now I'm wishing I had put on slippers and pajama pants. Now that summer is officially over, I'm starting to realize how cold it gets down here. For as much time as I spend here most nights, I think I should invest in a space heater. Anyway, I just thought that after all the stressful feelings and anger and confusion, it would be nice to talk about this wonderful rush of life that we just shared. The lightbulb is flickering pretty wildly down here (it actually went for half a minute just as I

finished that last sentence), so I think I'm going to end it here and go back upstairs to her.

OCT 8

Today was the first frost of the year. I really do think I am going to get a space heater down here. It gets terribly cold even in the day, even in the summer. I do all the actual washing and drying now because – thanks again to Ashley – the kids are terrified to be down here. They keep having nightmares about the man in the hat. Ashley, of course, won't even walk past the basement stairwell without holding her breath and looking at the ground, like some fucking little school girl. Yesterday night – or this morning, really – Ethan came into our room sobbing girlishly about this monster Ashley's created. He had a dream that every night the man gets out of the ground in the root cellar and walks up the basement steps, he checks the doors to make sure they're locked, then he turns to the stairs and walks up those without making any noise, and every night he stands on the landing and looks into each bedroom. First he looks into the girl's room, for a long time – looking at the bed and the girl in it – then he moves to Ethan's room, watching him for a long time – looking at the bed and the girl in it – then he moves to our room, watching us for a long time – looking at the bed and the couple in it – then he takes a step forward and walks soundlessly to my side of the bed and does something with his hand, and looks down at me for a long time, then he touches his neck under the chin like he is feeling for swollen lymph nodes or pressing lightly on a healing bruise – gingerly and thoughtfully – and then Ethan wakes up. He says this is the fifth time that he has had this dream, and I couldn't hold my anger in anymore because he was saying this in front of Ashley, who I have to be as protective of as Carly (you know, like keeping her from having nightmares and turning the station if a show gets too scary). Ashley was sitting up in bed staring at him, and I told him to stop it. I realize now that hitting him was horribly incorrect – I sent him to the floor when he didn't stop screaming about this boogey man of his – and Ashley (who has no trouble sending me to the floor) kicked me out of bed and made all the kids come into our room to sleep with her. I'm sure none of them are asleep. I'm sure they're all self-perpetuating their delusions now that I've been banished and all common sense is gone. I brought a blanket to the couch but went downstairs to write about this because I'm almost fed up with this.

Near Dawn, Same Morning

I had a strange dream. I suppose that's something I might as well admit – that is, that I've been having many strange dreams lately. Doctor Jessica says she doesn't buy into Freud or Jung. She says that dreams mean nothing and that there's nothing to our unconscious minds other than the odd wish fulfillment. I'd like to think that she's right, but I'm going to write this down just to get it out of my head. Like I said earlier, I was pretty steamed with Ashley and the kids, so I slept downstairs. Well, it wasn't long before I was asleep. Now, both in our room and in the living room we have these salt rock lamps; they're orangey-pink rocks with light bulbs in them that stay on 24/7. Ashley thinks they disemmanate [sic] some kind of healthy vapor that keeps us well – her hippie sister swears by them.

Anyway, they have a soft, orange light that is dim enough for us to sleep, but bright enough to see the room by. Well, in my dream I opened my eyes to darkness and it really spooked me. I didn't realize it was a dream, and I knew that if I opened my eyes to darkness it meant I was neither in the bedroom where I should be sleeping, or in the living room where I had been sleeping – no salt lamp light. Instead, I was in almost complete blackness. I was laying down on my back on what felt like old, uneven concrete. The air was thick and moldy, and my lungs stung each time I inhaled. I don't know how, but I had the feeling that something I wanted to hurt was above me, separated by space – as though, if I could levitate directly upwards – through matter and space – I would be standing beside something I wanted to do bad things to. But this is the weird thing – I didn't levitate, even though it was a dream and I could have. Instead, I stood up slowly. My feet were bare, and I felt more uneven concrete with cracks and warps in it, but I began to walk in spite of the blindness, and eventually my feet felt rough wooden steps – and I began to rise from the cold thick air into cool, clean air. I now began to see light – from a street lamp, through a window – and feel tiles, and then hard wood. I moved on and was in a room covered in thick carpet that rubbed coarsely on my feet, lit dimly by a cold orange light coming from one corner. I was now at the foot of another stair – this one covered with the same carpet – and was climbing it, moving towards the thing I wanted to stop and hurt. A landing. Another flight of steps? No, only three, then a landing and a hallway. Three doors. Each holds an enemy. Each needs to be entered and dominated with my will. I know where to start. I open the door. The light is orange and dim – not too dim: I can make out the bed. It has two oblong shapes in it. I know what to do. I know who they are. I know the closest one best. He knows me – has always known me. I reach my hand to him – in the orange light I can see my hand; the skin is not a wholesome color. I know why that is, and he – if he understood – could tell you why, too.

This is all I remember.

OCT 10

I have never been so afraid. Not afraid like Ashley and the kids – of boogeymen and witches – but of my body and mind. This morning, around four, I woke up looking at my house. I was outside in my pajamas, standing on the pavement, and my heart was pounding as if I had been in a sprint. I opened my eyes to see it there – dark yellow in the sour lamplight, with its black window-eyes and its door open like a hungry mouth. Why was I outside? What was my intention? Where were the kids? I mounted the porch and entered my home like a thief or an insurgent – as unaware of its contents as the driver who passes by it on his way from another city to another city. I was now in darkness, except for the salt lamp I wrote about earlier. Orange light smoothed away some of the shadows. But what was this? Something standing at the foot of the stairs – black and menacing and postured towards me with square shoulders and a tilted, lolling head. I took a step towards it like a man ready to throw himself into the arms of a cougar as a sacrifice to distract it from his family. But it was all shadow and dust – nothing

more. But then there were footsteps, pounding and desperate – did they come from below me or above me, I wondered. But it was a senseless fancy – of course they were from above. And now they were on the stairs, and there was Ashley with a bat, and my spirit fermented with love and hate as she made eye contact with me – long, deep eye-contact, full of recognition – before she heaved the bat overhead and swung it into my ribs with all her weight. And then she was on top of me, but this time I felt her tears and her hot face rubbing against my cold skin. She held me like a little boy whose mother has just given him a beating for running away: my body ached, but by soul felt wanted.

OCT 12

More strange dreams. More sleep walking. This morning, around four, I woke up and didn't know where I was. I looked down and saw Ethan sleeping under his race-car blanket. My first thought was that he was too old for that kind of thing; I thought about how I sometimes resented him and resented how Ashley sometimes made me feel and look like less of a man around him; resented how my son couldn't possibly respect me. I respected my dad up until I found him in our basement – found him with his bladder and bowels released (people don't realize bodies do that after death; I guess I knew because it had happened to our cat when we put it to sleep, so I wasn't surprised) and his neck and tongue and eyes... Well, at any rate, I looked down at him and saw the curse of my masculinity – a failed god watching over the worshipper who will one day rebel and replace him – and I raised my hand to my face to stifle angry sobs. I felt something soft. I was holding my flannel bathrobe belt – wrapped tightly around my hand. The other end was wrapped around by left hand, leaving two feet of slack in between. It was odd, too, because I wasn't even wearing my robe. Something about this materiality – the real, non-dream-world sensations of touch and logic – brought me fully awake and I looked back down at Ethan. I realized that the reason I resented those cars was because I was so afraid of the day that he would become a man – the day when he would no longer be in my protection. I wanted him to be young forever. I didn't want to disappoint him. I loved him so, so much. I didn't want him to wake up and see a man looking at him, so I checked the windows, closed his door, and went down here to write about it.

OCT 20

Things have been great with Ashley all week. I can't believe how much our work with Dr. Jessica has helped. I've never felt closer to her or the kids. I think I might be able to wrap this journal up soon. I just wish I could get better sleep. Three nights out of seven I wake up and I'm sleep walking. Usually I'm heading towards the basement or just leaving it. I have no clue why my sleep-self is so determined to go there (especially now; as the seasons move on it's become less of a cool retreat from the sun and more of a reeking ice-box) other than the fact that it's kind of become my man-cave. Dr. Jessica thinks it might represent something to me from my childhood (and she said she didn't care for Freud) – something that I either want to return to, to hide from the future, or need to return to, to confront the past.

OCT 22

Another weird sleep walk to the kids' room. This time I woke up around 3:30 and I was standing over Carly. This time was better, though. I just felt some confusion, and then I was glad that she seemed to be sleeping well. I had a little jump when I looked up at her vanity mirror (one of the shadows in the room was shaped like a man, so that when I saw my reflection it looked like someone was standing behind me), but I went to bed and tried to find some sleep. Odd thing, though: when I sat down I felt something hard in my pocket – it was my dad's old Army pocket knife. I went to put it back in the cigar box where I keep relics like that, but before I did I found that it had something stuck in it. I opened the blade. Bits of hair. I felt in my pajama pocket. I found a lock of Carly's blond hair. I flushed it down the toilet. It was a small enough lock that Ashley won't notice it, but if she ever knew what I did in my sleep, I can't imagine what she'd do.

OCT 27

Ashley gets worse during Halloween season. She reads more and listens to podcasts, and all of her podcasts and books are the same: spiritualist, mystical, hippy-dippy bullshit. I'm not a religious man or a spiritual one (Ashley is both). I haven't been to a church or a séance in decades, plural. I don't go to my children's baptisms or funeral services. I believe in science, in reason, in logic and sense and physics. I put up with Ashley's provincial superstitions because I care about her and I don't want to put her down or insult her intelligence, but when she takes the kids and leaves the house... Well, I just don't what to do about it. I've endured all the talk about her French gypsy ancestor who was spirited away by the Wendigo in the Tennessee hill country, and the Egyptian metaphysician who deserted Napoleon to become a voodoo priest, the Welsh witch, the Spanish medium, and the Hungarian alchemist. All of them can go to hell. She's left. She found out about the sleep walking. I was dumb enough to explain it when she noticed the gash in Carly's hair (it was easy to miss, but she was testing out a princess hairdo for her Halloween costume and found it). She told me that the kids won't even tell her about their nightmares anymore (probably for the best: her hysteria is what's feeding them). Ethan said the man in the hat now stands at the end of his bed with his back to the street light and watches him without moving, with his head rolled awkwardly to the side. Ashley said she had a nightmare that she was too ashamed (she was: she blushed to her roots) of to tell even to me. She just said that it was a hideous thing to imagine happening to a woman in a room across the hall from her sleeping children, or to any woman. She won't spend the "Hallow-Mass" in the same house as "that basement with that man." She's taking them across town to her cousin's, and she had the gall to ask me to leave with them. As if I would leave my home for a whole week to hide from a child's dream.

OCT 29

The house is quiet now. Once I refused to join her and the kids, Ashley went livid and won't answer my calls anymore. She thought a night alone would put "sense into my head" (as if that's something I LACK and she has a SURPLUS of. Ha!!), but when I still stood firm, she wailed over the phone and muttered

something about “understanding it now,” as if she had just solved a puzzle that she didn’t like the answer to. I say she went livid, but it was really more of wailing and moaning, not so much anger. But I have to be a good example to the kids. When they’re older I’ll teach them to love their mom, but to take her superstitions to the curb. It’ll be a sad thing for her to deal with, but the kids have to learn that this kind of stuff leads to a mushy intellect. Before she hung up – between the hysterics – she wanted to know how I was sleeping. I said fine. And I was. The other night I woke up only once (good compared to last week) to find myself standing at the top of the basement stairs, looking down.

*[At this point the writing changes. It becomes more scraggly and rushed. Some words have to be guessed at. He no longer records dates, although police evidence suggests that they all occur between the evening of October 30 and the early morning hours of All Souls Day, November 2].*

Was startled awake just before falling asleep, and now I can’t sleep. I was closing my eyes (I’ve mentioned my bedroom has a salt lamp that’s always on, even when we sleep), when something passed between me and the lamp. I know because even with my eyes closed, my eyelids let in a very dim, red glow. Just seconds after I closed them, my eyelids went black for a second, then back to red. I shot up and looked around, but there was nothing there so I went back to the pillow and closed my eyes. Cozy, soft red light – then black, as if someone had walked in front of the lamp – a lamp that is four feet to my left. I tried to ignore it, but – have you ever felt like you were closing your eyes to avoid seeing something that might be there? It’s a sort of Schrodinger’s cat allegory: while your eyes are closed, something is both there and not there. Well, I kept my eyes closed all night, and didn’t sleep for a second.

*[The following appears to be a separate entry]*

There is a man in a hat that comes out of the basement to look at me and my family when they are asleep.

He is tall with wide shoulders. It is hard to explain how he’s dressed – I can’t even explain what kind of hat he has, if you can believe that. He is a periphery blur – an imposing, towering thing that stands between me and the light. I fell asleep from exhaustion today around five in the afternoon. It is a very dry, very overcast day – dark well through two or three – with lots of shadow and dust hanging in the air. I fell asleep sitting on the couch. When I woke up, an hour later, I was standing at the top of the basement stairs, looking down into its darkness. Some scant rays of sickly light glinted on the steps and wall, but it was terribly murky. I almost turned away – I was used to the tableau, after all, and just assumed it was what Dr. Jessica had said: I kept returning to the basement to hide from the stresses of the future – of my strained marriage, of my impressionable son, of my insecurities and fears. But as my eyes adjusted to the darkness they were considering immersing in, I saw its outline, and the white face under the brim was just lit well enough from the sides to indicate the heavy jaw, sharp cheeks, and hard nose. Everything else was muddled in darkness under the brim of a black hat, and swallowed up in

clothes that were impossible to make out for their dark color. It was as if he rose up from the floor of that place, like he was another extension of it – another shadow caught in its deepness – and for a moment I thought I was looking at my reflection, and I don't know which thought was more horrifying. It was a face that – even though I couldn't see it – seemed familiar and instinctive, like the face of an old bully which has been changed by aged, but immediately taps into its archetype in your imagination, or hearing the voice of a strict teacher at your hometown supermarket twenty years after you've last seen them, but immediately feeling fear and submission surge in your spirit.

I ran as quickly as I could to the closet and found my gun in the shoebox at the top. The bullets were in a box on top of the fridge, and I flung on the lights, charging down the stairs with a loaded revolver and a deep sense of denial. I knew that it was not a burglar, but I couldn't sleep another second in a house with my children's nightmare loose in it, and I desperately threw myself around corners, under the stairs, into crannies, and behind storage bins, hoping to see a crouching felon or an armed lunatic, but there was nothing.

I've brought my journal back with me. If I need to say anything, I won't be able to do it if it's in the basement. I can't bring myself to go there again.

I'm checking into a motel. My cell is dead now, and Ashley has both chargers. I don't know where her cousin lives.

*[Another separate entry is supposed here, although there is, again, no date]*

I don't know what to do. I don't know where to turn. I don't know who to ask for help. I checked into a motel across town. Fifteen minutes ago, I woke up in my bed on North A— Boulevard. I had my clothes on and a receipt from the motel desk. The key card is not with me. I think I turned it in. Our bed faces the doorway, and I can see out into the landing. Our room is still bathed in soft orange light, and the door is opened – a black rectangle. But it is not an empty vacuum – he is there, standing just at the threshold, just barely casting his shadow on the jambs and carpet, but he is there. And I can hear him. Gibbering, squeaking, gargling through his crushed throat – mumbled, rubbery laughter that is just loud enough to be heard, just soft enough to be written off, but I have no doubt. And now I know. Now I am convinced. Like Ashley, I understand. I am too afraid to get up to turn on the lights. I am writing this by the salt lamp only. God knows if it's even legible, but I need to have it written. I need to have something to do other than think. For the first time in my life I can't find any comfort in my mind – it seems as much a fragile wonderland of moonlight, fog, and cobwebs as Ashley's superstitions. And those are no comfort either. I don't know anything about them, but I don't think they are powerful enough for this thing. I tried to recite the Lord's Prayer. But I don't know the words.

I fell asleep. I didn't mean to. I didn't mean for any of this to happen. I want to protect my kids. I know what will happen if they come back here tomorrow and I'm still alive. I'm not to be me, if they come. I'm not to be myself. I'm to be something else, something older, something deadier, something I've known all my

life – and hated. I know who he is. I know what he is. I know what he wants. He wants more of what he started, more of what he buried in me – a corpse or a seed? – that day that I found him twisting in slow circles by his belt. It wasn't her that he hated. It was me. It was me, just like I looked down on Ethan and saw the breathing, dreaming embodiment of everything that I had failed at – and everything that I stood to continue to fail at. I fell asleep. I woke up in the spare room under the office where I had been coming for so many weeks – the man-cave, the retreat, the sanctuary. Now it's the palace of my terrors. Dr. Jennifer was right. But I didn't initiate the confronting, so I've lost the power. I've lost. I woke up in pitch darkness and crawled out on my hands and knees, shivering, crying, terrified. I found the stairs and stood to make a dash for the door, but now I was standing at the foot of the steps... and he was there, looking down at me from the top – looking with his wrenched neck and cocked head. I left before he could take a step down. I don't think my mind could survive seeing him move, and so far I haven't. I found my way back here and turned on the bulb. It is a low light, but it is the greatest comfort to me.

I have one more comfort. I have this journal, which I am going to hide here for Ashley to find. If he finds it – if he becomes me – he will destroy it. I love you, Ashley, and I love our babies. I'm so sorry. So sorry. So sorry. So sorry. I have to face him. You know that. Knew that. Understood that. Now I have to go to him, otherwise our babies will be in danger. They already are. Already have been – of being garroted, having their throats opened – and so have you – I can't even imagine, don't ever want to imagine, in what manner. And he doesn't live here in this house. That's why he found me at the motel. He lives with me. Wherever I go. Anywhere I hide, he will find the cold, dark basement in my life, and make camp there. He will sleep and strengthen and hibernate until he is able to climb the stairs and find me. And when he finds me, he will find you. I can't let him do that, but I'm so scared. I'm so, so scared. I have only one chance to escape now, because I am his prisoner in this basement. He stood at the top of the stairs. I've since heard him move down it step by step, and even now I know he is within reach of the door here. I have one chance to protect you from him – from me. I still have the pistol. I can still defend you and our dears. But I have to stop writing. I see darkness piling at the door, and every time I look up, I imagine I see its white face sliding into view. And I can't see that. I can't survive that. To see that expression, to see those eyes – things that I've been lucky to have hidden from me – my mind can't survive that. But my body can. And I can't let that happen either. Only a few more words then I have to hide this away from him. I feel him on the other side of the door, and I know that at any moment I'm going to look up and see h





# THE MAESTRO'S CURSE

— Arel Koehler

It was about four o' clock in the afternoon in *Pleumeur-Bodou* in Brittany, when Yann Le Goff, the postmaster of that village, brought a telegraph to Dr Hugh MacLeod, a young scholar from Glasgow with family ties to Berneray (Sound of Harris), who was just having a cup of tea at the local hostelry, the *Hôtel du Granit Rosé*.<sup>1</sup> *Côte du Granit Rosé*, "Red Granite Coast", was this whole area's by-name. Doctor MacLeod took another sip of tea and read the message. After having gone through it in the batting of an eyelid, his face took a grave expression, and it was obvious that he was fairly shaken. "What happened, dear friend?" Yann asked in Breton, his mother tongue, which Hugh MacLeod had grown fluent in, though it belonged to another branch of the Celtic languages, and was quite different to the Gaelic Hugh and his brother had acquired on their parents' knees. "Bad news, dear Yann" replied Hugh in the same language, "my father was murdered in a way not yet entirely clear, and my brother Norman was institutionalised in Edinburgh where he worked as a police detective!" "Mother Mary!" exclaimed Yann, "now that is bad news!" "Aye" said Hugh, "it appears that he was in pursuit of the people who killed my father!" "And he went mad as a result" said Yann, "the poor wretch! Why did they let him take any action in this at all? Is it not unusual for a police investigator to engage in a murder case which concerns his own kin? That's how it is over here, anyway – that another police officer must be engaged in his place!" "Well" said Hugh, "it is like that in Scotland, and all over Britain, too. But Rory Cook, the man who sent me this telegraph, says that my brother investigated the case, anyway..." "And who is this Rory Cook?" "He is a colleague of my brother's on the force in Edinburgh." "If that is so, why did he not hinder your brother to engage in this case at all?" "It is because Rory was not merely a colleague to my brother, but he's his pal, as well." "Oh really?" said Yann quite sceptical, "but as a colleague and a mate, one would think that yon Rory were reasonable and professional enough to keep information from your brother, so he would find peace and rest!" "Ah, indeed" said Hugh, "that is not that easy...anyway, be that as it may, dear Master Yann, I shall have to return home by the first steamer sailing to Britain, as to acquire more knowledge on what really happened!" "Good luck to you, young Doctor MacLeod!" said Yann Le Goff, and left.



At his brother's house in Edinburgh, Hugh glared at Rory Cook. "Why on earth did you let Norman take up this case at all? Is it not illegal for police folk to have any business with murder cases that are too personal for them? And why, and by whom was our father murdered in the first place?" "Easy, lad, easy" said Rory, "one

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<sup>1</sup> This means "Red Granite Hotel" in English.

by one, castles are built and big issues solved – if they can be solved at all!” “And what does that mean now?” Hugh asked, his eyes ablaze anew. “Now, *Ùisdein*” said Rory, “I understand your anger and your grief, but that is of no use just now! You must have patience! Won’t ye sit down and pour yerself a big dram, I have something to show to you!” Rory passed him a letter, and a newspaper. Hugh looked at the newspaper first, and what was it but the *Scotsman* of the week before? He saw the article in question right on the first page, and read:

*“Great unrest in a pub in Grassmarket: policeman firing at landlord!*

*On Wednesday evening, 11 October 1924, Inspector Norman MacLeod – the son of the renowned music professor John Angus MacLeod – fired three bullets at George Hastie, landlord at the public house ‘The Rollicking Pooch’ in Grassmarket, at the corner of Cowgate. As it is reported, Mr Hastie was just about to put a new disk on the gramophone when Mr MacLeod went maniac as the gramophone played ‘Ole Miss Rag’ by the American composer W.C. Handy.*

*That was not the first incident that was heard about the MacLeods, as Mr MacLeod’s father disappeared under yet undisclosed circumstances a mere week before the current outrage!”*

“So, my father thus died a week and a half ago, then? But why did my dear Norman not let me know back then?” “He could not, dear friend. But ere ye rage and rant at me again, and me not the guilty party at all, won’t ye read this letter your brother left you, afraid that something ill might occur to him?” Hugh sighed heavily. “Ah well” he said, “all right then, if it brings more light into the matter...” “Dear Friends and Relations,

*if you are indeed reading this letter, it must be because I am either gone for good, or my mind and my wits are broken beyond repair and rescue. But I need to pass the following knowledge on to you, no matter how unbelievable the ill things that have occurred to my dear father and myself may sound, so at least a few of you may understand the danger we were in, and possibly everyone else of our kin may still be in; as vengeful spirits know no rest – and it is that kind of spirits that brought us down in a manner so harsh and hateful that neither of us, my poor father nor myself, can ever return among the living!*

*And I really hate to admit that my father was to blame for bringing down this misfortune which was in store for us: a year ago, he expelled a skilful scholar and musician from the university’s board of music, as he had come to know that this gifted man was involved in Jazz and Ragtime music, the new-fashioned music from America. Now, I have myself grown fond of this new style of music that is now being played by every band in the big and popular hotels in Edinburgh and Glasgow, etc. But my father was ever too traditional in such a dour way, and though he put up with worldly Gaelic music right enough, it always showed in his musical taste that his folk over in the Isle of Berneray were elders of the kirk. He himself was never as religious as most of his kin, but it was never easy for him to shed his puritan heritage, and he would not stand Jazz, as much as I told him that the origins of this music were not that different from Gaelic music, in a way, and that it were influenced by classical music these days, too. He would not listen to reason, though, despite my telling him that even renowned*

composers of Claude Debussy's ilk and other famous classical musicians of our days were influenced by Jazz. But he would not have it...Anyway, it was yon narrow-minded attitudes that made him chase Thomas Kennedy from the board he presided over, and thus ruin that young man's career. Thomas took it very badly, and before he committed suicide, he visited his uncle Egbert who had always been a scholar of the occult. Providence only knows what Egbert MacCulloch suggested to his sister's son, but it is obvious that Thomas Kennedy sealed a covenant with one of the demons even darker than every devil in hell!

As it happened, Thomas had ever been a skilled inventor, and he was very fond of mechanical musical instruments in the manner of the pianola. He would construct them himself, and his whole pride among them was an orchestrion playing the tune W.C. Handy had composed in the second year of the Great War, viz. 'Ole Miss Rag'. And that very instrument is largely connected to the horrible ordeal my father and I went through; for it was that device he used to exact his curse upon my father and his kin: Apparently, his soul was closely connected to this machine, and in yon contract he made with the demon his ghastly uncle had summoned from whatever place beyond hell, it was written that his spirit would still dwell within the machine after sacrificing his body to the demon. At this point of the account, I should hasten to add that Thomas Kennedy had hired one really odd servant before his suicide. It is questionable whether he belonged to the world of mortals at all, or whether he rather originated from the realm of the demon his master had sealed a covenant with. A fortnight before my father disappeared from the world of the living, yon creature came to our house, as we were having a srùbag<sup>2</sup> together. That was the first merry afternoon we had together at my father's house since our mother passed away with cancer a year ago, and it was a long time since on yon day that I had seen him as pleased as a puppy.

When yon gnome rang our doorbell, he looked ordinary enough, wearing fashionable clothes of our time, a Homburg on his hat and a pin-striped dark blue suit, even though he had a face like Max Schreck in his mask as Nosferatu, or so it looked to me, anyway; but a hairdo like Buster Keaton's. My father did not have the slightest suspicion when yon gnome invited him to an exhibition of mechanical music instruments, for – strange as it may be – although he would not put up with Jazz, he was open-minded enough to that kind of thing. My warnings as to yon wee goblin he would not heed, as if yon creature had already cast his spell over him. He would not say anything but that I should not judge people by their looks, police officer on or off – but it was not yon gnome's likeness that made me wary. It was his aura...and from that day my father took the invitation to yon mysterious show, he was no longer seen among the living. For as soon as he arrived at the venue of yon strange "exhibition", he was tied to a chair, and the orchestrion started playing endlessly – 'Ole Miss Rag' over and over again, all day and every day that my poor father had to languish in yon dreadful place in a remote part of town at the foot of Corstorphine Hill...Maybe he was untied after a wee while, or a day, as he could not escape from yon place anyway, as I

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<sup>2</sup> tea and cake (Gaelic srùbag = "gulp, drop", pron. [stroobug]).

experienced myself soon enough: not only was that abysmal orchestrion under spells, but the whole damn place, and even my poor father, as soon as he got into that house. I doubt whether he got food at all, mad and devilish as yon man had grown during the bitter days he had got through my father...and his maternal uncle, Egbert, was hellish wicked anyway, and far too skilled in the dark arts than any man should ever be! As for the dwarf with Nosferatu's face on him, he was not capable of any pity or mercy – and he did not give a docken about human good and civil manners, anyway! And thus, my poor father died of starvation and a cursed perpetual orchestrion!

Now, one would think that Egbert and yon ill-boding gnome were bad enough already, and that yon infernal trio, Egbert, the gnome and Thomas Kennedy himself who still lived on as the spirit of the orchestrion, were the worst lot – but they were not, and I should not fail to mention one who was even more dangerous, and that was Rose, Thomas Kennedy's girlfriend. Demonic as he was in his revenge, she was even more demonic in extending the Maestro's curse upon Professor MacLeod's son – for she was the one who mowed me down, as I was investigating my father's disappearance: I happened upon her right after I had taken on my father's case in spite of everyone else's arguments against policemen tampering with cases they are themselves too involved in on a personal level. But she bumped into me unawares, and I had no clue that she was the lover of the music master I was in pursuit of. And little did I know at that time that I was up against supernatural forces, still thinking I were investigating an ordinary murder. It is a shame that I wasn't born with the second sight, and was raised in a family rejecting everything supernatural, connections to Gaeldom or not – possibly I had then been more aware of my adversaries' fighting methods.

Anyway, I was having a pint after having called an end to yet another long and unsatisfactory workday, as a bonnie and fashionable young lass in flapper style came in. It did not take long until she came over to me and started a conversation with me. I was surprised of the interest she was taking in me, what on earth made her – a lass like her – seek the company of an old bachelor on the force? Aye, it was surprise I felt, but no suspicion...I had no suspicion at all back then that yon lass was out to complete her lover's revenge and bring about my ruin. I was merely contemplating a famous song of our time when she started talking to, and even flirting with me: 'She's funny that way', ye know? "I'm not much to look at, not much to see [...], I've got a woman who's crazy for me – she's funny that way!" Well, if I had only been more cautious and suspicious back then, perhaps I'd still be alive and well, but that is not how it went...and yon lass ignited my fancy, with her dark brown bob according to the latest fashion, the hue of her face so braw and white as the snow of one winter's night, her rosy cheeks...one would think she were a Gaelic lass, a beautiful Barrach<sup>3</sup> or Hearach,<sup>4</sup> but it was apparent from the accent in her English that she was from the States. She told me that she were from Arkham County in Massachusetts, in

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<sup>3</sup> Barrach [baarach] = person from the Isle of Barra.

<sup>4</sup> Hearach [herrach] = person from Harris.

*Miskatonic Valley...and that she belonged to an ancient family there. I know too well now where she was actually from, and who her kin were<sup>5</sup>...she had told me the truth right enough, but I had never been to Massachusetts nor anywhere else in the States, and therefore, I had no idea that her people had always been witches and warlocks, and that I was not to trust her ever at all! It must have been through Egbert MacCulloch that Thomas Kennedy first met yon woman, as he was quite the person to welcome the likes of her within his four walls! Anyway, she invited me to join her and follow her to her house where I would receive more hospitality, and good music, and where she could provide me with more information that would help me solve my investigation – well, I got those three things at her lodgings right enough, but not in any way I expected:*

*After a night full of passion and tenderness, I awoke to a reality hard to deal with. When the two of us had taken breakfast, I arose to leave, but she told me that she had something to show to me. There was an odd taste to my tea, and that was the last thing I noticed before I fell into a swoon. When I awoke again, I found myself hog-tied to a chair in the room of the orchestrion, and her facing me with an evil grin so demonic that it was hard to believe she was not wearing a mask, instead of her own pretty face...Even though I had never been in yon cursed house before, I knew that I was now captive in the house where my father was murdered! And I had hardly considered that, when yon demonic woman said that she had something to show to me – as if she were capable of reading one's mind! She showed me a chair I had not noticed before and which was covered by a dark blanket. She took away the blanket, and who did I see full of horror but my father's corpse staring at me blankly. She uttered an ugly laughter. "Are you enjoying your company?" she asked with cold-hearted mirth. I could not stand the sight of my father's corpse for long, having already grown malodorous – there was a vile reek all over the room, but yon woman was apparently oblivious to that...as if she had no nose at all.*

*Then, as long as she put on the orchestrion, she untied me, telling me with an evil grin that it were of no use to keep me fettered – I could not get away from that house anyway! I did not know what she was playing at back then, but I would learn soon enough. After she had told me that, and put the orchestrion on again, she left and would not show up again. I was then on my own, and there was nothing else in the room but my father's corpse and the cursed machine playing 'Ole Miss Rag' non-stop, all day and every day. Sometimes, I would get a glass of water and a bowl of porridge from yon gnome, but I would not get away from yon place: once or twice, I attempted to escape. And that was when the horror really began – escaping would be of no use to me, as Rose had told me before: every time when I went out of yon room, I would get to a long corridor where there was but little light from dim lamps. I would follow that corridor until I reached another door. When I first arrived at that door, I thought that freedom lay in store for me, but...I was far wrong: where did I get but into the orchestrion room once more where my father's corpse was festering and growing*

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<sup>5</sup> In fact, the young lady was a cousin of Asenath Waite. The author.

ever more rotten by the hour. How late was it, though? And what time was it anyway? I did not know that after a few hours, my perception of time entirely lost! It must have been only a short while gone past in the world of the living, but in the demonic dungeon where I was held captive, it was like many days, and even months, had passed. I was worried I might lose my wits and go insane, and it was obvious that that was the very thing Thomas Kennedy and Egbert MacCulloch had envisaged. O aye, but I was only in a swoon yet, until the day Egbert himself came to see me, together with his goblin, to find out whether he might find a poor wretch going as mad as he was himself, anyway. Now, I had no clue as to how daft I had indeed gone already, but I had sworn myself since I had landed in yon black hole in the first place that I would not do them the favour to yield to them and go insane, in spite of whatever they did to me – I must now admit that it was not at all easy, though, to make a good stand against them keeping myself sane and wholesome in my mind, and maybe I am now failing after all – but it was worth it! At the end of the day, I vanquished Egbert, his nephew and his servant, and avenged myself and my poor father upon them...I noticed that I still had my gun, my trusty Webley revolver, every chamber of it charged, and I wondered why yon woman had not noticed it...but that did not matter now.

With his ugly grin, Egbert asked me whether I liked the tune which Thomas – the orchestrion, and his nephew – was playing. “So, what exactly are ye hinting at?” I said, “And what business do I have with this matter, anyway? Just because I am Professor MacLeod’s son? Well, I have a brother, and I still have a way to make sure that you will not harm him, too!” And as long as I spoke these words, I was drawing my gun, sliding it out of the holster. Their eyes widened in terror, but Egbert still held his ugly grin. He did not manage to speak another word, though, for it was then that I showered them well with bullets, shot by shot – two for Egbert, two for the gnome, and the remainder for the orchestrion. After that, I reached into the right pocket of my jacket, trying to find another roll of bullets. Strange as it seemed to me after all that happened to me, I found one – and I recharged the revolver to discharge the same amount of lead at Egbert, his servant and the orchestrion all over again. After that, I took a closer look at the two men whether they were indeed dead. It looked like they were. And the damned orchestrion was quiet at last.

I opened the door – and for the first time since I got to yon cursed house, I did not get to the corridor I had now grown too familiar with. But I got to a flight of stairs which took me to the front door at last. I ran outside, and left yon house behind as soon as I still could. Although I was still in pretty much of a swoon, I still knew that the house was somewhere at the foot of Corstorphine Hill...I made for Corstorphine Road, and as soon as I got there, I took a tram that would take me to the centre. I did not notice anything suspicious on that way, but that it was early in the evening, though I did not know which date it was, nor anyway which day.

As soon as I reached the town centre, I left the tram at St Cuthbert’s Kirkyard at the foot of the Castle, walking up Lothian Road and King’s Stables towards Grassmarket as quickly as I could, as if the legions of hell were at my heels, and maybe they were – I still do not know why I was walking that way, but I was seeking an alehouse where I could gather enough steam to drive the images of my ordeal in that

ill-boding house from my mind. But that was not to happen...When I got inside yon pub, 'The Rollicking Pooch', in Grassmarket, I knew that something was wrong, seeing a bonnie young lass talking to the landlord when I had just come through the door. And aye, after downing four pints, I was feeling even odder instead of growing more comfortable – there must have been something in each pint I got that did not belong to mash, or to water either. But something was yet to happen that was far worse to me than the bad taste on my tongue: there was no live music yon night as was customary in that alehouse, but a gramophone was playing. And suddenly, the mouthful I had just sipped getting stuck in my thrapple<sup>6</sup>, I heard yon tune that had grown as ill-boding to me as the house over in Drumbrae where I had been held for many days and hours I could not grasp anymore, in the company of my father's corpse, and yon tune being played without end by Thomas Kennedy in the shape of the orchestrion he had constructed himself...until I put an end to it with my revolver – but had the effort all been in vain? Was the evil spirit of yon man still after me? Was the maestro's curse still holding me enthralled? I drew forth the revolver, and fired shot for shot at the gramophone...and the next thing I noticed after waking from the stupor I was in was a padded room in this loonie bin where I am now held captive..."

Hugh shivered when he had read his brother's letter all through, and said nothing but "A Thì Bheannaichte! A Rìgh nan Gràs!"<sup>7</sup> His face had grown pale, and Rory gave him a glass of water and a wee dram to refortify him. After he had grown better, he said: "Dear Rory, I would like to visit my brother in the institution, please! I would like to see him!" After Hugh had said that, it was Rory who jumped. "Are ye sure, lad?" he said, "Are ye no' feeling bad enough yet, by the look of it?" "I am indeed, but he is my brother! I ought to call on him, even if he were in a bad state!" "Aye, right, but as fine as I know Norman, he'd rather you remembered him as ye last saw him, and as he ever was in his days..." "I agree with you right enough, Rory, my man, but what would you do if he were your own brother?" "Aye, another point for you, lad – I would do the same if I were in your place, and I do not want to keep ye from it, 'tis just an advice I have for you. But I shall go with you to yon loonie bin tomorrow just to make sure there's no danger for you!" "Thank you, Rory, you're welcome, I appreciate that!"



Dr Simpson's Hospital was a grim place, but at the end of the day, all asylums are grim places, and to be locked up in them is no laughing matter. Of course, Hugh hated to see his brother imprisoned in that kind of institution. And although he expected to happen upon fearsome screams and poor wretches salivating, or going through their fits of mad rage, he had an odd feeling when he got inside with Rory. He was growing ever more nervous and tense, as if another evil thing were to happen, and the danger were not quite over for poor Norman, and

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<sup>6</sup> throat (Scots).

<sup>7</sup> "O Blessed One! O King of the Graces!" (ScotG)

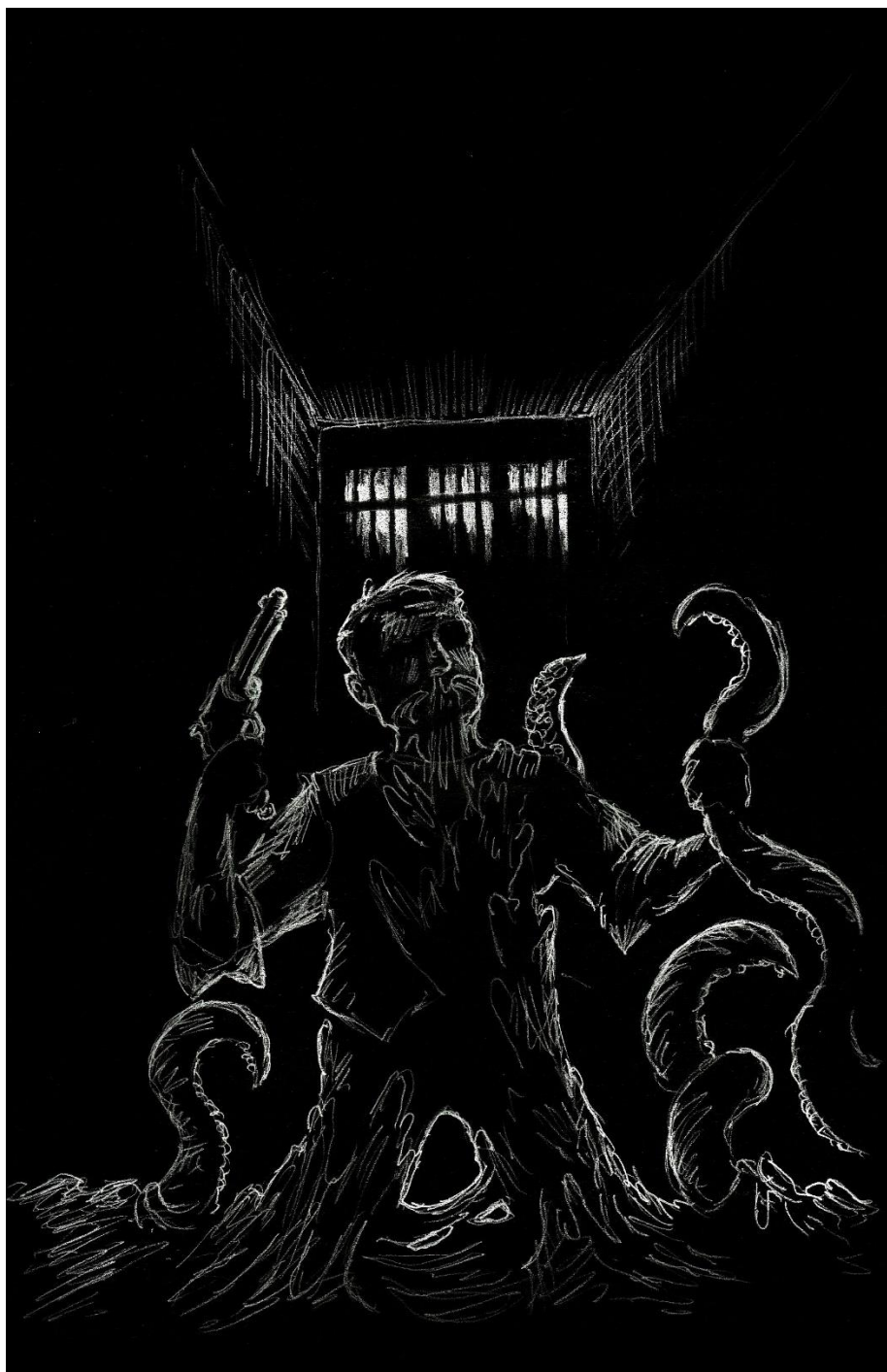
even for himself. He got proof for that ill premonition as soon as they bumped into a stern and harsh nurse. "Who're youse lookin' for?" she said, "Have youse made an appointment with one of the doctors at all to obtain allowance to see anyone?" But Rory was used to that kind of behaviour, having grown familiar enough with it in the plenty of years he had been serving on the police force already. "I'm Inspector Cook of the Crime Investigation Unit of Edinburgh Police" he replied in a firm and forward voice, and he showed her his shining mark and identification card. "We are for visiting my poor partner, Detective Norman MacLeod, who is being held here just now. This young learned man who's with me here is his brother. It is important that we get to his room without delay!" The nurse had grown a wee bit shier, but still she would not give in, and now she even showed concern in her expression. "Ye must not call on him just now" she said, "you must not! Dr O Shea is seeing him just now, and a lady student of mental health from America is with him." Hugh and Rory exchanged a glance. "O really?" Rory said warily and inquisitively, "Is she from America, the woman who's with the worthy doctor? What does she look like, then?" The nurse was really worried now, if not afraid. "We-ell" she said slowly, and insecurely. "Well?" said Rory, growing impatient and tense. "Make haste, Nurse MacKinnon – it appears that something evil is about to happen in this hospital!" "Er, well, she is a young dark-haired bonnie one – aye, she's bonnie right enough in her shape, but she's minding me of a fish around her eyes..." "*Gu sealladh orm!*"<sup>8</sup> exclaimed Rory, "she's got the blood of the Deep Ones in her veins! It must be Rose, Thomas Kennedy's girlfriend – now the music's all over the fiddle!<sup>9</sup> Tell the security staff of the hospital right now, Nurse! And I need to phone! Right now, without dilly-dally! Oh-oh! I need to phone the next police station for reinforcement! Detective MacLeod is in grave and fatal danger – or anyway, what is still left of him, poor wretch he is...and, Hugh, don't you separate from me just now – you must be in danger, too! But yer brother is in high emergency! She's the one that took yer brother to yon cursed house in the first place – the one he mentioned in the letter, and where yer father was killed, too!" "Woe's me" Hugh said, "we must hurry!" Within a few minutes, Nurse MacKinnon returned with a squad of the hospital's security staff, and they made for Norman's room, Rory and Hugh heading the little force. On the way to Ward Eight, Rory asked the nurse whether Dr O Shea's lady student were carrying anything suspicious. She replied that she were carrying a kind of box beneath her arms, similar to a gramophone box. "*A Thì Bheannaichte!*" exclaimed Hugh, burying his face with his right hand. "Yon witch has brought the tune of curse with her, and is now trying to drive him entirely off the rails – if he still has anything of his wits at all..." "I don't understand a word of what ye're trying to tell me, dear Professor MacLeod, and I cannot make tops nor tails of this whole matter at all, at all!" Nurse MacKinnon said. "And ye may be happy for that" Rory said, "for if ye knew

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<sup>8</sup> *Gu sealladh (Sealbh) orm!* – "(Providence) look down on me!" (ScotG)

<sup>9</sup> *Tha an ceòl air feadh na fìdhle* – Scottish Gaelic expression for "the sh... has hit the fan!" More poetic and polite actually than the US colloquialism.





what was behind it all, maybe ye would yourself have to be locked up in yer own loonie bin here!" The nurse grew pale, but did not say anything. Now, terrible screams are a usual thing in the closed ward of a mental institution, but the closer they came to Norman's room, the more dreadful the screams were growing. Rory was happy in a way that he had the pocket of his jacket well-filled with well-charged cylinders. Also, the closer they got to Norman's room, the clearer the tune of *Ole Miss Rag* could be heard. The door of Norman's padded cell was wide open, and the poor man himself was tightly fixed. Rose was sitting opposite him, clenching the gramophone, an ugly smile on her cheeks. Beside her was Dr O Shea – it was not the right Dr O Shea, though, but Egbert MacCulloch! Nobody would believe the expression on poor Norman's face – it was no longer a human look. If he ever came out alive of this grave situation he was in, it was not likely now that he would ever get out of the mental asylum again! That was too ugly for Hugh to suffer, and he would not put up with his brother's torment any longer – he grabbed the revolver from Rory's hand, and fired shot for shot at Rose and the false Doctor – but instead of dying as common mortals would, they were melting! Yes, they were melting into grey goo! After that, they moved towards the gramophone which was now lying on the floor in smithereens. The goo surrounded the instrument, and suddenly, it started working again, endlessly playing *Ole Miss Rag* as it was before, and at the same time, the walls of the hospital started shaking.

The tune now kept growing ever louder, and the corridors and rooms of the asylum started falling down and apart. Rory shouted at the top of his voice that everyone able to run ought to evacuate the building straight away and without any delay, and they all fled, the police force who had just arrived among them. They got out of the building right enough, but that did not hinder or put an end to the terror, as a little stream of the grey slime was following them! And suddenly, yon terrible stuff which came out of the confounded gramophone grew tentacles! Some of the hospital staff, and the police squad were grabbed and devoured, though their companions fired at the horrible thing that could not be explained or named, and little by little – possibly it was inevitable – the tentacles even reached poor Hugh, and captured him. He was not devoured, though, but the tentacles turned back into streamlets of goo and crept up Hugh's body, as he began tittering, paralyzed by shock. But even though Rory had retrieved his revolver from Hugh, neither he, nor anyone of his police squad - or anyway what was left of it – were able to do anything, but watch him, rendered immobile and devoid of speech or action themselves. At last, Hugh screamed full of anguish and despair – and it was then the most disgusting thing happened: the goo ran up his nose, and into his mouth. Rory would never cease to remember the moment Hugh's desperate screams turned into the tune of *Ole Miss Rag* in the manner of a pianola playing incessantly, and he would nevermore be able to listen to yon tune without experiencing nightmares full of despicable images of the incident at Dr. Simpson's Hospital on yon day...

## EPILOGUE

Nobody of those who used to work at Dr Simpson's Psychiatric Hospital near Edinburgh ever got employed by any other hospital, as everyone who belonged to yon hospital's staff went entirely out of one's mind on yon dark day when the curse of the maestro and his kinsfolk was completed in yon place. But was it really fulfilled? If it was, the wound it slashed open is not yet healed, and apparently, it will never do so in our lifetime. It even seems that the wound were still festering. A year after yon ghastly day, a news article appeared in the *Scotsman*:

*"It is about a year ago today that Dr Simpson's Mental Hospital was demolished in a violent way still hard to apprehend, or even to explain. It is extremely difficult to obtain any details on the core of the matter, as witnesses of the incident are refusing to talk about it, and those who are slightly more willing to communicate with us are in a stupor as soon as they make an effort of telling us more [...]."*

*But the site of the incident is itself still under some kind of cloud, and it is a dark cloud unfortunately. The majority of people of our city will not go near the ruins of that hospital, but at times, one hears about young and bold (or even downright stupid) people who disappear entirely, walking too close to it. If anyone goes close to the place at all, or even the area, at any time, nothing is heard there except a weird sound similar to the tune of Ole Miss Rag by W.C. Handy. But the worst thing yet is that the drinking water of yon area is totally contaminated, as the locals have grown sick and sallow in their complexions, constantly singing or whistling Ole Miss Rag. Is that not taking us back to the issue of the policeman from the family of the late Prof. MacLeod, music scholar at our town's prime university? He was held at the very hospital until it was blown up, and it is known that Hugh, his younger brother, went to see him on that day. The latter is now being held at Craig Dunain Mental Hospital, far away from Edinburgh and Brittany in France where he was wont to stay. He is perpetually singing Ole Miss Rag in a manner and a voice not natural to man, but to a pianola or orchestrion. No trace of his brother or what is left of him has ever been, and is still not found, though."*

# A CRASH

— *David Senior*

1.

*“A 26-year old cyclist suffered a miraculous escape yesterday when he crashed in rush-hour traffic – only for a bus to pass safely over him.*

*Jason Shendling, 26, lost control of his bicycle on Ghisallo Street, and crashed onto the road in front of an oncoming X94 bus. Yet remarkably, the bus passed straight over him, leaving only minor bumps and grazes.*

*‘I’m still in shock, to be honest,’ Shendling said afterwards. ‘I’m careful on the roads and don’t know what happened. I thought I was done for, but the wheels somehow completely missed me.’*

*Shocked onlookers phoned for an ambulance and Shendling was taken to the St James Hospital as a precaution, but released soon after with minor grazes.”*

2.

Jason stood on the pavement and watched the traffic pass, his mind drifting. It was only six in the evening, but had already been dark a couple of hours, the world illuminated with harsh lights from shops, street lamps, vehicles. The roads and pavements bustled as people made their ways from work, or to an evening on the town, or to their nightshift, or wherever their lives led them. The din of the city faded into the background of his consciousness, along with the dull throbbing pain that remained in his left arm and head.

He watched the vehicles as if seeing them for the first time. In a way, during these past few days, he was indeed seeing them for the first time, unable, since the accident, to fully grasp the reality of these often colossal machines, their crushing weight, the ease with which they could be handled and the ease with which this control could be suddenly, shockingly, wrenched from anyone’s grasp.

Eventually he broke through his numbing fuzz and continued on his way. He had been standing by the spot where he had nearly been crushed only a week earlier. His lucky escape had made the local newspapers. He half expected someone to walk up to him and recognise him, ask how he was, how he was feeling. Nobody gave him a second glance. He was forgotten, if he had ever really been known before, if he was even really here now.

3.

He lived in a bedsit in a dark and old part of the city. The house was high and narrow and divided up into eight separate rooms. The all had their own cooker and their own sink. A toilet and shower cubicle on the second floor landing was shared between everyone. The rent was cheap. He lived on the second floor, by the toilet. The noise of flushing would wake him at all hours, if he was managing to sleep. The tenants kept themselves to themselves.

Jason let himself in through the front door. His bike was in the fusty-smelling landing, where he had left it days ago, the frame bent and one of the pedals wrenched

off. The brake wires had been rudely torn out of position. The café owner who had witnessed Jason's accident had picked his cycle up off the road and held on to it when Jason had been taken to hospital for a check up. Jason had collected it the next day.

'You're lucky you're not dead,' the café owner, a bald Turkish man with a heavy accent, told him with an almost accusatory tone. Jason had looked at him and nodded his head and for some reason wanted to apologise. He looked down at his bicycle. It looked strange to him. He pushed it back home with difficulty, its new shape resistant to easy movement, and left it there in the hallway, unsure what to do with it.

Now, he looked at it again. With every passing day the contraption seemed to grow more odd in appearance and theory. A spindly metallic skeleton to be woven through enormous hissing crushing trucks and buses and cars. Pads the size of his pinkie finger the only things allowing him to halt his speed. No protection. No comfort from the elements, or the dirt, or hunks of scalding metal to cut through his clothing and flesh and bone. He looked down at it, disfigured and useless in his shared hallway, and once again felt a rush of nausea. This wasn't merely a death trap. It was even more sinister than that. It seemed consciously designed to put him in harm's way.

The doorway to the flat across the landing opened. Noel peered out from behind beard and shadow. Noel was the only of his neighbours with whom Jason conversed. Jason supposed that made Noel his only friend.

'Alright,' Noel smiled with yellowing teeth, opening the door wider. 'How's it going?'

Jason nodded, unsure what to say. 'Good, thanks.'

Noel stepped out of his room, stood beside Jason and looked down at the cycle. 'Reckon you can fix it?' he asked.

Jason wanted to tell him the thing filled him with dread, but held off. 'I don't know,' he muttered instead. 'The frame is all bent out. I don't know how I could sort that.'

'Fancy a beer?' Noel asked him, nodding to his doorway. 'I've got a crate of stubbies from my dad.'

Jason went into Noel's room. Like Jason's own on the floor above, it was cramped, damp, dark. The coin-operated heater on the wall was cold. There was a faint smell of old weed. Noel was a petty drug dealer on such a low rung of the ladder that he hardly qualified. He smoked practically all of his own miniscule stock and couldn't even afford that most days.

He handed Jason a tiny bottle of cheap Belgian lager.

Jason noticed Noel's arms. Both were completely covered in tattoos, and had been as long as Jason had known him, but Jason had never really paid them any attention. Now, he noticed the design of a motorbike on one of his biceps.

'You like bikes?' he asked, nodding to his friend's arm. Noel glanced down, almost surprised to find that design still on his skin.

'Oh. God, yeah, when I was younger. Saved up for a Suzuki. Ended up totalling it after about two months.'

'Were you hurt?'

Noel shrugged dismissively. 'Bust my leg up pretty badly, but I was okay.'

Jason strolled to the window. Noel sat on the bed. Jason looked out. The view from Jason's window was of the back of a laundrette. This side of the house looked out onto the car-park across the road, an empty stretch of land covered in gravel surrounded by a wire fence. The number of cars was thinning out, now, as the evening wore on. Jason watched the headlights streak across the ground as the metal shells on wheels, piloted by bags of living meat, pulled out and headed for home.

'Are you going to buy another one?' Noel asked behind him, and it took Jason a moment to realise that he was talking again about his bicycle.

'Not sure,' Jason replied, turning away from the night beyond the window. 'I can't afford it.'

'You can pick them up for a couple of quid, mate.'

Jason drank from his bottle. 'I don't even have a couple of quid. I don't have anything. I need a job, but I need transport to even be able to get anywhere. I'm stuck.'

Noel mused on it for a few moments, trying to think of something to say.

'Yeah, that sucks,' he said, eventually.

#### 4.

Jason laid on his own single-person bed and stared up at the ceiling in the darkness. The mattress was hard. He was beneath the covers but was still fully-clothed.

His coin-operated heater also sat cold and dead on the wall.

The house was damp. His room was damp. The film posters he had tacked up when he moved in were damp, fused to the walls. He thought he could feel mould growing in his lungs.

He wasn't sleeping. He hadn't been sleeping much anyway, worrying about money and food and the possibility of homelessness. Since the accident he was sleeping even less, and his thoughts and worries seemed different, darker. His body felt so tired and weak. Some days he surprised himself by even being able to get to his feet in the morning.

He thought of the bus passing over him.

He couldn't understand how he had not been killed.

There in the night, alone in the world, he began to doubt that he had survived.

He had started to believe that he was in Hell.

He couldn't remember a time when things were not like this.

He began coughing in the darkness. Through the wall, the toilet flushed.

Through the ceiling, he could hear the elderly man who lived up on the floor above, sobbing into the small hours.

#### 5.

Jason stood on the pavement and watched the traffic pass, his mind drifting.

It was rush hour. People were heading home. People always seemed to be heading home, Jason thought. Everyone had homes to go to. Here in his Hell, everyone else had homes to go to. They would be large. Proper houses. They would be heated. They would be lit, gently, with soft lights and candles. They would have deep bathtubs filled with hot water. Here in his Hell. Where he was denied this, and



allowed only illness and darkness and cold dirty water and endless days when the sun wouldn't rise.

He had carried his bicycle out of the house when he left tonight. There was a skip outside an office building at the end of his street. He had carried it down there, its meagre weight nevertheless giving ache to his still-hurting arms, and tossed it in amongst bricks and masonry, this symbol of his body's destruction. It lay there like some giant broken insect. Some enormous mantis, crushed underfoot.

He had walked into town. Drizzle began to fall, dripping from his hair into his eyes.

The lights of the city were reflected on the wet roads.

He stood at the spot where he kept returning, outside the café, by the road where, he now understood, he had been killed. He had to have been killed. This was not the world.

Vehicles passed, spraying him with cold rainwater. That was perhaps the most painful part about all of this: the pain and the cold and the hunger pangs and the muscle aches all still felt so real.

He pushed the cyclist as he or she passed him. He didn't have chance to see if it was a man or a woman. He simply saw a high-visibility jacket, a helmet, long blond hair at the back. Jason's shove was strong, despite his weariness, and the bike swerved madly, skidding at an angle, the cyclist suddenly freezing up with panic, and then the bus that had been moving up alongside drove straight over bicycle and cyclist alike. The sounds of the crunching bike frame and the crunching bones were audible even over the noise of the screeching brakes.

In a daze, Jason stepped out into the road to look. Limbs beneath a massive wheel, blood and meat smeared across the tarmac. Twisted metal poking out from beneath the bus, and one undamaged wheel continuing to spin.

The bus driver stumbled off into the road in white shock. Jason recognised him as the driver who had run over him not so long ago. Jason raised a hand in awkward greeting.

'He pushed him!' Jason heard someone screaming behind him, as he moved even closer to the front of the bus to see the mangled intertwined bodies of flesh and frame. 'Jesus, he pushed him in front of the bus!'

He couldn't get any closer, as suddenly strong arms were being wrapped around him and he was dragged away. He could hear people crying and screaming. They were the same noises he'd heard as he laid beneath the bus, stunned and in shock. He didn't bother to try and free himself. He went limp as he was dragged off the road, his gaze remaining on that single spinning wheel.



## STARTING OVER

— *David J. Gibbs*

THE sun was bright and it made the multi-colored buildings swim with sleepy motion, though that was just the heat wafting off of the pavement in watery looking waves. It helped to hide the worst of the damage. None of that really mattered though they were too busy cleaning up after the flood.

Luther's hat was misshapen, the brim bent and larger on one side than the other. The stupid thing wouldn't keep the sun out of his eyes, but it was better than nothing. The wiry head of hair escaping from beneath was itchy too and he kept running his fingers under his hat to scratch.

The dog that roamed the neighborhood, complete with broken tail pointing the wrong way, meandered past, tongue lolling out of his mouth. One of his legs wasn't quite the same length either, so he had a weird limping gait when he ran. The poor thing looked mangy and was in a bad need of a bath. Of course, he wasn't about to volunteer for that duty.

Piling a few more sections of jagged, broken pieces from his house, flotsam from the flood, and garbage, he stood arching his back, muscles crying out from all the hard work. A satisfactory pop sounded somewhere along his lower back as he twisted side to side.

"Luther? Hey, Luther?" asked his neighbor Pete.

Closing his eyes for a moment, Luther steeled himself for the unwelcomed conversation he knew to be coming. Taking a deep breath, he turned around and said, "Hey, Pete! How is cleanup going for you guys? Making some progress I hope."

Pete, always wearing a big grin, shrugged and said, "As good as can be expected."

"I hear that," Luther said.

"Hear what?" Pete asked looking around.

"Was a figure of speech Pete," Luther said, taking another deep breath.

"Oh. I thought it was the helicopter again. That thing never shuts off," Pete said, rather disgustedly.

"Nope. Never does," he agreed returning to other debris he was drawing together in a pile.

He was hoping that Pete would take the hint and leave him be, so he could continue cleaning up the mess. As usual, he wasn't that lucky.

"Really wish the stormy season would be kinder to us," Pete said suddenly. Here it comes.

"I don't understand what the problem is. Why does it always seems worse during certain times of year?"

"Pete? They're called seasons. Mother Nature's way of keeping track of our calendars for us."

"Oh, I know that. I can read too ya know," Pete said, fingers interlaced, though Luther couldn't look.

His neighbor had the oddest looking hands. He was missing his pinkies and it gave Luther the willies to stare at them for too long. He didn't like touching them either. As ridiculous as it sounded, he was almost afraid Pete might not let go and steal his own pinkies. He knew his own hands were odd, the thumbs too short and ring fingers much longer than his middle ones, but at least he had the right number of digits.

"Right," Luther said and moved away with hands full of refuse.

"Hey, wait," Pete said.

"What is it Pete?"

"Are you going to throw away those sticks and that grass?"

He just blinked back at Pete, not knowing what to say.

"Uh, yeah."

"We're supposed to keep anything that could be used to help if the floods came back."

"It's grass."

"If you have enough of it could help absorb the water. They said that it might make all the difference"

"Fine. Here's the grass, Pete. Take it all," Luther said, unable to keep the disgust from coating his words.

"No, no, no, not for me. I have plenty. It's for you, neighbor. You should think about stockpiling like we do. Conserve, prepare and be diligent. It'll make all the difference when the time comes."

He couldn't stand when Pete got up on his soap box and almost said so, but held his tongue. Instead of throwing the refuse away, he rather dramatically began piling it up near the edge of his yard. It was completely ridiculous. He didn't want this crap all over his yard. And, he certainly didn't think that being diligent would make the floods stop coming.

"I'm sure you're right. Thanks Pete," he said sarcastically raising his hand.

"Sure thing neighbor," Pete said, offering him an awkward looking salute before he stumbled back toward his own house, his flip flop catching the edge of the sidewalk.

What an idiot.

He knew the guy meant well, it was just he could only stand Pete in doses, and very, very small ones at that. Besides, he had his hands full with his own cleanup.

Luther looked toward the front of his house and realized that there was an open lawn chair, its arms inviting him to sit on it. He smiled and walked toward it. Picking up the full glass of lemonade beside the chair, he sat down and sipped it slowly, loving the way the ice cubes clinked together as took a few swallows.

He leaned back in the chair and eased the hat down over his eyes, letting the sun do its best to creep around the edges. Closing his eyes, the sounds of the neighborhood followed him down into sleep.



Luther woke to bright pain in his lower legs. It took him a moment before he realized there was icy feeling water swirling around with sections of debris scraping roughly across his feet.

It was another flood.

Standing up, his left foot vanished in the water and the pain mercilessly gripped him again. Pulling his leg back, his foot was almost completely gone. It had been reduced to a shriveled lump of flesh dangling at the end of his foot. He stared at the wounds and his mangled toes.

Scrambling up the steps at the front of his house, he realized there wasn't much time as he raced inside. Looking out the side window toward Pete's house, Luther hobbled toward his back door as quickly as he could. He saw his neighbor throwing everything he could out of his front door, trying to stem the flow. He didn't have the heart to tell Pete that it wouldn't do any good.

The water rushed down the alley to the side of his house and started to fill the street between the back of his house and the apartment building one block over. It seemed to be rising so much faster this time.

Luther cursed as the back door stuck for a moment, banging his head into the frame before he finally managed to yank it open. Hobbling, he limped toward the apartment building.

He saw Pete making his way out of the back door of his house, dragging his young son Michael with him. His boy was missing an arm at the shoulder and most of his right leg. Luther had to look away, it sickened him so. A sudden rush of water splashed against the corner of the apartment building and it started rushing into the open doorway.

He leapt to the sill of the first floor window at the front of the apartment building and called to Pete, "You have to hurry! Get up here on this ledge!"

Pete stumbled, a stick wedging itself between the sole of his foot and his flip flop, making him limp. Luther didn't think either of them was going to make it. Barely giving it a thought, Luther jumped down and rushed over, grabbing Pete's little boy and carrying him to ledge, trying his best to avoid the rushing water and the dangerous debris it carried.

He reached back and grabbed Pete's wrist helping him so he could get onto a ledge himself. The water was definitely rising much faster than the last time, his house tumbling in on its foundation little by little as the rushing water slipped around the edges.

They were all in trouble this time. Luther looked up along the uneven edges of the apartment building and realized they had only one chance. They had to get to the roof and try to signal the chopper.

"Pete! Pete! Listen to me. We have to get to the roof. I know it's a long way, but there isn't any other option. Hopefully, we can signal the chopper to come and get us."



"I don't know. I don't think we can do this. Luther, we're a mess and Michael is hurt pretty bad."

"I know," Luther said, not able to look at Michael's injuries.

"I'm not doing much better."

"Look, Pete, I know this isn't ideal and I know we're all hurting, but we have to try and do something. We can't just sit here. No one else is going to help us. It's up to us."

The screams were getting worse now, as others in the neighborhood struggled to escape the force of the flood. They were terrifying and he tried his best to shut them out, but it was difficult to do. He could hear animals crying out for help too, a dog yowling a few blocks over, and what he thought might've been a horse, but he wasn't sure. Just beneath him, the cat that had been meowing from the tree at the front of his house was frantically trying to grab hold of something to escape the surging flow that rushed past.

"How are we going to get Michael up there? It's five floors."

The building groaned and the corner tumbled into the rising stream. Thick branches, toys, a grill, seat cushions, all of it buffeted the edge of the building.

"One floor at a time," Luther said, matter-of-factly just as he watched the house three doors down crumble and vanish quietly into the rushing stream.

They had to hurry.

He pushed Michael up to the next sill and then followed, reaching down and helping Pete as best he could. Twice Luther thought he had lost his bothersome neighbor, his grip slipping just a bit, but each time Pete surprised him and managed to hold onto the ledge and steady himself.

It was exhausting, and still the water climbed. By the time they were on the fourth floor, the water had already risen to the second, tearing apart the building bit by bit. They could feel it teetering beneath them as they managed to finally get to the roof.

Luther quickly started waving his hands frantically toward the chopper that was over just a block away. The pilot finally noticed and began flying in their direction. He knew they were cutting it close, more and more of the building disappearing with each passing second.

Helping Michael and Pete stand, the helicopter grew louder and louder as it closed the distance quickly. Once Michael was up in the chopper, Luther helped Pete in too. The man lost both of his flip flops in the process, but Luther figured it was a small price to pay for being rescued.

The building shook again, this shudder must deeper and more terrifying, causing the nervous pilot to lift off the rooftop quickly. Losing his footing, Luther stumbled and missed the landing skid with his hand. The chopper seemed to sway and almost tumble away from him as the building crumbled, feeling the tremors moving beneath his feet. Luther tried to run, a loping gait, his footing difficult

because of his injuries and crumbling building. He rushed to the edge of the tumbling building toward the helicopter.

He leapt and reached for the landing skid, his uneven hat falling off, his fingers reaching, and stretching.

He hoped he would make it.



Luther was always her favorite. He never gave up. He always thought he could do it and survive. His uneven hat and temperament reminded her a little bit of her daddy, but only a little bit.

Cindy liked starting over. Her chalk box lay on its side. The colored sticks spilled from its mouth and splayed out around her near the base of her driveway. She liked to draw and loved the long, lazy summer days when she could use the sidewalk and driveway as her canvas.

She worked hard to get the details right, but wasn't quite good enough. She was only six. Cindy couldn't do dogs very well and always ended up drawing them with tails bending the wrong way and legs different lengths. Her helicopters were the best. She was really good at getting the details right with the rotor blades and the landing skids.

Most of her buildings weren't straight and the people usually had weird looking hands. Some of them were missing fingers and others had thumbs longer than the rest of the fingers, but she didn't care. Each time she did it, they looked a little better and she figured that the more she practiced the better they would look. She didn't do horses anymore because those ended up looking like weird giraffes and were kind of scary.

Her daddy had washed the cars earlier in the day which had resulted in the first flood, that moved through her chalk city, but the second was all her own. She directed the stream from the hose upward along the skyscraper. The color was swept away neatly by the cool water bursting from the end of the hose. She liked setting the nozzle to spray, because it took away just bits a pieces of her creations at a time. Sometimes, it was a person's leg, sometimes a window, or sometimes a tree. Every time it was slow and haphazard and that's why she liked it best, because it was unpredictable.

Watching Luther jump from the building, she washed him away and the helicopter too and waited for the sun to dry the sidewalk so she could begin again. It didn't take long at all. It was so hot, that the water left the sidewalk quickly, the wet patches one by one disappearing.

She started again, hoping to make Luther's hat better this time and fix his hands. He had really liked the lawn chair and glass of lemonade last time. She thought about other things she could draw for him, chewing on her lower lip for a few moments before drawing again.

She always started with Luther. He was definitely her favorite.

# THE DROGNAR

— Christopher Burke

*"When you're Dead...you live in a box, and it's always dark, but you're not ever afraid." -Kelly Link, "The Specialist's Hat"*

WHEN Ellen and Juliya were 4 and 6 years old, Dad would leave out the most gruesome parts of the story of the Drognar. But when they had gotten to be 7 and 9, though Juliya was getting a bit old for bed-time stories and could read pretty well on her own, they asked him to tell the whole tale and leave nothing out.

Dad would extinguish the cigarette before entering their rooms, push his glasses up on his nose, take a sip of the whiskey nightcap he had each night, and finally settle down on one of their beds. It was a ritual the three of them shared that they pretended amongst themselves was secret from mother.

"Once upon a time, long ago, there lived a clever and terrifying beast called The Drognar," he'd begin. Over the years he'd added more and more adjectives, such as "terrifying" and "clever," in order to ensure the story's continued appeal to them. "We have the story of Adam and Eve, of God creating the world and all of its animals and plants and oceans. But one thing that is largely missing is the story of the creation of the Drognar. For not only does no one know, it is also the case that maybe, just maybe, the Drognar is the only thing on Earth that wasn't created by God. No one knows how long it has existed, for it is notorious for its ability to blend in unnoticed."

Ellen pulled her blanket up to her chin and closed her eyes. Juliya looked at Dad, pretending to an air of confidence that was due the older sibling.

"Legends have it that the Drognar used to eat one small child each year, as a sacrifice to ensure the fertility of a town's harvest, or the success of the next year's hunting season. The Drognar did not much care which of the town's children were offered, but invariably they chose the worst behaved, for children who break the rules too much could grow up to be quite bad for everyone indeed. This was how the Drognar survived; once he consumed the naughty child, he or she would become a part of him, their soul trapped inside, sustaining him for another year. But the Drognar grew stronger over the years, as more and more souls of naughty children accumulated in him. Sometimes, these would be children who had become notorious thieves even at a young age, or who went about picking fights amongst the others, or who were unaccountably cruel to animals, and the like."

Juliya develops a faint smirk as she sees Ellen try to feign that she was asleep, rather than frightened. Father reaches over to the dresser and takes a sip of his whiskey, and then resumes the story.

"Many warriors, for a time, had attempted to hunt and kill the Drognar, but they never returned. Legend holds that the Drognar has a lair, somewhere, in

which their remains are gathered, for the Drogmar is quite a packrat indeed. So, over time, the villagers stopped sending warriors and chose simply to cut their losses and appease the Drogmar with a single naughty child, and accept that this was simply the way things were. But one day, the daughter of a famous scholar, a renowned teller of tales and legend, took it into her head that she would defeat the Drogmar by becoming that year's sacrifice. Since she'd heard the legends more times than anyone, she felt that she knew the secret to its defeat. This little girl's name was Ellen," Father said, looking over at Ellen on the bed. Her fake-asleep eyes fluttered at the attention and she failed to suppress a faint smile that came over her. "Sometimes, the brave child's name was Juliya. The name did not matter, after all; surely, it had varied a thousand times with each Father's different telling of the legend."

"Ellen would become the most brave, most strong, most determined person in her soul, and her soul would survive beyond her body inside the Drogmar, and she would use the force of her will to slay it from inside, no matter how long it took.

"This was very brave indeed, but she knew that if she revealed her plan, her parents would do everything they could to stop it. So she set about to misbehaving terribly. Overnight, she underwent a complete change of character. Where she had been noble, she became petty, where she'd been peaceful, she became combative, where she'd been generous, she became cruel. This caused enormous distress to her parents, for obvious reasons. After much arguing and being punished, over the next several months everyone in the village had grown tired of her behavior, and her parents' worst fears came true; she was chosen as the child that must appease the Drogmar.

"She was taken to the forested path at which each year's sacrifice was taken. There was much weeping, and her parents had to be restrained and led away by the villagers."

"Daddy?" Juliya interrupted.

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"Why didn't they all just gang up on the Drogmar?"

"Well, you see, the Drogmar would only appear if the child was the only one there, for deep down it is cowardly. And if the villagers tried to trick it and ambush it when it came for the child, they would incur its wrath and it would smoke at its nostrils, breathe its fiery breath, open its mouth wide, and devour them all one by one, and more people would have died that way. And the Drogmar had special eyes that could see far better than humans. Some legends say it has fake eyes to blend in with whatever environment it's in, and that it can remove the fake eyes so that it can see from inside its head with the power of all the souls that it has devoured.

"Now, Ellen was brave, but she was also terrified, as anyone would be. I know I would be," Father said.

"John!" Mother called from down the hall, "are you getting the kids to bed or keeping them up all night?"



“Just finishing up now, sweetheart,” Father said, and winked at his daughters, whom he loved very much.

“It took every ounce of courage that Ellen had to stand still and wait for the Drognar. But she had brought her special blanket with her, which had been blessed by the town’s alchemist, so that whenever she got underneath it, nothing could see her. So if she lost her courage to carry through her plan, she could hide, and maybe the Drognar’s eyes would not be able to see her. As the hour approached, and the sky faded to darkness, and the sounds of the day were replaced with the sounds of the night, she became more and more lonely and frightened. She second guessed herself. She spread the blanket on the ground and curled up underneath it, pretending that she was already dead and that the darkness of the blanket, within the darkness of the night, was just like it must be for her to be swallowed up by the Drognar and have her soul carried along inside him.

“Soon, she heard a snorting, and a coughing, and a heavy breathing, and she knew it must be the Drognar, looking about for its yearly meal of naughty child.

‘Where is my meal?!’ it bellowed after searching fruitlessly, for Ellen was very, very frightened and still hidden in the magic blanket. ‘If I cannot find my meal, I shall pluck out my false eyes and hunt you with all my powers, and I shall find you, for I can see everything! If you come out, I will make it easier for you. If you do not, I shall be very angry indeed.’

“So Ellen summoned her courage, deciding she must follow through with her plan, for she loved her parents and neighbors very much and wanted to save them at whatever cost.

“‘Here I am, Drognar,’ Ellen said as she revealed herself. ‘I am to be your meal, now be quick, as you’ve promised.’

“The Drognar snorted smoke through his nose, breathed his fiery breath, opened its mouth wider than wide, and gobbled her up quickly and painlessly.

“None of the villagers knew of the girl’s brave plan, and they mourned her even though she’d been very naughty indeed. But Ellen’s soul lived on inside the Drognar, and she was very strong. She worked hard to make the Drognar weaker and weaker. Eventually, the Drognar figured out what this brave girl’s soul was doing, and he vomited her right back out, bellowed savagely, and left the village for good to go do his evil deeds elsewhere. Many years had passed, and Ellen had grown to adulthood.

Her parents were quite old, but they were extremely grateful to hear what had happened. They cherished their daughter, and she cherished her parents, for years to come. But nobody knows exactly what happened to the Drognar. It is extremely difficult to hunt, because it can change forms at will. It is thought though, that its natural form is something like what we think of as a Dragon, and that it is the origin of all of our stories about evil Dragons. For you see, stories of Dragons exist in almost any culture, from which we could guess that the Drognar has been on the move ever since, choosing to keep a lower profile so nothing like

the brave Ellen could ever happen again and defeat him. These are the sorts of things Daddy studies, and maybe someday one of you will grow up to do the same.”

Father kissed each of them and said goodnight, the faint fire of his nightcap causing them to wrinkle their nose as his glasses bumped into their foreheads.

“Goodnight, Daddy,” said Juliya.

“Goodnight, Daddy,” said Ellen.

“Daddy,” Ellen said.

“Yes, sweetheart?” Father asked.

“Can the Drogmar see through the magic blanket if it plucks out its false eyes, and uses the power of all the souls inside it to see?”

“Well, sweetie, we don’t know,” Father said. “The legends are different. Sometimes, yes, and sometimes, no, but in this version it never gets the chance to take its false eyes out because the Brave Little Child steps out and confronts the Drogmar.”

It was a story they’d heard many times over the years, as her father was quite fond of telling stories, and they were quite fond of hearing them. As they lived in the countryside with no nearby neighbors, they often amused themselves by playing together. Ellen and Juliya would take turns being the Drogmar and the brave child, and they had a worn, beat-up blanket they kept separate from their bedding that they used for the magic blanket.

The family lived in a house that was small, but they had a great deal of land surrounding it, which bordered on a forest that was pleasant to stroll through and play in. Father and Mother frequently took walks down the path when they needed to clear their heads from the stresses of the day, or Father needed to think about the research he was doing for his book on folklore for the University in town where he taught.

“I AM THE DROGMAR!” Juliya would bellow out in the field between their home and the forest. “I AM HERE TO EAT YOUR SOUL!”

Ellen would smile into the oblivion provided by the blanket and do her best to jump out and surprise the JuliyaDrogmar.

Sometimes, Ellen would shout “I AM THE DROGMAR! I AM HERE TO EAT YOUR SOUL!” and Juliya would hide in the welcoming darkness of the magic blanket until she could surprise the EllenDrogmar.



This was the manner in which many of their days passed during the summer when they were not in school, for none of their friends from school lived near enough to see very often. But one day, while Father was teaching his classes, Mother called each of them into the living room and sat them down.

“Listen, girls, I need to talk to you about something very, very important, I need for you to do as your told.”

The girls nodded politely.

“Okay, Mommy,” Juliya said.

“Do you know a little girl named Rosa Vaughan, from school?” Mommy asked.

“Yes,” said Ellen.

“Yes,” said Juliya.

They were in different grades at the small school nearby, but it was the sort of school where everybody knew everybody.

“I don’t want to frighten you, but something very sad has happened recently. It seems Miss Rosa has gone missing, and her parents are very worried.”

A sudden pang of fright panged at Juliya’s heart.

A sudden jolt of panic jolted at Ellen’s heart.

“Now, have you girls talked to Rosa any time recently? Have you any idea if she might have run away, or where she might have gone to?”

“No,” said Juliya, looking very sad.

“No,” said Ellen, looking equally sad.

“Okay, well, I thought not. But until Rosa comes back, we have to be very careful, because sometimes there are bad people who do bad things to girls and boys. I need you to be big girls and stay closer to the house. You can play your games here all you want, but I don’t want you going into the forest by yourselves any more. I need you to not go past the big tree out in the yard. Do you understand?”

“Aww, but Mommy!” Juliya said.

“No ‘buts’, girls. I need you to be brave and grown-up for me right now. You’re going to be okay if you obey me and your father.”

“Was it- was it the Drogmar?” Ellen said. “Maybe the Drogmar got her!”

“Now now, that’s just one of your Father’s stories, Ellen. If you do as I say, no one – not even the Drogmar, will get you. Understand?”

“Yes, Mommy,” Ellen said.

When Father returned home, he was astonished to hear about Rosa’s disappearance, but he reinforced to the girls that it was important for them to obey Mother and stay close by.

“What if it was the Drogmar, Daddy?” Ellen asked.

“I promise you, sweetie, it was not the Drogmar,” Father said.



Later that week, the girls asked if they could walk through the forest with their parents, since they were growing bored being so close to the house all the time. Mother and Father agreed, and they packed a small picnic and set off down the trail through the woods.

After they’d gone into the forest for a time, they came upon a clearing where they usually took a break when they were strolling through the area. They spread their little picnic on the ground, ate their lunch, and then Ellen and Juliya asked if they could go off and play for a bit as long as they didn’t go too far.

“Yes, that’s fine, kids. Just behave yourselves and don’t go too far.

Ellen and Juliya scuttled off into the woods a short ways. Soon, they came by a strange little cave they'd never seen before, even though they thought they'd explored the area exhaustively.

"What if this is the Drogmar's lair?" Ellen asked.

"Don't be silly, that's just a kid's story," Juliya said.

"But how do you know?" Ellen asked.

"I just do, now hush up," Juliya said.

They entered the first few feet of the cave where the light penetrated, too frightened to go any further, for although Juliya felt that she was outgrowing the story, enough belief remained in her that she didn't want to chance upon inadvertently stumbling upon the Drogmar and getting gobbled up.

But just at the edge of the light, something caught their eyes. Whatever it was, it was brightly colored.

"What is that?" Ellen asked.

"I'm not sure," Juliya asked. "Go in and get it, why don't you?"

"I'm not going in there," Ellen whispered. "I don't want to get gobbled up!"

"Don't be silly," Juliya said. "Dragons aren't real." But as she said that, she thought she detected a faint odor of smoke. She couldn't be sure if it was real or just her imagination.

"Oh fine, I'll get it," Ellen whispered. She crept forward slowly and quietly, doing her best to be brave for her sister. She picked it up and scurried back to the lighted portion of the cave entrance.

"That's Rosa's backpack," Juliya whispered fiercely. They both became very, very frightened, and screamed when a hand was laid on each of their shoulders.

"Girls," their Father said. "Girls, calm down now, it's just me." He took his hands off their shoulders and reached up to the cigarette in his mouth, flicking some ashes aside. "But what did we tell you about staying close by? This is too far away. You've been very, very naughty."

"That must have been the smoke I smelled," Juliya thought with relief.

"No dragons after all. I knew it. I just knew it."

"What is that you've got there, girls?" Mother asked. Ellen held it up to her. "Why, this is Rosa's red backpack!" Father said. "We must go home now. This is serious!"

When they got home, Ellen and Juliya went to their room, quite frightened by the turn of events. Ellen hid under the magical blanket, and Juliya sat on her bed, thinking. Ellen pretended that whatever had gotten Rosa, the Drogmar or some other monster or maybe just some bad person out there, could not see her underneath it.

"I'm scared," Juliya said.

"What if that's the Drogmar's lair?" asked Ellen.

"What if it gets Mom or Dad when they're on one of their walks out that way?" asked Juliya.

"Wouldn't we have seen it, or heard it, or smelled it, if that was his lair?" Ellen asked.

"Well, we smelled smoke, but that was just Dad. What if the Drognar's smoke smells like cigarette smoke? You wouldn't be able to tell," Juliya said. "And since we couldn't see anything in there, maybe the Drognar sees around his lair with the power of the souls that are inside him, those would make it so it could see in the dark."

Ellen didn't say anything, but grew more frightened.

"I don't want the Drognar to gobble up Mommy and Daddy!" Ellen said finally, her voice muffled by the blanket.

"I know, we'll sneak into Daddy's study and read more about the Drognar. There has to be some way to tell if it's out there. We have to protect them. They walk out that way all the time and it could get them!"

While Mother and Father were in the kitchen at the phone, talking about the back pack and making phone calls to the proper authorities, Juliya and Ellen snuck into the study and looked for one of his books that might have more information on the Drognar in it.

"Giants, Magick, and Dragons: An ----something---- of M...Myth," Juliya read off the spine of one.

"Imaginary Fire: Being an Inv...est...ig...a...tee...on... of the His...History of Dragons and...' Why are grownup books' names so long!" Juliya said angrily. She read off a few more titles and flipped through tables of contents, as she'd learned how to do in school last year.

"Here," she told Ellen. "This chapter says it's about the Drognar." She flipped it open to the specified page and began to read. Many of the words were too big, but when she found a passage she could read, she did so.

"The legends vary, but one consistent thread is the sacrificial daughter. In every story, it is a young girl that must be brave to save her family or neighbors. The Drognar is often a shapeshifter of some kind, but its true form is usually pretty similar to what we now call 'dragons.' It seems likely that "Drognar" is one source for the word and that it has simply changed over time. It should be noted that this creature often has the outer look of whatever form it has adopted, but it remains able to perform many of its reptilian functions, such as opening its mouth almost 180 degrees on a hinged jaw. It often has some form of smoke that comes out of it, and fire on its breath, and the ability to remove its eyes so that it can see with the power of the souls it has eaten."

Juliya struggled with some of the words, but the gist of it was clear to them, as this seemed to confirm the story as they'd heard it from their Father.

"But...How did Mom and Dad know where we were? What if...what if DAD is the Drognar? It can shift shapes!" Ellen said.

"Don't be silly," Juliya said. She continued to read aloud:

Some forms of the legend have the brave child being swallowed up and then 'defeating' the Drognar from inside until it leaves the village alone. In most cases, it usually moves on, sets up somewhere new, and adopts a new outer form.

In some versions of the story, it can be killed by tricking it into drinking poison, or into falling into some elaborate trap. But these seem to be later additions to the tale, and for most of its history, it cannot be killed, only forced to move elsewhere. These tricks are invariably plotted by the figure of the Brave Child after her family or neighbors are believed to be under threat from the Drognar. It is often made clear in the legend that the Drognar is neither male or female, though it can adopt the outer appearance of either. Some versions hold that the Drognar is solitary, and in some cases it lives with one or more others of its kind.

"Dad's cigarettes," Juliya said suddenly after pausing at the end of the passage.

"It just says the Drognar breathes smoke, it doesn't say how! Maybe the Drognar has turned into Daddy!"

Ellen started to weep in panic.

"Don't say that! Daddy is NOT the Drognar. It's just cigarettes!" Ellen said.

"Keep your voice down!" Juliya whispered fiercely. "We aren't supposed to be in here."

"Girls?" Their mother called from down the hall. "What are you up to?"

They quickly cleaned up and put things back where they'd found them, then scurried back to their room. Ellen pulled the blanket over her head and said a muffled, "I'm scared."

"It'll be okay," Juliya said. "Dad's not the Drognar, it's just a story. And even if he is, in the stories, the brave child wins in the end and gets back with her family."

"But what if that part isn't true?" Ellen whispered, for they could hear their parents coming down the hall, the sound of their deliberate footsteps bouncing down the hall toward their room.

"The whiskey," Juliya said. "The whiskey--FIRE!"

"What's that, then?" Father asked, poking his head into the room.

"Are you girls all right?" Mother asked.

"Yes, Mommy, just scared," Juliya replied.

Ellen made a noise that sounded like an affirmative from beneath her magical blanket.

"Juliya, can you find your sister please and both of you come down to the kitchen? Some nice men are coming out to talk to us about Rosa and her red backpack, and it's important that we have our stories straight."

Mother and Father walked back down the hall to the kitchen. Juliya walked over to where Ellen was hiding under the magical blanket.

"What did they mean, 'find' you? Couldn't they see you were under the blanket?"

Ellen started to cry; had she been invisible to their Father? But how could that be?

"The whiskey," Juliya whispered. "It smells like FIRE."

Ellen wept and trembled, and tried her hardest to be brave for the sake of herself and her sister and mother. She had doubted at first but now was beginning to wonder if her Father really could be the dreaded Drognar in human form.

“And his glasses,” Juliya said. “What if those are his fake eyes? What if Daddy really did gobble up poor Rosa, and her soul is inside of him?”

“He wouldn’t!” Ellen sobbed, even though she was starting to think that just maybe he would.

“We’ve got to go to the kitchen or they’ll start to suspect we’re on to them,” Juliya said. “We have to be brave. He’s not going to harm us while Mother is here; the Drogmar can only gobble people up if they are alone, remember?”

Ellen summoned all of her courage, quieted her sobs, and cast off the magical blanket. Holding hands, the sisters marched quietly down the hall to the kitchen, where their parents were sitting with somber looks.

“Girls, the police shall be here in a few moments, okay? Now we’re going to need to tell them what we saw,” their Father said. “Just be honest and it’ll be over soon. They’re going to help find Rosa, okay?” Ellen and Juliya looked at each other, scared, but hopeful.

Soon, the police arrived, and they were all quite nervous, but they told the police what had happened as best they could. They told the police about taking a walk in the woods, and about wanting to play their pretend game about the dreaded Drogmar, and about stopping for a rest, and about stumbling upon the strange little cave, and about seeing the little red backpack, and about their father exclaiming “Why, this is Rosa’s red backpack!”

At that, one of the nice police officers asked, “And how could you ascertain that the backpack belonged to Miss Vaughan?” His voice had the flat tone of a person going through a routine procedure, repeated day in and day out with persons who often forgot things and had to repeat their story several times before all the details were clear.

Juliya and Ellen both gulped. How HAD Daddy known that it was Rosa’s backpack?

“I noticed the school papers inside,” Father said. “They had her name on them.”

The children wanted to feel reassured, but they couldn’t remember him ever looking inside of the backpack. After an hour or so, the police appeared satisfied. They collected Rosa’s red backpack and thanked the family for their information, then left.



Later that night, the girls could not get to sleep, for they were even more frightened now that night had fallen.

“We have to find out for certain. I don’t want to get gobbled up!” Ellen whispered.

“Me neither. We have to figure out some other way to defeat him, if he’s the Drogmar,” whispered Juliya, for as brave as she was, she wasn’t brave enough to risk getting gobbled up and having her soul trapped inside somewhere.

The two sisters stole down to their Father’s study while their parents were asleep, looking for more information that might be useful.

Juliya pulled out the volume they'd been reading from, and began again.

According to most legends, the only way to tell for sure if something or someone was in fact the Drogmar in disguise, would be to ask it to say its true name. For the Drogmar is unable to say its true name aloud, for it is a creature devoted to deception. If, after three attempts to get it to say its True Name aloud it refuses or is unable to do so, or it otherwise tries to trick the asker, most versions of the legend hold that the creature can be confirmed with certainty as being the Drogmar, or one of the Drogmars if there exist more than one. Although the Drogmar cannot die of natural causes or old age, one such legend differs from the story in which the Brave Child gets gobbled up and defeats it from within. In this version, reports indicate that the Brave Child tricked it into drinking poison. Where swords and traps and arrows failed, poison seems to have worked for this village.

"That's it!" Juliya said. "We'll test him, ask him to tell us the story of the Drogmar so we can get to sleep. When he does, we'll ask him his name three times. If he can't say his True Name, then we'll know it's him and we'll have to tell Mom and we'll have to get away!"

So Ellen and Juliya went down the hall to their parents' bedroom, and woke them, explaining they were too frightened to sleep, and could Dad tell them a story? They did not say which story, as he had always asked them to keep their bedtime story ritual a secret from Mom. He grumbled for a moment, but kindly got out of bed, urging Mother to stay while he read the children to sleep.

He stopped in his study, poured himself a small glass of whiskey, pushed his glasses up on his nose, lit a cigarette, and then set it in an ash tray. Father followed the girls down to their bedroom and they got under their blankets, hearts pounding furiously.

Before he started, Juliya asked, "Daddy, what is your True Name?" Ellen looked on nervously.

"What?" Father asked, with a look of confusion.

"Your True Name," Juliya said. "I was just wondering."

"I'm afraid I've no idea what you're talking about, darling," Father said.

"You know my name, silly."

"But we've never heard you say your True Name," said Ellen. "Can't you just tell us?"

"Look, I don't know what game this is, but if we're going to have a story to get you to sleep, I'd like to get on with it," Father said. "I'm very tired, as I'm sure you understand."

With that third request avoided, Ellen and Juliya exchanged a meaningful look. They knew. The fear was almost too much for them, even after they tried to be even braver than they'd been earlier in the day.





The next morning, while their Father was at work, they agreed that they simply must tell their Mother, who was the only grownup around that they could trust.

"You think your father is a what?" she asked.

"The Drogmar," Juliya explained for what felt like the hundredth time.

"Listen, girls. I know you're deeply upset over your friend, but that's no excuse to go about accusing your own father of having been involved or something ridiculous like being a monster you heard about. I really don't know why he tells you so many stories, but that's all they are: stories. There's been a real crime here and it's incredibly irresponsible to go about making these kinds of bizarre accusations," Mother said.

"But MOM!" Ellen said.

"Mom, you've got to believe us! We read about him in the books in his study! It's him!"

"That's ENOUGH!" Mother said. "You're being extremely naughty all of a sudden. You've been so well behaved! I don't know what has caused this change in behavior overnight, but you must drop this, right now. Do you understand?"

"But MOM! We don't want to get gobbled up! What if YOU get gobbled up? You've got to do something!" Both girls were now crying and frantic.

"That's enough, I said," Mother said. "Now go to your room until supper and calm down; your Father will be here any minute and I don't want him to have to listen to this nonsense."

The girls went to their room, sobbing and terrified. Would no one listen to them? Would no one protect them? Or would they have to be brave enough to defeat the Drogmar on their own, before it gobbled up another child?

They talked quietly in their room while their Mother prepared dinner.

"We've got to do what it says in the story," Ellen said.

"How? Is there any poison in the house," Juliya said.

"There's got to be something," Ellen said.

While Mother was finishing supper, the girls crept down to the bathroom. The medicine cabinet was just out of reach, and they'd been told they must never open it.

"Well, we've been quite naughty anyhow, and that's part of the story," Juliya said. She boosted Ellen up onto the sink, and Ellen opened the cabinet. She couldn't read the labels on the bottles, so she grabbed all of them that she could carry, and dropped down onto the ground.

"Quick, down to the study," Ellen whispered. Juliya nodded and they crept down to their Father's study. They looked about frantically, and found his favorite whiskey in the drawer to his desk.

"Can you open it?" Ellen asked.

Juliya scrambled, half-panicked, but trying to be brave as they did what must be done, wrestled with the bottle for a moment until she got it open.

"Ew!" said Ellen, as she smelled the fiery drink.

"Ew!" said Juliya, as she too smelled the fiery drink. It was much stronger in the bottle than when it was on their Father's fiery breath. The girls took turns

opening all ten of the bottles they'd scavenged from the medicine cabinet. They opened every capsule from every bottle, and dumped the powdery, or liquidy, contents into the whiskey, hoping the dark color of the stinky drink would cover up what they were adding to it. Pill after pill after pill, medicine bottle after medicine bottle, the girls emptied them all as quickly as possible. They reclosed the bottle of Father's whiskey and put it back in the drawer just as they heard him pull into the drive.

"Quick!" Juliya said, as she and Ellen frantically scooped up the empty pill bottles and hurried down to their room. "Where will we hide these?" Juliya whispered as the front door opened and the Drogmar's footsteps echoed through the house.

"Girls! Supper time!" Mother yelled from down the hall.

"I know! Under the magical blanket!" Ellen whispered. "He won't see them!"

"Juliya! Ellen!" the horrible Drogmar masquerading as Father called. "Come on, now. Time to eat!"

They stashed bottle after bottle after bottle under the magical blanket, and dashed down the hall, doing their best to compose themselves and calmly face the Drogmar during dinner.

They did their best to wolf down their chicken and potatoes and corn, and to drink down their milk, and to finish their dessert. They tried to be as brave as the Brave Child in the stories, and talk to the Drogmar without becoming too frightened, and the Drogmar told them all about his day at work.

After dinner, they went back to their room and pretended to play, but they mostly just talked nervously and tried to figure out what might happen after the Drogmar was dead. They tried to figure out what might happen if the poison didn't kill the Drogmar. They tried to figure out how to comfort their Mother when the Drogmar died and revealed its true, Dragon form. Hopefully, then their Mother would finally believe them.

"Daddy!" Juliya called after a while.

"Daddy!" Ellen echoed after Juliya.

"Are you ready for bed and a story, then?" their Father said, poking his head into their room. He carried his customary nightcap of that awful fiery stuff, and smoked his customary cigarette, and pushed his glasses back on his customary nose. He took a sip of his customary nightcap, and placed his customary cigarette in the customary ashtray he carried, and sat down.

"Before we do storytime, I'm afraid I've got to talk to you girls," Father began. "This isn't going to be easy," he added, and finished off the last of his customary nightcap.

Juliya and Ellen exchanged a glance. He'd drunk it and hadn't noticed! They'd tricked the Drogmar! Their hearts beat faster. How long would it take for the poison to destroy the Drogmar? How long before they no longer had to be afraid of being gobbled up?

"Your mother tells me you've been talking to her about this Drognar business," he whispered, and then sighed with a look of sorrow on his face. "Don't you remember, I asked you never to tell her about that?"

Juliya gulped and nodded, trying to be as brave as the Brave Child.

Ellen gulped and nodded, trying to be as brave as the Brave Child also.

"That was a very, very naughty thing to do," the Drognar said. "I just don't know what has come over you girls all of a sudden, you're normally so well-behaved. Don't you imagine I have my reasons for not wanting you to tell your Mother about the tale of the Drognar?"

Juliya and Ellen just looked at one another, confused.

"Don't you know by now that I've been trying to teach you, in secret, about how to defeat the Drognar? It was very, very bad when you told your Mother that I've been teaching you all these years. I wanted to protect you from getting gobbled up."

Tears started to run silently down Ellen's cheeks. Juliya began to sweat in fear, trying to fight it off like the Brave Child would.

Just then, the Drognar began to cough.

"For you see-" the Drognar began, but his face started to rapidly change color and he could not get the rest of the sentence out. His coughs and gasps grew louder. The poison! It was working!

They had tricked the Drognar!

He hacked and coughed and gasped and tried to cry for help, but to no avail. The Drognar skin started to change color, and he fell to the floor, and grew still. The Drognar's face was purple, and it appeared to be dead.

Ellen said, "But what if it's a trick?"

Juliya said, "Only one way to find out"

They ran to fetch their mother in a panic.

"What is it, girls?" Mother demanded. They were babbling excitedly and she couldn't decipher their sentences. "Where's your Father? Would you stop with this Drognar nonsense, I can't understand you at all!"

"Just come, Mother, please!" Juliya pleaded. They dashed down the hall to their bedroom, leading their Mother. When they got there, the Drognar had not reverted to its Dragony shape.

Mother let out an inhuman wail when she saw the body.

"What have you done?" she demanded, hands on her hips.

"We've killed that awful Drognar, can't you see?" Ellen said.

"We didn't want to get gobbled up," Juliya explained.

The Drognar's face was still purple and swollen, and a bit of froth had trickled out of its mouth. Its brown, human eyes stared vacantly at the ceiling. The girls each tried to be as brave as the Brave Child while mother stared first at the body, then at them, as though trying to construct a narrative of the events that had taken place out of her sight.

"You've been very naughty, girls," Mother said. "Very, very naughty. Perhaps the naughtiest girls in our whole village."

Ellen and Juliya looked at one another, scared and sad.

"I thought Rosa had been the naughtiest," Mother said. "Apparently, I was mistaken, for murdering your own Father is just about the naughtiest thing I can think of."

"I don't-" Juliya started.

Smoke began curling out of Mother's nostrils.

"Mommy?" Ellen said in a frightened voice.

Mother let out another inhuman wail, opening her mouth wider than they'd ever seen her open it before. She grabbed Juliya, who began screaming, and the room became hotter and hotter. Somehow, her mouth continued to get wider, and she pitched the struggling Juliya into her gaping mouth, and gobbled her up.

Ellen ran into the closet and got beneath the magic blanket. Sloppy wet sounds came from the bedroom as Mother chewed on Juliya. Such awful gnashing, crunching sounds. She began to cry, harder than she'd ever cried before. Another roar, and the heat from a belch of flames that must have come from Mother's -- the real Drognar's -- gaping maw.

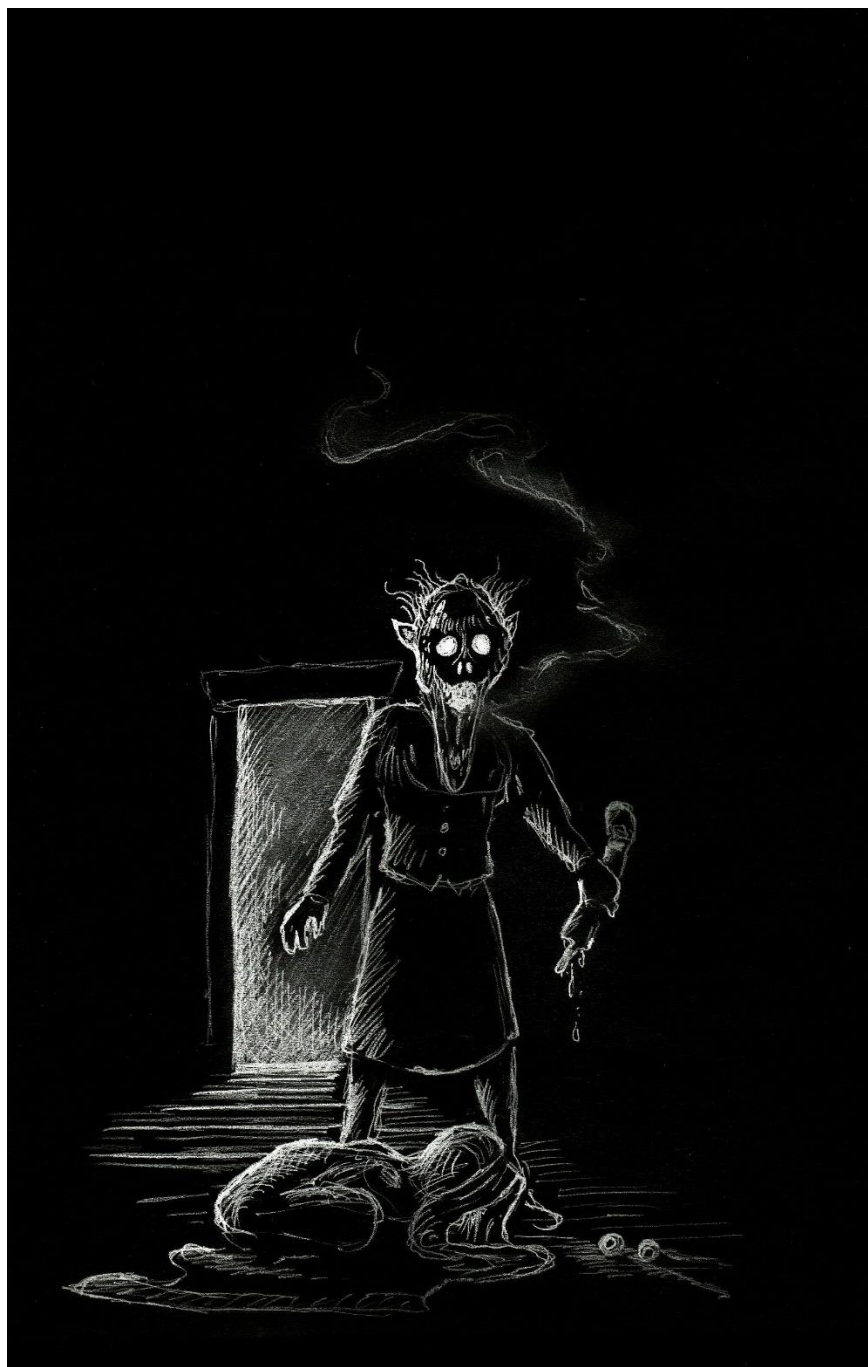
Ellen tried to be as brave as the Brave Child.

Ellen hoped that the magic blanket would work.

"Foolish child, don't you know I can take my false eyes out and see you, no matter where you are!? I don't know what hogwash your Father has been telling you, but rest assured, I'm going to gobble you all up. That blanket won't protect you, for I can see everything with the power of all the souls I've gobbled up before!"

Ellen hoped desperately that at least some of her Father's version of the story was true, most especially the part about the magic blanket, because as she peaked out from under it she heard a pair of ripping sounds, as of flesh being torn, and then two popping sounds, as of two eyeballs being popped out of a Drognar's head, and she saw through a gap between blanket and floor the two fake human eyeballs land on the other side of the room.

She felt very, very unbrave after all, because the stories she had been told had been very, very misleading, and the Drognar still seemed very, very hungry.



## BELOW THE SURFACE

— Geoff Woodbridge

HE watched as she walked back from the bar, carefully carrying two full pints, doing her best not to let a single drop spill. Between her teeth was a jumbo pack of crisps, presumably for them to share. She smiled as she placed the drinks on the table and freed the crisp bag by dropping it to the table.

'You know something?' she said, her face beaming, full of life. 'It just doesn't get better than this.'

He smiled and took a sip. The glass was wet; she had spilt it a little, resulting in a drip, which fell to his trouser leg, close to his crotch. He really hoped that her premonition was wrong, as right here, right now, the future was looking bleak.

'Exams are behind us and we have the whole summer to look forward to. You have any festivals planned?'

He'd met her on the first day of enrolment for the University of Cornwall and they had been thick as thieves ever since. She was a Bristolian with a lust for life and an appetite for knowledge. She knew his mind better than he did most of the time, and had watched out for, looked after and cared for him like a sister, through heartbreak and hell, which all come as part of the package of leaving home at a young, inexperienced age; being flung into the bear pit of life.

He shook his head slowly as she raised her eyebrows. 'Are you gonna tell me what's bothering you or am I gonna have to ply you with ale?' she asked.

'It's nothing... it's... just not yet ok?' he said.

'That's not exactly helping' she said, opening the crisps and waving them in front of his face. 'Hmmm, let me see. Who could be this weeks crush, causing my buddy Jay to emotionally regress into a wet teenager?'

He smiled, unconvincingly. She was digging in the right spot and it wouldn't be long until she uncovered a whole heap of bones. But that's what this entire relationship was about. The sole reason he'd arranged the session was to speak with her and try to make sense out of it all. That's the way it worked, that's the way it always worked, but this time it was different, very different.

'It is time for stormy weather' she mouthed as the Pixies played on the jukebox, perfect timing for the occasion.

'Did you put this on? Really?' He looked shocked.

'I've got it! Beth Macrae.... Again?'

'No, it's nothing to do with Beth Macrae and there never has been.'

'Haha, you love her.'

'I thought you wanted to help? This isn't helping.'

'Sorry, it's just, you know, you've always had a crush on Beth and I know you always say you haven't but you two, you really need to get it on.'

'Listen, I'm gonna get us another drink and then I'll try to explain a little.' He stood up, glaring at the bar. She could see he was swaying slightly, a little uneasy on his feet.

'But I've only just got us these!' She exclaimed, waving her hand across the table as if presenting the drinks for the first time. She was hoping he'd take this as a reason to just sit back down.

'We need something a little stronger.' he said, heading towards the bar. The pub was a quiet local, which had been transformed by its new clientele moving into the area. A regular suburb which was now overrun with student accommodation and with it had come the beard wearing, sockless hipsters. The décor hadn't changed, with what was left of a worn out Aztec patterned carpet from the 80's and oak finishing throughout, but the music was pretty cool and the bar staff were friendly.

He returned to the table with a couple of glasses of whiskey.

'Are you trying to get me drunk? Whiskey? Its only 6 o'clock!' She said, trying to lighten the mood.

Jay stood as he sipped the amber drink, feeling the kick and burn followed by a shudder through his spine. He sank slowly into the chair and fixed his eyes on Becs. 'Remember that girl I told you about?'

'Hmmm, no, but remind me.'

'Ysella, she's in my tutor group, one of the locals.'

'Ah-ha, sure, the one with the hair.' Becs smiled whilst taking a slight sip of her whiskey as reward. Her expression changed to that of concern. 'Wait a minute, she's the one you followed home. You haven't been stalking her again have you?'

'No, and I didn't follow her home, she just happened to be... you know, walking in front of me, and it was on my way. But no, listen.' He looked confused and troubled.

Becs looked deep into her friend's eyes and could see something dark, something terrifying. She reached out to touch Jay's hand. 'What is it, you can tell me.'

Jay soothed a little to the touch, but still pulled back his hand slowly, picking up his glass and taking a sip. Becs watched his lips against the glass, dry from dehydration, awaiting his response.

'They aren't the same as us.' He whispered, his eyes shifting, watching to see if he'd been overheard, or noticed.

'What? Who?' She leaned in closer.

'Them, all of them.' And with that, he leaned back, nodding along to the music.

'Have you lost it?'

He leaned in close again and whispered, 'Shhhh, they're watching us now.' His hands began to tap along to the music, adding a slightly out of time, dampened percussion section to the track.





Becs turned to look around the bar. The door swung shut, evidence of a customer leaving what looked like a very empty pub. 'Have you been drinking all day?'

He shook his head slowly. 'I've seen them Becs. I've seen them.'

'What, what have you seen?'

'Something Becs, I don't know how to explain it or where to begin and I can't get this out of my mind. I feel sick.'

'Tell me, just ... let it out.' She stroked his hand. It was cold and calming; reassuring. She smiled.

'Last night, I was down near the harbour. I'd been in the Wreckers and had seen Ysella and Cador. They'd left after some disagreement. I left shortly after, sat near the landing stage and watched the tide lap away at the harbour wall. The boats were swaying gently as I watched. The air was still and the night was so peaceful; the boats still swayed and moved to a rhythm. The moon lit up the whole bay – it was beautiful. But the ripples weren't being caused by the tide or the wind. There was something in there.' He stopped, and stared at Becs, deep into her eyes, and held that moment.

'What was it Jay?'

'I stood close to the edge, looking into the dark depths and could see the slippery movement, below the surface. It wasn't just a fish, this was something much bigger. Huge Becs, something huge!' His eyes bulged as his tone increased.

'What are you saying Jay? What was it?'

'It was as if there was something inside the under current, not just swimming along within it, but the under current was a physical thing. As I watched, I could see this thing spread out, in and around and under the boats and up to the shore and along the harbour. I began to walk, watching the shapes move under the current. Before long, I found myself out of the village and walking along a grassy bank, all the time watching the movement in the sea.'

'Jesus Jay, what were you drinking and why were you at the Wreckers alone? I know I said I was busy but the last thing I want is to see you drinking alone.' Becs placed her hand on his once again. His movement was fast as he slipped his hand over hers and held it tight.

'That's when I heard it. I could hear them; laughing, giggling, kissing, splashing. Christ, I thought, they're in the water! I crept along, moving closer to the sounds. It was their clothes that I found first, a shoe followed by a sock and trousers, and so on. It was a laundry trail leading me to the scene.'

Jay's hand gripped tighter as tears filled his eyes. Becs leant in and wrapped her arms around him, comforting. She could smell the salt in his hair, on his clothes and as she inhaled, she could picture the scene in her mind. Their faces were close as Jay continued.

'Yselle was in the sea. Cador was lifting her up with his strong arms, as she laughed and soaked up the moment. It was a vision of true joy, of unquestionable, free love. Two spirits, two bodies, at one with nature in that sea with the moon and the whole moment was beautiful. They kissed and held each other tight and her

face shone with a happiness, a perfection of pleasure, and then the undercurrent moved and all around them became something of darkness as it wrapped itself around the two lovers, under the tide. Something slipped from the wave, across Cador's back, over his shoulder, reaching for Yselle, reaching further, across her shoulder, around her neck and down into the waves. It wrapped tighter, pulling the two closer as they kissed, seemingly unaware of this third entity. I looked around for a branch to use as a club to fight it off, to warn and help them. I must have lost my footing as I tumbled to the water, sea up to my waist, freezing cold as my fingers grabbed at the muddy bank. Then I felt it, against my leg, wrapping round and around, gently as if it was caressing rather than grabbing. I panicked, kicked and pulled myself onto the shore, turning to look if the two had made their escape whilst I was 'the thing's' focus. What I saw, I'm telling you now Becs, this is exactly what I saw.'

'Jay, its ok, you're ok. Don't you worry.'

'It was Yselle. It was her arm, her arms, her body had defiled nature. Her shoulders were flesh, but what her limbs had become was a sin and Cador was embracing this and they were both smiling at me, laughing as I pulled away onto the bank and then I was running and running through the wood, to a higher ground, away from the shore.'

Becs was calmer now. She held Jay tight, rubbing his back, stroking his face and running her fingers through his hair. Jay took a few deep breaths. He felt a feeling of relief. Opening up and speaking about this whole thing now made him feel different, calmer and accepting of the unnatural occurrence. Becs leant back a little and smiled at him. She touched his face with the palm of her hand, holding his cheek. 'Let me get you another drink, I think you deserve it after this confession. Will you be ok for a moment?' She smiled, stepping up and leaving toward the bar.

Jay sat and watched as a few locals entered the bar, they smiled and waved in his direction. He nodded and acknowledged their salutations. And then, she came into focus. Yselle was greeting Becs at the bar. They hugged and kissed each other like old friends and smiled and laughed as they looked over at him watching, and he could see a shimmer cast across their faces like that of a fishes scales. For one slight second, his whole body froze. He listened to his own heart beating slowly, waiting for the halt, the final, the end. Then a calm fell across him, a smile filled his face and a warmth filled his soul. Yselle approached with Becs who was carefully carrying two full pints, doing her best not to let a single drop spill.

He couldn't take his eyes off Yselle, mesmerised, hypnotised, his mind tumbling, heart beating. Then Yselle spoke and the words slipped and tumbled from her lips like music. 'You don't mind if I join you?'



