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Yellow-Booke.

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

Wulpurgis-Night Edition.

Edited and Illustrated By

M. GRANT KELLERMEYER





Oldstyle Tales Press

SUPERNATURAL, WEIRD, & HORROR FICTION

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INTRODUCTION

— *M. Grant Kellermerger*

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 roughshod 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 Christmas fantasy. 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, April 2017

✠ AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES ✠

G. L. McDorman

Since growing up in the Chicago suburbs, Glenndon has served as a soldier, an intelligence analyst, and a teacher. Following a passion for dead languages and mysterious ruins, he is in the process of earning his doctorate in medieval history at Princeton University, where he spends an inordinate amount of time mulling things over in the gothic chapel designed by weird-fiction writer Ralph Adams Cram.

“Without doubt, my favorite horror writers are Edgar Allan Poe and H.P. Lovecraft, both of whom profoundly influenced my adolescence. Digging deeper into the canon, I’ve developed a real love of M.R. James’s haunted churches and doomed scholars and have discovered a genuine fear of Algernon Blackwood’s supernatural wilderness.”

Ever Dundas

I’m a writer specialising in the weird and macabre and I graduated from Edinburgh Napier University with a Masters in Creative Writing with Distinction in 2011. I’ve had several short stories published and my work has been shortlisted for awards. Queer Theory forms the backbone of my work. My first novel, *Goblin*, will be published by Freight in 2017. Her website can be found at www.everdundas.com

Favourite authors: Shirley Jackson, M.R. James, Michel Faber, Angela Carter, J.G. Ballard

Daniel Pietersen

Daniel Pietersen is a writer of weird fiction and terror philosophy, most interested in how horror can be used to talk about the human subconscious; the half-seen figures, whispering sounds and voids between realities that we know exist but cannot otherwise articulate. He lives in Edinburgh, Scotland, with his wife and dog.

Favourite horror authors: Clark Ashton Smith, R Murray Gilchrist, MR James.

Jeb Burt

Jeb Burt lives in New York. His first book, a collection of short stories, will be published by PS Publishing in 2018. His influences include Harold Pinter, JG Ballard, Anna Kavan, and HP Lovecraft.

Columbkill Noonan

Columbkill Noonan has an M.S. in Biology, and lives in Baltimore, Maryland. She teaches Anatomy and Physiology at a university in Maryland. Her work has appeared in numerous anthologies and magazines and her novelette, "The Unexpected Travelers", was released in early 2017.

In her spare time, Columbkill enjoys hiking, aerial yoga, and riding her horse, Mittens. To learn more about Columbkill please feel free to visit her website (www.columbkill.weebly.com) or on Twitter @ColumbkillNoon1.

Favorite writers: Stephen King, Shirley Jackson, Clive Baker, H. P. Lovecraft

Erin Fanning

Erin Fanning spends her summers on a remote Michigan lake, where her imagination explores the water and dense forest for undiscovered creatures. In the winter, she migrates to central Idaho, exchanging mountain bikes and kayaks for skis and snowshoes. She's the author of "Blood Stitches" (Kensington Publishing, 2015), "The Curse of Blackhawk Bay" (Sam's Dot Publishing, 2008), "Mountain Biking Michigan" (Globe Pequot Press, 2002), and numerous short stories, essays, and articles. Visit www.erinfanning.com for more information.

Favorite authors of dark fiction from classic to current:

Edgar Allan Poe, Shirley Jackson, Ann Rice, Carrie Ryan, Ransom Riggs

Silvia Barlaam

Born in Rome, Silvia Barlaam lives in Scotland with a cat and an axe-wielding fight arranger. Silvia writes short stories about the dark places within us and she favors the Gothic and the experimental. She is writing her first novel about conjoined twins, set in Victorian Edinburgh, and she loves the Oxford comma, mentoring other writers, and making Artists Books. Silvia has a MA in Film and Television Studies and a MA in Creative Writing. You can find her website here: <http://www.silviabarlaam.net>

Her favourite horror writers are:

Shirley Jackson, Henry James, Steven King, Robert W. Chambers and H.P. Lovecraft.

Greg Howes

Greg Howes is a genealogist, writer and historical researcher based in Carmarthenshire, South West Wales, UK. Greg has lived in Carmarthenshire for the last twenty five years, though originates from Thame in Oxfordshire, England, UK. Greg's work as a researcher

has seen him present (and research for) family history programmes on television for both the BBC and ITV channels. He has taught family history (and horticulture, in his younger days) and featured on national and local radio stations answering questions and giving advice on family history and the historical landscape.

He has written many articles for various magazines on subjects as diverse as local history, dating and archiving old photographs, and the history of woodland and ancient trees in the landscape. Greg is also keen photographic art and design. He has recently released a book featuring some of his work entitled, *The Dark Room*, which includes fifty (mainly) black and white images of his designs.

His other pastimes include walking, watching motorcycle speedway and reading. His favourite authors include - Arthur Conan Doyle, Arthur Machen, Peter Ackroyd, David Gemell, Jack London, Charles Dickens, Bernard Cornwall, Algernon Blackwood, Henry Mayhew, Mary Stewart, Jack Vance, Robin Hobb, Oliver Rackham, Marion Zimmer Bradley, H.P. Lovecraft, Bram Stoker, Sheridan La Fanu and Conn Iggulden.

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.

David Groveman

David Groveman is a writer of fiction, stage plays, screenplays and poetry. His short story, "Her Pale Blue Eyes" appeared in Zimbell House Publishing's "Tales From the Grave" and his poem, "Pagan Night" is set to be published in the 2017 viking anthology "Hammer of the Gods". His play series, *Et Pour Vous* has enjoyed several short runs including an Off-off Broadway production in Manhattan's Lower East Side.

Influential Authors:

J.R.R. Tolkien, Douglas Adams, Stephen King, Edgar Allan Poe, J.K. Rowling
George R.R. Martin, Frank Herbert, and others...

M. Grant Kellermeyer

Michael is the editor, illustrator, and researcher who operates Oldstyle Tales Press. His bio can be found at the end of the book (it needn't be printed twice), but in short he writes and lives in Fort Wayne, Indiana where he is an English professor. His wife and two cats encourage his dabbling in literary endeavors. He is primarily influenced by M. R. James, J. S. Le Fanu, Ambrose Bierce, E. F. Benson, Lovecraft, Poe, and their ilk.

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.

BIAGIO CARGNIO

— *Ever Dundas*

HIS lips were a wound that cut across his face, garish and messy against the white of his skin. Ringed in heavy kohl, his eyes popped wide as he sang, and his cheeks were so rouged it seemed he burned with a sickness. His head bobbed to-and-fro, too big for his neck, and Jamie guffawed at this strange marionette-man. The singer turned on her, his eyes suddenly narrowed and sunken; she gasped, slapping her hand across her mouth.

"She doesn't know whether to be frightened or join in," John said as he leaned back in his chair and put his arm around Mark.

"He's a little creepy," said Mark.

The liquid orange of the setting sun poured across the piazza as the singer wove his way between the restaurant tables.

"What are you doing?" said John.

Jamie's reply was muffled, her hand still over her mouth.

"I can't hear you, silly-billy."

"He's coming!" she yelled as she lunged at John. "Dad! Don't let him get me." She tightened her grip around his waist.

"I won't, but I can't protect you if I can't breathe."

Her grip loosened, but when she saw the singer was at their table she buried her head under her dad's arm. John rolled his eyes at Mark. The singer let out a sing-song laugh, throwing his bobbling head back, his mouth wide open. Jamie sneaked a look from beneath her dad's arm.

"He's the silly-billy," she said, pointing at the singer. "Not me - him!"

"You're both silly-billies," said John.

"No!" she said, then turned to Mark. "Daddy, you know he's the silly one."

"We're *all* silly-billies!" said Mark, tickling her belly. She screamed and laughed, pulling away, backing up into the singer who took a hold of her hand and spun her round before she realised what had happened. Letting go, he retreated, continuing his song. Jamie looked close to tears but her little body shook with laughter when the singer fell over. She glanced at her dads for reassurance, then back to the singer who had bounced back up, repeating the chorus. As the song came to an end he knelt before Jamie, held her shoulders and gave exaggerated air kisses, turning her pink with embarrassment. As he pulled away, he brushed the side of her face, some of his make-up smearing across her cheek. She sidled back to the table, giving the singer shy glances as he took off his cap and offered it to them.

"Grazie, signore," he said as John threw in some Euros. "I hope to see you again."

Jamie was back in her seat, playing with the remains of her melted ice cream.

"I think he was singing about doughnuts," she said, clanking her spoon against the bowl.

"Doughnuts?" said John.

"No," said Mark. "It was about murder."

"Murderous doughnuts?" said John.

"Imagine that, imagine being murdered by a doughnut!"

"Your Italian is terrible, both of you," said Mark.

John looked out across the piazza, watching the tourists disappear into shadows.

"I wish you could stay," John said, kissing Mark.

"Me too."

"You taste of salt," John said.

"The taste of Venice. Is there nothing of me left?"

"I'll lick you and see."

"You guys are gross," said Jamie.

"Love isn't gross," said Mark.

"Tis."

"You'll feel the same when you grow up."

"I'll never."

"Never grow up?"

"I don't want to grow up."

"I don't want you to grow up either," said John.

He stroked her hair.

"Look," said John. "The sun is turning your hair into gold. We should cut off a lock to pay the waiter."

"Ha!" she said, pushing her hair behind her ears.

"No? Money will have to do, I suppose," said John, pulling out his wallet.

"What're we going to do now?" said Jamie.

"I don't know about you two," said Mark, "but I need to get back to the apartment to prepare for tomorrow's meeting."

"Boring."

"It is boring. I'd rather stay with you, but it's only one evening," he said, getting out his handkerchief and rubbing at the make-up on Jamie's cheek.

"So what are we doing, dad?"

"I don't know," said John.

"Whatever you do, think of me going over spreadsheets," said Mark, giving up on the red smear as Jamie squirmed away from him.

"We won't," said Jamie.

Mark kissed Jamie on the top of the head.

"See you later, golden girl."

"Bye, daddy."

Mark kissed John and winked at them both. They watched him walk down one of the narrow streets off the square.

"Dad?"

"What?"

"What are we going to do?"

"Go for a walk?"

"Can we look for lizards?"

"Of course. How many are you up to now?"

"I lost count. I'll start again."

"I apologise for the disturbance, signore," said the waiter as he cleared away their plates.

"Oh, it's fine. She loved it. What was he singing?"

"It's the story of Biagio Cargnio. Not in best taste."

"Biagio Cargnio?"

"He owned a restaurant on Riva di Biasio. He was known for his succulent stew, and was popular before someone found a finger in their meal. The restaurant was searched and revealed dead babies. Everyone in Venice wanted revenge. His hands were cut off and strung around his neck. He was quartered and his body parts displayed around the city as warning. They say he haunts Riva di Biasio and in the evenings you can hear the cries of babies."

"That's gross," said Jamie. "That's gross eating babies."

"Not an appropriate song, signore. We Venetians are still sensitive centuries later. I hope you weren't disturbed."

"No, Jamie had fun. Didn't you?"

"Uh-huh. But I thought it was about doughnuts."

"It can be about doughnuts if you want."

"But it wasn't."

"No," he said, gathering up her things. "C'mon, let's go look for lizards."

"Lizards!"

Jamie jumped from her seat and ran out into the piazza.

*

They walked through the streets, past numerous shops selling masks. John smiled at graffiti beneath a street sign: 'love the lost.'

"For once, we're not lost."

"What?"

"We're not lost."

"I know," said Jamie, "This is where Maria has her stall during the day."

"Where shall we go, then?" he said.

"Can we go to the Biasio place and listen for babies?"

"No, it's morbid. You'll have nightmares."

"I won't, dad, I promise."

"You promise you won't have nightmares?"

"Uh-huh."

"I don't know..."

"There might be lizards there."

"There might be lizards anywhere."

"But we've not been before, there might be *new* lizards."

"New lizards?"

"Yeah."

"Well, if there's gonna be *new* lizards..."

"Stop it! You're laughing at me."

"Alright, alright. Let's see if we can find it."

"Really?"

"Really."

John took out the map and traced a route with his finger.

"Right," he said, "I think I know the way."

John had Jamie's bag slung over his shoulder and she reached up and rummaged around.

"Whatchadoin?"

"I'm gonna blow bubbles for the babies," she said, showing him her bubble bottle. "They'd like bubbles. They wouldn't be sad anymore."

"I think you're right."

They walked down the maze of streets, crossing the bridges over the small canals. John squinted at the map.

"We're almost there."

They continued down a narrow street and reached Riva di Biasio. There was a vaporetto stop but it was empty and the street was dark and quiet.

"Spooky!" said Jamie.

"Yeah," said John, "It is a bit."

"I don't hear any babies."

"Maybe they're asleep."

"Don't be silly, dad. Ghosts don't sleep. I'm gonna blow the bubbles over the water cos if I was a ghost baby I'd swim in the water."

"Can ghosts swim?"

"Of course they can, dad. They don't need to breathe, so they swim as much as they want."

"I guess so."

A flurry of bubbles scattered across the canal.

"I think the babies will be pleased," said John.

Jamie blew more bubbles, one volley after another. John sat next to her and watched the bubbles float over the water. He looked down at her.

"Are you cold? You've got goose pimples."

"I'm a bit cold."

"I didn't bring your jacket. C'mon, we should get back and you can tell daddy about what we did."

"Dad?"

"Uh-huh?"

"Do you think the babies were happy?"

"Did you hear them crying?"

"No."

"Then they were happy."

"Good. I'm glad, dad. I'm glad I made them happy."

*

Jamie walked into the sitting room and fell onto the couch.

"Morning, sleepy head."

"Where's daddy?"

"He's gone already. He didn't want to wake you."

"Oh."

"You slept late. You must have been tired."

"When does daddy finish work?"

"Around six. C'mon, we'll get you in the bath then go for breakfast."

"I don't want a bath."

"You need one."

"Don't want one."

"Fine, but you're having one tonight. At least go wash your face – you've still got that red mark."

Jamie disappeared for a few minutes and returned wearing shorts and a t-shirt, her hair brushed, her face still unwashed. John shook his head, but said nothing as he took her hand. It was late in the morning when they arrived at the café.

"What would you like?"

"Dunno."

"Your usual?"

"Dunno."

"Don't be awkward."

"I'm not."

"I'll order your usual."

"OK."

John ordered as Jamie sat with her elbow on the table, her head leaning against her hand.

"You alright?"

"I'm fine."

"Did you have nightmares?"

"I promised I wouldn't."

The waiter brought their food and John drank his coffee as he watched her peeling the layers of pastry from her croissant

"Eat up."

"I'm not hungry."

"Are you ill?"

"No, just not hungry."

"I'll take you to the doctor."

"I'm fine."

"Then eat something."

"I'm not hungry, dad."

"You don't look well."

He leaned over and felt her forehead. She pulled away.

"Dad, I told you. I'm fine, just not hungry."

"OK, but drink your orange juice."

"I'm not thirsty."

"What is wrong with you today? I don't like this attitude. Drink your juice or we're spending the day in the apartment."

"I'm sorry. I didn't sleep."

"Did you have nightmares? I know you promised but maybe they sneaked up on you. You can tell me."

"I didn't have nightmares. I was just too hot."

"We can buy a fan for your room today."

"OK."

John finished his breakfast. He watched Jamie sip her juice.

"Can we go see Maria?"

"You want to buy your friends some masks?"

"Uh-huh."

"Drink up. Then we'll go."

She held the glass with both hands and gulped it down. It was nearing lunchtime as they left the café, and the streets were swarming with tourists. Turning into the square, Jamie ran ahead but hesitated when she saw Maria holding a baby. Maria saw her and waved her over as John caught up.

"Chi si vede, la bambina dai capelli d'oro!"

"Buon giorno, Maria."

"Buon giorno, John. It's good to see you both. How are you, little one?"

"Fine. Who's that?"

"My grandson."

"Can I hold him?"

"Of course," Maria said, kneeling. "But be careful. Hold him like this to support his head."

"OK."

Jamie cradled him. He stirred, stretching his arms and yawning.

"He looks funny. He's got no teeth, like grandpa."

Maria laughed.

"True. He doesn't get teeth for a while."

Jamie leaned into the baby, nuzzling him.

"He smells like butter."

"You smelled like butter when you were a baby," said John. "I wanted to eat you up!"

"You did?"

"I still do," he said, pretending to chew on her arm. "You're just so delicious!"

"Aw, dad! Don't be silly."

"Maria," said John, standing up. "We're after some masks for Jamie's friends."

"Aah, si?"

"No, dad. I don't like any of these masks."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't like them."

"Don't be rude, Jamie."

"I'm not," she said, lifting the baby's hands, smelling and kissing them.

"You are. You know you are."

"I'm just tired."

"Maybe we should go back to the apartment and you can have a nap."

"Maybe."

"Sorry Maria, she's been in a strange mood all morning."

"Are you not well?" said Maria, looking down at Jamie with concern.

"Just tired," said Jamie, stroking the baby's head.

"C'mon," said John. "You need to give him back now."

"I want to keep him."

"Si, he is very cute."

Maria scooped the baby from Jamie's arms.

"Sleep well, Jamie."

"Arrivederci, Maria."

"Arrivederci."

John took Jamie's hand and they walked through the busy square.

"I'm just going to get some coffee to take home."

"OK."

They made their way over to the coffee stall. As he jostled with the other tourists crammed around the stall, he let go of Jamie's hand. He craned his neck, looking at what they had. When he got to the front he picked through the bags of coffee before deciding on the one he wanted.

"They have hot chocolate too," he said, turning to her. "Would you like some?"

John was hemmed in by tourists and couldn't see her.

"Hey, you. Where are you?"

He looked around him, seeing flashes of blonde hair in his periphery, but when he turned she wasn't there.

"Jamie?"

He pushed people out of the way, craning his neck.

"Jamie!"

He turned back to the stall, crouched down and searched between legs and bags and pushchairs. He looked under the stall, only to find boxes and crates. Back on his feet, he pushed aside tourists, grabbing the stall-holder.

"Have you seen her?"

"What do you want? Let go!"

"I've lost her. She was just here."

"Please wait your turn."

"A girl - this tall, golden hair, white t-shirt. Tell me you've seen her."

"I haven't seen her, signore. Now, please—"

John turned and pushed his way through the people gathered round the stall. He ran into the middle of the square, scanning the crowd.

"Jamie! Jamie!"

Someone caught John by the arm.

"Are you alright?" asked an elderly man.

"I've lost my little girl."

"Oh, I'm sure—" he said, glancing round, "What does she look like?"

"Golden hair," said John, "a white t-shirt. Oh god—"

He pushed the old man aside and ran to Maria's stall.

"Have you seen Jamie?"

Maria was cradling her grandson as she spoke to a customer.

"John, I—"

"Have you seen her?"

"Excuse me," she said to the woman. "John, what is it?"

"Jamie, have you seen her? Tell me you've seen her."

"Not since you left, what—?"

"She's gone, she's gone."

John doubled over, his breath coming in short rasps. His legs gave way and he collapsed.

"John, slow down. Breathe slowly."

He shook his head, clutching her arm.

"It will be OK. You need to calm down."

"We have to find her, Maria."

"I know. We will."

They searched together, shouting her name, stopping people and giving them her description. Maria spoke to some of the stall-holders, but no-one had seen her.

"I'm sorry, John. They all say the same. Tourists come and go, they can't remember everyone."

"Someone must have seen her."

"Is there somewhere she might have gone?"

"I don't know. Maybe the apartment. I was taking too long at the stall. She was tired..."

"John, she will turn up. It's not your fault."

"I'm going to check the apartment, Maria. Please keep in touch."

"Here's my number, John. I'll keep looking and I can call the police for you, explain to them in Italian."

"Not yet, Maria. I don't—"

"The more people searching, John."

"Wait until I've checked the apartment, Maria. I'll phone you."

John ran, only pausing to look at every blonde child he passed. His mobile rang.

"Maria?"

"It's Mark."

"I thought—"

"Why were you expecting Maria?"

"I...we were at the stall. Jamie lost her bracelet. You know how she is with that bracelet, and I called Maria to ask if she'd look."

"Ah, right. I was just phoning to see how you two were."

"Jamie's upset about her bracelet."

John started to shake and cry. He scrunched up his eyes.

"Are you alright? You sound—"

"Fine, it's just Jamie's making such a fuss and she's been in one of those moods anyway, so, look, I better go."

"OK, I hope you find it."

"Right."

"John?"

"Yeah?"

"You sure you're alright?"

"One of those mornings."

"OK. Well, I hope you have a better afternoon."

"Yeah."

"Can I speak to Jamie?"

"She's asleep."

John felt sick and sank to the ground.

"Asleep?"

"She was tired. We just came home. I think I'll have a nap myself."

"Well, give her a kiss for me."

"Sure."

"Love you."

"Love you, too."

John hung up and checked for missed calls, but there was nothing. He pulled himself up and ran. When he reached the apartment he expected to find her on the front step but she wasn't there. He'd locked the door that morning but he still shouted her name as he entered. He checked every room, finally collapsing on her bed. He picked up her cardigan and held it against his face.

"We can't lose you."

He sobbed, wiping his tears with her cardigan. He thought of all the places she might be, but kept coming back to yesterday evening.

He left the apartment, leaving the door unlocked, and made his way to Riva di Biasio.

*

When John arrived he was convinced he would see her blowing bubbles next to the vaporetto stop, but there was no one. It was quiet. The sun cast long shadows across the street. John walked along, calling her name. He felt panicked again and placed his hands against the wall, leaning over. He was dizzy and nauseous. He shivered as his thoughts drowned him in the prospect of her absence, an absence that suffocated him with its emptiness. He thought of Maria, heard her telling him to calm down and breathe and he began to recover as he focussed on the other places Jamie could be. He was turning to leave when he saw someone crouched in a doorway, obscured by shadow.

"Jamie?"

Her head snapped up, but it wasn't her, it couldn't be her. She was red, everything was red. When he saw her face she wasn't her, she wasn't her at all. He was sucked into a dark sea of blood and bone. There was a strange smell; sickly, like curdled milk, giving way to something more metallic and dense.

"Jamie..."

Her face was covered in blood. It clogged her eyelashes, matted her hair. Whatever had happened for there to be this much blood filled him with horror but he also felt relief; he had found her, and he would make her better, he would do whatever it took. He reached for her and recoiled at the opened up ribs, the guts spilling over splintered bones. He couldn't understand how she was still alive. He stared at her, trying to piece together this mess, trying to make sense of the violence. He saw a tiny heart in her hand, a head lying in her lap, and he reeled. Backing away from her, he fell to his knees. He retched and threw up.

"I'm sorry, dad."

He shook his head.

"I was hungry, dad. It smelled like butter."

"Butter?"

"I'm sorry, dad."

As she approached him, he threw up again, then collapsed, dragging his knees close to his chest. He couldn't look at her.

"Where'd you get it?"

"In the square. I just took it."

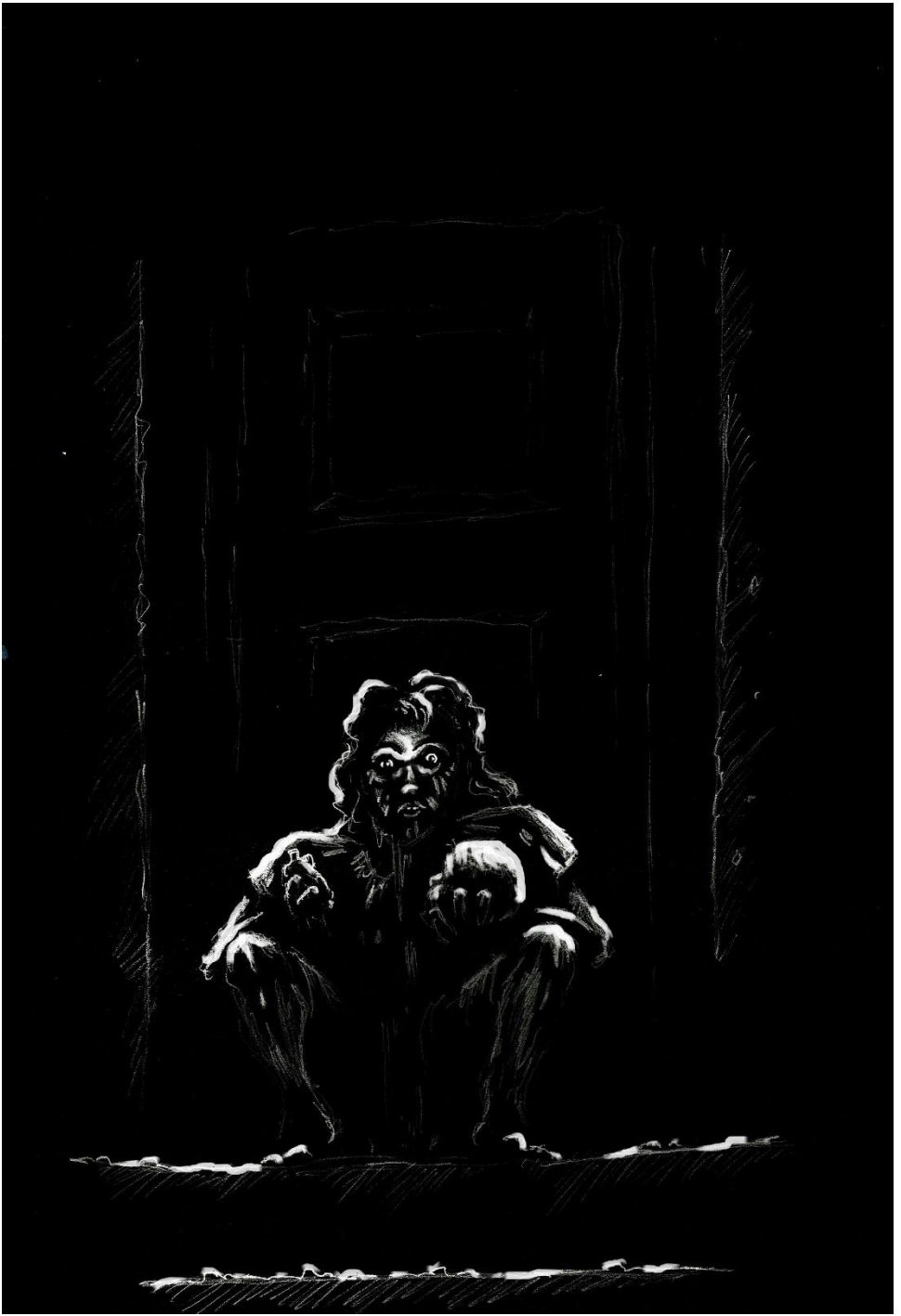
She put her hand on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, dad."

"You said that already."

He looked up, dazed. The blood obliterated the white of her t-shirt, streaked her thin arms, dyed her hair. She had wiped it from her eyes, but the rest of her face was red; it collected round her mouth, dark and dripping. He reached out and wiped her lips with his thumb.

"I don't understand."



"I'm sorry."

"I know. I know you're sorry."

He unfurled, kneeling in front of her. He took her head in his hands.

"I was searching for you."

"I'm—"

"I was searching for you. How could you do that to me?"

"I didn't mean to."

"How could you do this? I don't understand."

He stroked her face and stared at the blood on his hand.

"How could you do this?"

"Dad, I—"

He stood and grabbed Jamie by the back of her t-shirt, the material bunched up in his fist. She choked, unable to speak. She grasped at his arms as he dragged her to the canal and plunged her in the water. Jamie thrashed as he held her under and he gazed across the canal, watching the water lap against the buildings opposite. John looked down at her, mesmerised by her blonde hair swaying in the water, clouds of red dispersing. He pulled her out and her small body heaved, spitting up water and gasping for air. She sobbed, her crying coming in intermittent hiccups, punctuated by a low wail.

"Shut up."

She shook and diluted blood dripped onto the street. He heard a siren in the distance as he wiped her face with a handkerchief, rubbing her skin raw to remove the blood. She cried louder, but didn't move.

"I've stopped, see? I've stopped."

She nodded, trying to control her sobs.

"I thought..."

"What?"

"I thought you were drowning me."

He hugged her.

"No. No, don't think that. I would never...I was trying to get you clean. OK?"

"OK."

"He did this, didn't he?"

John pulled back and held her by the shoulders.

"He made you ill. He marked you."

She gulped in air, still crying.

"We're going to find him, Jamie."

Water and snot dribbled down her face.

"We're going to make him take the curse off you."

He grabbed Jamie by the hand and dragged her along, her sobbing increasing again. She stumbled as he pulled her. People stared, but didn't approach. They walked through the narrow streets, John losing his way and doubling-back several times.

"It's this way, this way..."

Reaching the square, he walked through the crowd of tourists, past the restaurant they'd dined in. There was no sign of the singer. They walked the whole square and back to the restaurant, where he saw the waiter from the previous night.

"Where's the singer?"

"Signore?"

"From last night?"

"Is she OK?" said the waiter, looking at Jamie. "What happened?"

"Where's the singer?"

"Singer, signore?"

"From last night."

"Aah, si - he moved on."

"Which square?"

"No, signore, he's not here anymore. He comes every season then moves on."

"Where? Where did he go?"

"I don't know," he said, looking down at Jamie. "Is she hurt?"

John backed away.

"Signore - I can call a doctor?"

John shook his head and walked back out into the square, pulling Jamie behind him.

*

He took Jamie into the bathroom and sat her on the floor. He turned on the taps, squeezing in bubblebath, the smell of strawberries mingling with the smell of blood.

"Dad?"

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry."

"I know. It's not your fault."

"I'm still sorry."

"OK. C'mon, let's get these clothes off."

He helped her peel off the wet clothes.

"We'll get you all clean again."

"OK."

He lifted her in.

"Jamie?"

"Uh-huh?"

"I'm sorry I put you in the canal. I'm sorry I hurt you."

"It's OK, dad."

"It's not OK."

He took the sponge and gently washed her.

"Here," he said, "here's your boat."

"Dad?"

"Yes?"

"I couldn't help it."

"I know."

"I was hungry."

"I know."

She pushed the boat into a mountain of bubbles.

"Dad?"

"Uh-huh?"

"Am I going to get in trouble?"

"No. No, you're not. We'll figure this out. It'll all be OK."

"Do you think I've been cursed?"

"No. I don't know. Maybe."

"Will they cut off my hands?"

"Of course not! Don't be silly. I told you, everything will be OK."

"OK."

He rubbed shampoo into her hair, the bubbles turning a faint pink.

"Are you going to tell daddy?"

"I don't think...No. We won't tell daddy."

"OK."

She pulled the boat free of the bubbles and plunged it to the bottom of the bath.

"Dad?"

"Yes?"

"What happens when I get hungry again?"

He scooped up some water and poured it over her head, watching the pink foam slither into the bath.

"There," he said, stroking her hair. "You're my golden girl."

He tilted her head up and stared into her eyes as he hooked a lock of hair behind her ear. He smiled.

"You'll always be my golden girl."

THE LION THAT STALKS BY NIGHT

— *G. L. McDorman*

Chapter One

THE end of the summer could not come quickly enough for Rose.

While the other students of Barrow School were off on boating holidays in the Mirrors or enjoying a month eating ice cream by the sea with their families, Rose was stuck with a retired vicar and his wife in Cripplewell. There wasn't anything wrong with Vicar and Mrs. Rothcap, of course, and Rose knew that taking her in and caring for her was a charity, a kindness. But they were so old. And they treated her like a stray puppy. And Cripplewell was boring – just row after row of brick houses with small gardens, not even a newsstand or a library.

Nestled amidst the row houses was a park, The Green, surrounded by a ring of mansions. These were all run-down, and some of them were empty, their owners having either moved into the heart of the City or further into the country, embracing or rejecting the encroaching urbanism. The decay and the ambivalence with which the adults regarded it filled Rose with an uncomfortable sadness, and she always kept her head down on her way into the Green, not looking up again until she had passed well into the oak wood on her way to the willows. She liked to read here in the afternoons, sitting with her back against her favorite tree, the sunlight filtered through the long leaves and shining greenly on the pages, the view of the spring over the top of the book.

But then she ran out of books, only ten days into the holiday. This distressing situation was Headmistress Blythe's fault. She hated Rose and refused to let her take any books from the school library over the holiday, even though it was a common practice, something even that was encouraged. Rose quickly grew bored, and once the boredom came, the loneliness was not far behind it. She missed her friends, she missed having a purpose – even if it was just doing algebra and memorizing verb conjugations. Most of all, she missed feeling at home. In the Rothcap house, Rose felt like a guest, like an intruder. All she wanted was to be back at Barrow, surrounded by the people and buildings and trees that she knew. But Rose imagined, chasing the frogs at the Green one afternoon, that the way that she felt on holiday was the way that most of her schoolmates felt during term, and she vowed to stop feeling sorry for herself.

About a week later the postman brought a letter for her. Mrs. Rothcap was very excited, cooing as she handed over the envelope, and then making raspberry biscuits so Rose could have a full afternoon tea with her correspondence. "Like a proper lady," she explained as she whipped the batter with a dangerous-looking spoon. But Rose was much less excited. In fact, the envelope made her nervous. She and Jasmine had been roommates at Barrow since they started and they had been best friends for a time. But last winter they'd had a falling out when Rose had gotten them in serious trouble with Blythe. Well, gotten herself in trouble, at least. Jasmine hadn't been

punished, but Rose's actions had terrified her, made her feel unsafe, and she hardly spoke to her at all during Gregory Term. Things had been better at the end, and they both cried a little when they had to say their goodbyes on the last day of school.

Now Rose was worried that Jasmine had written to say that she had requested a new roommate. She didn't open the letter right away, not even when Mrs. Rothcap had arranged the table for her tea. At first she just placed the envelope to the side, but even that set her stomach to turning, so she pushed it around behind the tray so she wouldn't catch sight of it while she ate. "But aren't you going to open your letter, dear?" Mrs. Rothcap must have asked her this half a dozen times before Rose took the hint. When she started to tear into the envelope, the old woman stopped her. "Use the letter opener, dear." It was only then that Rose realized that the old woman had brought an entire correspondence kit to the table, complete with sealing wax and a curiously ornate letter opener. "Had that from my uncle, I did," Mrs. Rothcap explained when she saw the expression on Rose's face. "He fought with Lord Warren at Bhaglashi."

"My dearest Rose," the letter began, and joy shot through her, igniting every nerve until her skin tingled and reddened. "Blythe loves to torment us. The Cowanshire coast is lovely if you prefer cliffs to beaches and can find happiness in dark skies and cold saltwater rain. There is not nearly enough urbanity for my tastes, yet I can't help but think that you would have had months of adventure here. But I know you're impatient, so I will get to the point! I've been reading *A Genealogical and Prosopographical Study of the Peers of Cowanshire from the Arrival of the Castlebuilders down to Our Own Present Day* by Mr. Howard Chambers, Esq. It's not as dull as you would think – in fact, it's quite tawdry in places, rather like an Emma Elliot novel, just without all the quippy dialogue. I found something extraordinarily interesting in a chapter on the Porvards, who were a family of some importance in the Withers late into the seventeenth century. There was some sort of conspiracy, and Queen Ingry stripped the family of the title and their name. The Earl and his sons were executed, but others with the name – cousins of the main branch – were banished overseas. Meanwhile, the Earl's seven daughters were forced into religious life. Since they couldn't use 'Porvard' anymore, they all took the name 'Whitehall' after the family estate. Your heart must be thumping! Think about it – you might be the descendant of earls!"

Rose's heart was not thumping. Instead, her stomach soured and the raspberry biscuits now smelled rancid and she pushed the plate across the table. She could imagine Jasmine's excitement at learning about her own family, and her assumption that Rose would react similarly was certainly understandable. Jasmine had known her parents, after all, and their absence was the defining feature of her existence. But Rose didn't remember anything before the orphanage, and the thought of discovering something of her origins made her feel anxious, like a hare in the shadow of a hawk.

Mrs. Rothcap noticed that she was no longer reading, so Rose retrieved the papers before the old woman could take this as an indication that there was silence in need of filling. "But this isn't even the most interesting bit," Jasmine went on.

“One of the last daughters became a teacher at Barrow – Charlotte Whitehall. And it gets better! SHE DIED PROTECTING THE SCHOOL! Here’s what Chambers says: ‘In those days, an Abomination took root in the School and many students perished. Sister Charlotte discovered the Beast’s nest and vanquished it there, but during the contest her own Light was extinguished. To this day, there remains a Chapel devoted to her veneration, and the alumnae of the School say that though her Priant is sculpted from the purest marble, it is ever warm, even in the darkest grip of Winter.’”

There was more, but Rose set the letter aside. Charlotte Whitehall interested her very much. Not the possibility of some remote biological connection, but the connection to the school, to the inhabitants of her home in generations past. No such chapel existed now, but there was a St. Charlotte Hall, a newer building, perhaps only forty or fifty years old, a temple of order and symmetry where she’d taken Geometry last year. This must have been built on the location of the chapel as the grounds became crowded and the number of students grew. But St. Charlotte herself must have been moved, and Rose determined to look for her sarcophagus when she returned to Barrow.

Summer came to an abrupt and early end, a suddenly cool air ushering in a cover of grim clouds that hung low and unmovable over the City. The birds that nested in the willows around the Green departed and the frogs began to bury themselves in the mud, no longer giving Rose the satisfaction of a good chase. Mrs. Rothcap cried when Rose left for Barrow, waving a white handkerchief at her as the carriage drove away. For a while, Rose too was sad, disappointed by her failure to appreciate the kindness of the Rothcaps, disappointed by the extent to which she allowed anger to shape her world. But as the carriage left behind the redbrick suburbs the sadness dissipated, and by the time they reached the River, Rose had forgotten feeling anything other than an impatient excitement. Traffic was backed up at the Caster Bridge, but while ordinarily the delay would have aggravated her, today she was so happy to be going home that the time spent suspended above the water with nothing to do but admire the high towers of the Palace was pleasant and calming.

The excitement wore off – wore her down, really – and Rose slipped into a semi-conscious state, only vaguely aware of the journey through the northeastern boroughs of the City. But once the carriage had left the City behind and entered the Blaidding Forest, she snapped out of her reverie and leaned out the window and laughed. There were still two more miles to go before they reached the top of the Hill and the campus walls, still two more miles before she was finally home, but the Forest was officially part of the Barrow grounds, and that called for celebration. At last the oak trees thinned and then disappeared and the school came into view perched atop the Hill like a crown of brick and stone, and Rose slumped back onto the seat, her glee transformed into a nauseating anticipation.

But when she saw Headmistress Blythe standing at the gate, Rose began to sweat, and she nearly ordered the coachman to drive back down the Hill. This was not the homecoming she had yearned for all summer and she wanted to run away, but instead she took a deep breath and held it, willing her heart to slow and her mind

to clear, and then she stepped out of the carriage and marched confidently to the gate. Blythe offered a disapproving scowl, as if she had hoped that Rose would drown in the pond at the Cripplewell Green and regarded her return to school not merely as a disappointment but as a failure. "You had best control yourself this year, Ms. Whitehall."

The corridors of Gavin Hall were dark, but a rectangular patch of sunlight illuminated the floor in front of room 317. Jasmine was already home! Rose stepped a little faster, eager to embrace her friend. Jasmine was sitting on her bed reading a book, a familiar and comfortable sight. "You've already raided the library, I see."

Jasmine's head popped up so sharply that her spectacles nearly fell off. "What? No. Mrs. Hopkins gave me this before I left." She held it up so that Rose could read the title stitched onto the spine: *Grimwood Castle*.

Rose was simultaneously disappointed that Jasmine showed no excitement at being reunited and relieved that there was no sign of the tension that had existed between them last spring. She smiled at the comfort of this normal domesticity and moved to her own bed to unpack her suitcase. "No one else is here yet?"

Jasmine made a familiar face that indicated a begrudging acceptance that she was going to have to talk to Rose even though she was in the middle of a chapter, placed a marker in the book, and tucked it under her pillow. "Holly is here. I'm surprised she wasn't guarding the door when you came in." Holly Mersal was the Hall's prefect, and ought, indeed, to have been stationed at the entrance to greet the returning students. "Someone is home upstairs – I keep hearing footsteps – but I haven't been to the common room yet."

Rose laughed. "Trying to get one more day all to yourself?"

"I wanted you to be the first person I saw." Jasmine looked away, embarrassed by her own sentiment, nervously pushing her spectacles back up her nose even though they were already firmly in place. "Because we need to discuss St. Charlotte and the Porvards. I made some notes and I have some ideas for a plan."

Rose's stomach lurched. She, too, wanted to learn more about Charlotte Whitehall, but she knew that Jasmine really intended to discover more about the Porvards and Rose's possible relationship to them. Forcing a laugh and a smile, she kept up the teasing. "Are you telling me that you, Jasmine Irving, actually want to have an adventure?"

Jasmine's eyes opened wide, shocked at the suggestion. "No. Absolutely not. I want to use the library to do research."

Jasmine went on while Rose put away her clothes, listing off all the books she was eager to consult in the library and pining hopefully for permission to visit the archives in the Minster. In turn, Rose explained her assumption that St. Charlotte's sarcophagus had not been demolished, but relocated somewhere else on the Barrow grounds. The same thought had occurred to Jasmine, but she did not share her roommate's excitement for the opportunity to go searching for crypts in the school's cellars or prowling around graveyards. Rose thought better of suggesting that the chapel may have been moved into the Forest.

Gradually, the Hall came to life as students poured in, chattering and laughing excitedly. Rose looked out into the corridor, waving at her friends as they walked by, but Jasmine shrank back against the wall, subconsciously reaching for the book under her pillow. With a smile, Rose moved to the door. "You should finish that chapter before the banquet."

The Cantmas Term banquet was always the most thrilling event of the year. It was no better appointed than the other start- and end-of-term banquets, but none of the others could match the excitement of the grand reunion following the summer holiday and the anxious energy of the newly arrived first-years. The festivities began with an evensong service in the Chapel. The singing delighted Rose and standing shoulder-to-shoulder with her friends filled her with a comforting warmth that she had almost forgotten. She lost herself in the moment until the smell of lavender and cinnamon brought her back just in time to catch the last light of the day filtering through the stained-glass of the western facade, illuminating the crowned figure of St. Baldred, and splaying the otherwise grey floor with patches of blue and red and purple. Her cheeks hurt from smiling so much.

When the choral prayers were over, the girls lit their candles and, taking up the school's song, processed across the darkening quad to the Keep, an ageing ashlar palace, vine-covered and moss-stained, guarded over by legions of slowly disintegrating gargoyles arrayed along the parapet. Still singing, they passed through a pair of tall oak doors and into the black chamber of the Great Hall, lighted only by five chandeliers suspended from the invisible ceiling high above. Seven long tables lined the floor, one for each of the school residence halls, while a dais at the head of the Hall was home to the high table where the faculty would dine. As the girls took their places, they set the candles in ancient wrought-iron candelabras atop the tables until gradually the Hall was no longer dark and dreary, but warm and bright and alive, and the colorful banners along the walls were well illuminated, and even the ceiling of black stars against a field of indigo became visible.

The singing ceased, and the girls broke into the chants of their respective residence halls, each growing ever louder in the competition to outdo its neighbors until Headmistress Blythe rose from the high table and approached the edge of the dais, silencing them all with an icy glare. When the last echo had died, she addressed the students in a slow and considered diction oozing with hostility. Rose heard only the first few words before she tuned out this woman who hated her so much, glancing around at her compatriots who were likewise losing interest in the welcome speech. Primrose Venable, the unfairly pretty captain of Gavin's football side, began making faces, eliciting audible sniggers from some of the first years, and forcing Holly to intervene with some unintentionally amusing expressions of her own. The Gavin students were not alone in this, and Rose could hear similar noises from the Austin table behind her, and a burst of uncontrolled laughter from the Windbury table across the Hall.

Blythe finally stopped talking and now the porters emerged with supper, delivering tray after tray of rich food – roasted chickens and lambs, stewed beef,

breaded gammon, fried fish, wheat bread, rye bread, even blanched bread, squash, roasted potatoes, and, of course, mashed peas. It was the most food they would see until the banquet at the end of term, but the real trick, as Rose had learned last year, was not to eat so much that you got full before the pudding course, because this would be the last chance for anything sweeter than an apple for three months. It took a while for the trays to make their way down to where the lower-years sat at the foot of the table, and Rose had only just finished making an absurdly large pile of food when one of the Austin girls stood up, whirled around to face the Gavin table, and shouted something unintelligible but clearly insulting.

This was Dahlia Scrymsher, an Austin second-year, black-haired with sharp features, a girl already dangerously aware of her own beauty and used to getting her way. For centuries, her family had been the hereditary Earls of Marlcester, and because her grandfather had been a war hero, the Scrymschers were now also the Dukes of Rosslyn. She wasn't the only aristocratic girl at Barrow, but Scrymsher nevertheless thought that her lineage made her special, immune from punishment, and generally in charge of students and teachers alike. The Austiners followed her lead in most things, but Rose doubted that she had any real friends, and she was certainly and thoroughly despised by most in Gavin Hall, who had to endure sitting within earshot of her at breakfast and supper. During a football match last year Scrymsher had tripped Rose just as she was about to put the ball in the Austin net, and when Rose had stood up and placed her fist squarely and forcefully into Scrymsher's stomach, it had been only Rose who was punished. This had been the start of Blythe's open scorn for Rose, and Rose never forgot it.

There was so much noise from the seven hundred students in the Hall that only those nearby were immediately aware of the disturbance, but the sudden silence of those who noticed quickly spread to those who hadn't, and by the time Prim stood up to meet Dahlia Scrymsher with some comments of her own, the rest of the room had grown tense and still. Even under the watchful gaze of the teachers and the headmistress, Scrymsher didn't completely back down. Scanning the entirety of the Gavin table, Scrymsher's eyes lingered on Rose and she spat on the floor before returning her gaze to Prim. "I don't need apologies from paupers and orphans – just keep your filthy navvie hands away from me." Turning back to the Austins, she went on. "Why they ever decided to admit scholarship students is beyond me, but my father will put an end to it – we won't have to tolerate them for much longer."

Prim gave a sort of amused half smile and was about to open her mouth when one of the Gavin first-years, an orange-haired girl a full head taller than Rose, leaped over the bench, took two long strides, and in one graceful motion removed a plate of food from the Austin table and smashed it into Scrymsher's face. Hundreds of gasps nearly sucked the air from the room, and for a moment there was no sound, no movement. The orange-haired girl looked around, unsure what to do next, a little embarrassed by her own impulsiveness – but where another person might have become sheepish, she carried on, raising her arm triumphantly and shouting "Kirkley Moor B'tat!"

The room erupted in laughter, which Scrymsher answered with a furious shriek, and the rest of the Austin girls got to their feet. The Gavins did the same, and Rose was about to start throwing punches when she realized that Jasmine had remained seated and was muttering something inaudible. Instead, Rose stepped sideways to shield her friend and placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "Get under the table, Jasmine." When Jasmine didn't move, Rose twisted her head around and repeated the command. Now Jasmine slipped down from the bench, but when Rose turned back to the matter at hand she was greeted by an Austin fist and her mouth filled with blood.

Rose didn't get a chance to return the blow before the teachers rushed in to stop the fight. Blythe's face was crimson and she was subconsciously twisting her right hand just like she did when she was warming up to strike a student with the Cudgel. "Out," she whispered. "Austin and Gavin, out." When no one moved, she balled her hands into fists and bellowed, "back to your halls, now!"

"Quiet down," Holly Mersal said not loudly enough. When none of the other girls quieted down, she jumped onto an end table and shouted "Oi! Quiet down!" The chatter subsided, and the Gaviners settled onto the various couches and chairs and sofas clustered around the common room like golden islands in a sea of cobalt. Holly gestured at the first-year who had started the brawl. "Azalea wants to say something, so listen up."

The girl stood up to speak, but hesitated, fidgeting with her hands and looking at the floor. "Call me Zale," she said at last. When she had shouted the Northern battle cry in the Keep, she had done so in a thick Cowanshire accent, but now Zale spoke in the accent of the Southern elite. It was clear to Rose that Zale came from an aristocratic background, and her father must be some sort of earl or baron in the North. Scrymsher had meant "navvie" as a class insult, but Zale, who had no reason to feel insulted on those grounds, must have taken it as a slur against her homeland. She attempted to offer an apology, but the rest of the girls didn't let her get very far into it. "Scrymsher had it coming," someone called out, and Prim joined the interruption, shouting "just make sure you come to football tryouts," which received a laugh from the others.

The meeting broke up almost before it had really started, and Zale wore a relieved smile on her face. Yet even though this had gone well, Rose imagined that the girl was worried about the punishment that Blythe had in store for her, and so she made her way through the crowd to share her own experiences with the Cudgel. When she arrived, however, Prim was already there talking about football. "Rose is on the team, too," she said, putting an arm around Rose's shoulder.

Zale eyed Rose up and down with an expression of surprise that someone so short and scrawny could make the team. "What position?" she asked, a heavy tone of skepticism in her voice.

Rose laughed. She was used to being underestimated, and had come to find it amusing. "I'm a striker. I promise I'm quick on my feet."

“She is quick,” Prim said. “Quite quick, but that’s not why Rose is a striker. She’s a striker because she’s impulsive and reckless, and I like that – it wears them down.”

Prim excused herself, and the common room rapidly thinned out. Rose had just opened her mouth to bring up the matter of punishments when Jasmine appeared at her side. “Hello,” she nodded at Zale, and then turned her attention to Rose. “We never got to eat.” She gestured toward the assembled girls of the first- and second-year cohorts.

Zale’s eyes opened in alarm. “I’m ... I’m so embarrassed. It’s all my fault.”

Rose grinned, a playful glint in her eyes. “Well, then, you should help me fetch our supper.”

Centuries ago the Keep had served as a royal hunting lodge, and though it had the appearance of an impregnable fortress, it was, in fact, anything but. Entrances abounded, and sneaking in late at night was often as easy as trying the doors until you found one the porters had neglected to lock. But not this night. Rose imagined that Blythe had gone around the Keep herself, locking each door in anticipation of the Gaviners’ attempt to raid the kitchens. She was probably even lurking in the cellar so she could catch them in the act.

“Is that it?” Zale asked.

Rose put a reassuring hand on Zale’s shoulder. “That’s the last door, but there are other ways in. We are all going to have supper. Come on.”

They went around to the northwestern turret, where the ivy was especially thick at the intersection with the straight wall of the central structure. Rose handed the tiny oil lamp to Zale. “Wait here. And be quiet.”

“What are you doing?”

Rose ignored her and made a running leap into the vines. Climbing up the ivy was a delicate matter that demanded a great deal of concentration. The trick was to move rapidly enough that her weight never tugged at the vines in one place for more than a second or two, but not so rapidly that you tried to pull yourself up without a good grip. The Keep had no ledges or outcroppings or other handholds until the second floor, nearly thirty feet above the ground. At this height, the ivy thinned and the vines weakened, and though she did not move, Rose could feel her center of gravity shift. Adrenaline coursed through her so fiercely that she could taste it, and with a burst of strength she hurled herself from the side of the turret to the straight wall to her left, grabbing the ledge and swaying.

Down below, Zale gasped and Rose, momentarily distracted, almost let go. If she didn’t move quickly, she would lose her adrenaline, her concentration, and her grip. She took a deep breath, slowly exhaled, breathed in again, and then pulled herself up until her arms were locked and her hips even with the ledge. The ledge here was not wide enough to roll onto, so she first had to lift her knees up one at a time and then get to her feet, all without tipping backwards even a little bit. From here, she had to sidestep about twenty feet until she reached Prof. Beerbohm’s office window. For the first time tonight, Rose panicked. When she had first done this last year, the window had been open, and on subsequent visits she had found that even when it

was closed she could push it inward just enough to slip a finger into the crack and unhook the latch. But now the window was closed and it suddenly occurred to her that the latch might have been repaired over the summer. If it had been, and if she couldn't find another way into the Keep, she would have to wait out here until morning, at which point she would be in some very serious trouble.

A pair of deep breaths later Rose had the window open and it was all she could do not to laugh at herself for worrying. The next step was to find the key to the door so she could let herself out. Prof. Beerbohm had always left the spare key in the bottom right drawer of her desk before, but if it wasn't there, she would be trapped. It was dark inside, and now Rose cursed herself for handing the lamp to Zale. She didn't need to be able to see very well in the office so long as the key was where it was supposed to be, but the hallway was going to be pitch black. Rose closed her eyes, willing them to adjust well enough to look around for a lamp, and when she opened them again the room's contents became visible as black shapes against a grey light. She grabbed a small lamp and then began her search for the key, finding it precisely where it was supposed to be. With the door unlocked, she returned the key, closed the window, and entered the second-floor hallway of the Barrow Keep.

In the cellar kitchens, she found a key to the external door and came out along the northern wall. Zale was not where she had left her, and Rose's heart sank. But then Zale whispered at her from the corner where Rose had begun her climb. Rose turned and smiled. "That was good thinking, hiding like that. Now come on."

Rose closed the cellar door behind them but didn't bother to lock it since this is how they would get out once they had gathered their loot. But first she needed to return her lamp to Prof. Beerbohm's office – the kitchen staff were going to know that food had been taken, but the less Blythe was able to discover about how or by whom, the better. The prudent course of action was to take both lanterns herself while Zale hid in the cellar, but after what had happened to Jasmine in the Awdry theatre last winter, Rose didn't like the idea of leaving the new girl all alone in the dark, even if just for a few minutes. "We have to go upstairs. It'll be fine, just be really quiet."

"I haven't even been to class yet, and already I'm breaking into a teacher's office," Zale said once they were upstairs. Rose happily noted that this wasn't a complaint. "How often do you sneak in here?"

Rose smiled and shrugged her shoulders. "I get bored sometimes." Her smile broadened into a grin and a mischievous light flashed in her eyes. "Let's go to the roof. The food can wait a few more minutes."

Rose had loved the rooftops of Barrow School from the moment she arrived, and the roof of Gavin Hall had become almost a home to her during Gregory term when Jasmine wasn't speaking to her. But the Keep was the tallest building on the Hill, just over one hundred feet high, and it offered the most thrilling views and a sense of adventure. But what she loved most about the roof of the Keep was the isolation, that feeling that she was so far above the world that she was no longer really a part of it, that there was nothing between her and the stars. Not that she wanted to be alone. Rose thrived at Barrow, feeling that she was a part of a family for the first time

in her life. But sometimes she needed the loneliness that had been the defining feature of her life at the orphanage, needed it to center herself, to remind herself of her place in the universe, and her evenings up here all alone helped her feel even more connected to the girls in Gavin Hall when she returned.

Whether she was atop Gavin Hall, the Keep, or some other building, Rose always began her observations by looking outward toward the City. Tonight, clouds hung low over the metropolis, capturing the light of a thousand street lamps and drowning the cityscape in a sea of pale yellow. Rose felt as if she were peering into another world, an alien world illuminated by a dying sun, and this feeling comforted her. It was not especially cold, but the falling clouds carried a heavy dampness with them, and Rose became acutely aware of a growing pain in her jaw and cheek from the punch at the banquet. Beside her, Zale was rubbing her hands together to keep them warm.

The girls leaned against the cold stones and looked down at the southern half of the Barrow grounds. An hour past curfew, and with neither moon nor stars to help them, there was not much to see, but Rose pointed vaguely in the direction of Gavin Hall to the southeast and toward Merton Hall, where Zale would have her first class in the morning. Unless that was when Blythe summoned her for punishment, of course.

Rose shifted uncomfortably, unsure of the best way to bring up the Cudgel. "I was punished twice last year. It's not so bad."

Zale only responded after a long silence had passed between them. "What did you do?"

Rose laughed. "Well, the first time was for punching Dahlia Scrymsher, so we might think about starting some sort of official club. We could make special badges."

"We'd need a motto. What's the Ancient for 'Right up her Precious Nose?'"

Rose took Zale's hand in hers and squeezed it. "If that's going to be our motto, we'll be spending a lot of time in Blythe's office."

With her free hand, Zale pointed down and to the right. "What's that?"

Rose leaned further over her battlement so she could see better. There was a small light in motion near the base of the southwestern turret – someone else was out after curfew.

"Over there, too." Zale was pointing outward, near the Chapel, where a pair of lights met and became one.

The girls watched for a few moments as perhaps a half dozen lights made their way to the Chapel from all directions. As they arrived, they were extinguished so that there was only ever one lantern on at the entrance. "It's some sort of secret meeting, I guess. But I've never seen this before."

"Maybe we should go," Zale said. "If they get loud, we'll never make it back to Gavin."

"Yeah," Rose said, distantly, still wondering what these other students were up to. "Right," she added a few seconds later, her attention now fully on Zale and their own predicament.

Back in the cellar, they found trays of puddings and lukewarm meat pies that hadn't been eaten at the banquet. This was perfect, but now they were faced with the problem of getting enough for twenty girls without making a mess of everything along the journey back to Gavin Hall. "I think we'll just have to load up two trays and try to hurry. I can bring them back when we're done so there won't be any evidence that it was us."

Zale nodded. "I can carry a lot."

Behind them two pots bumped into one another with a dull clang. Rose's mind raced. She hadn't heard anyone come down the stairs, but maybe she had been right about Blythe trying to catch them in the act. If it came to it, she would create a diversion and hope that Zale had the good sense to get out in a hurry. She whirled around, ready to spring into action, but no one was there.

Rose held her breath, but the only sound in the cellar was the heavy breathing of Zale behind her. She listened for a long time, or at least for what seemed like a long time, and still there was nothing. But as soon as she turned back to Zale, a quiet, questioning meow came out of the darkness.

Rose laughed, much louder than she should have, and Zale was quick to join in, her deep, rich laugh a harmonious complement to Rose's bright vibrato. The cat emerged into the lamplight and meowed again, now a confident greeting to Rose. "Spider," Rose addressed the cat, "I want you to meet my friend Zale. Zale, this is Spider."

"Is that really her name?"

"That's what she told me." Rose stepped to the table where Spider was now purring and rolling over in an eager anticipation of being petted. "I'm sorry, my friend, but we have to hurry." After a few long brushes along her coat, the cat stiffened and ceased purring. At almost the same time, the darkness in the kitchen brightened to a soft grey as if a full moon were shining through a window. The air crackled with electricity and grew hot and thick and the lanterns went out with a sizzle. Spider leaped from the table and disappeared, but the charge subsided, and, as suddenly as it had come, the light vanished, plunging the kitchen into darkness.

"What was that?" Zale asked.

"I don't know. A storm, maybe. We should hurry."

Outside, there was no sign of a storm, but they both had a renewed focus on their mission. Rose had a difficult time holding onto the lantern while carrying a tray of puddings, but Zale had been telling the truth when she said she could carry a lot. Even with a heavy load of pies, the lantern wasn't a burden for the Cowanshire girl. Jasmine was waiting for them at the back door of Gavin Hall, an impatient expression on her face. "What took you so long?"

When Rose started to explain, Jasmine's mouth curled upward into a wicked smile, and Rose laughed at herself again. "I have to get these trays back right away. Save me something, but if I'm not back in half an hour, get rid of it. I mean eat it – and make sure everything else is consumed, too."

Jasmine squinted at her. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know. Something's afoot at the Chapel. And maybe something else." She put a reassuring hand on her friend's shoulder and gave a mischievous half smile. "I'll tell you about it when I get back."

When Rose woke the next morning, her cheek was throbbing from the punch she'd taken at the banquet. She could barely open her mouth, and at breakfast she didn't eat anything and spoke little. First up, she and the other Gavin second-years had modern history – a class they shared with the Austin second-years. Between the pain and the lack of sleep, it was nearly impossible to pay attention, and after a while Rose stopped pretending to take notes.

Suddenly, she became aware that Prof. Merevale was staring at her. "If you are with us, Rose, perhaps you could answer the question?"

Students sniggered. Behind her, Dahlia Scrymsher said "we can't expect her to know anything about the Parliament – her family's not even in it."

Some of the Austiners laughed at this, but Jasmine ignored them. "Clause 37 isn't even about the Parliament – it's about forest law, which is administered by the Crown through the Warden of the Forests, whose own daughter is a member of Austin Hall."

"Which you'd know if you ever let anyone else talk," added Lilly Benlance.

Dahlia started to say something, but the room erupted in laughter.

"Enough," Prof. Merevale rapped her knuckles against the desk and the students fell silent. "You need to learn some manners Dahlia, which we will discuss when I see you at detention this afternoon." She turned to Rose now and glared. "Jasmine won't be able to save you next time."

On their way to St. Charlotte Hall for trigonometry, Jasmine removed a red apple from her bag and handed it to Rose. "I figured you'd need to eat something eventually. And it isn't going to start feeling any better if you don't start using it."

She was right, of course, and by the afternoon Rose was able to talk without much pain at all, which was good news since that's when they had her favorite class – literature. This year they were studying the development of the novel, which was about the most recent thing they would ever study at Barrow. Jasmine, too, loved literature, and last year they had gotten into the habit of continuing to talk about books on their walk to Gavin for a snack, but when class was over she bolted from the room without explanation.

Rose didn't see her again until supper. Jasmine rushed into the Great Hall just before Blythe closed the doors, her book-bag about to burst at the seams and another full load of books in her arms. "Where have you been all afternoon?" The answer was obvious, but Rose liked to tease her.

Jasmine was out of breath – more from excitement than exertion. "Did you know that the library has an archive about the history of Barrow? Prof. Howell thought it was strange that I wanted to look through it, but she seemed interested when I told her about St. Charlotte."

"What class is that for?" Zale asked as she sat down next to Rose with two massive plates of food. "One of these is for you, Jas. I saw you come in late."

"It's Jasmine." She blinked at Zale. "Sorry, I just cannot abide nicknames. Thank you for making me a plate." She smiled at Rose. "But you probably didn't need to."

Rose laughed and with a wink at Jasmine, she revealed a second plate she'd been hiding under the table. "Jasmine finds it extraordinarily difficult to leave the library on time."

Zale smiled. "Good thing I'm really hungry, then."

"She kept a diary," Jasmine attempted to say through a mouthful of bread. "I haven't read any of it yet because I want to begin with the family history, but – " She stopped herself and looked at Zale over the rims of her glasses. "Sorry, I should explain. We're tracing Rose's ancestry. She doesn't know anything about her family because her parents were killed when – "

"Jasmine." Rose's voice was calm and steady.

"Anyway," Jasmine continued, aware that she had upset Rose but not wanting to exacerbate the situation by discussing it any further, "she might be related to St. Charlotte and I'm doing the research." She offered a sardonic smile. "And that would mean that Rose is the descendant of the Cowanshire aristocracy, which would really chafe Dahlia Scrymsher."

Zale dropped her fork on her second plate. "I'm from Cowanshire! The West Riding. Have you ever been there?"

"I spent the summer in a country house north of Stenohealh," Jasmine said, "but that's the only place I've been in the North. It wouldn't stop raining. Have you ever gone to the Withers? That's where St. Charlotte's family were earls."

"Yes!" Zale was really excited now and Rose suspected that she had been feeling homesick after the fight at the banquet the night before. "We live mostly in Loidens, but we have farms all over the Withers." Her eyes widened and she leaned forward. "You both must visit for Cantmas. We could walk to Malgun Cove. With their shaggy winter coats the Swaledale sheep look almost like polar bears in all that snow."

Rose tried not to let it show, but the idea of spending a holiday with someone who wasn't a stranger, someone who knew and cared for her, filled her with an almost overwhelming joy. "Are you ready for tryouts?"

There were only fifteen spots on a house football team, and these almost always went to older girls. That Rose and Dahlia had both made their respective teams in their first year was unprecedented, but the long odds didn't stop eight of the ten Gavin first-years from showing up to tryouts that morning, and Rose was pleased to see Zale among them. Rose knew that Blythe had given the Gaviners the first morning slot twice a week as a sort of continuing punishment for last year's altercation with Dahlia Scrymsher. Now that Zale had joined in, it was almost certain that the Gavin football team would be practicing at dawn until Barrow received a new headmistress. At least the practice pitch was on the southeastern corner of the hill, in full view of the morning sun shining through the mist rising from the thin ring of beech trees. By November, that wouldn't make much of a difference, but today it was everything, and Rose was feeling cheerful and optimistic.

Officially, everyone had to try out for the team each year, even the starters from the previous year, but that wasn't much more than a formality. Prim might boot someone who had gotten slow or clumsy over the summer, but that was unlikely. In truth, tryouts were really about finding a few capable second- and third-years to help with practice. As a starting striker, Rose was responsible for sprinting and passing drills. Most of the first-years were dreadful passers, barely able to hit a stationary target let alone a moving one. Zale was more than competent, however, and, despite her size, was actually rather fast once she'd built some momentum.

Once the first cut had been sent back to Gavin, the tryouts could begin in earnest with a series of half-field scrimmages in which the prospective players were pitted against the squad's best. Rose was part of the offensive formation that would test the hopeful defenders while Prim observed, looking for talent and determination. Prim placed Zale in one of the two full-back positions, matching her up with Rose. As much as Rose enjoyed winning, what she really loved was a challenge, and she was delighted to be going up against the most promising of the first-years. She locked eyes with her new friend and saw there a familiar glint and she smiled.

Croh, the tall fifth-year who was the assistant offensive captain, kept the ball away from the right side of the field where Rose occupied the wing. This was frustrating, both to Rose and to Zale, but Rose suspected this was a calculated move designed to wear down the defenders before giving the ball to their quickest threat. This would let Prim see which of the new girls might be helpful in defending against the Austin team, who often employed such a strategy and was likely to be their opponent if they made it to the championship match in May. This went on for nearly fifteen minutes, and Rose's mind was beginning to wander when the left-winger kicked the ball up in a high arc pass over the width of the field toward Rose. Zale, too, had taken for granted that Rose no longer posed a threat and had moved toward the center to back up the other full-back, and now she was caught far from her mark just as Rose was about to receive the ball. Yet, Zale was quick to respond and Rose had to work hard to deaden the ball with her chest and to keep it close in front of her as the big full-back bore down on her.

Instinctively, Rose spun to her right and side-stepped in a move that usually left a charging opponent several steps behind her and essentially out of the game. But when she came out of her spin, she saw that Zale had anticipated the move, coming up short and blocking her easy lane to the goal. Zale smiled at Rose – a self-assured challenge. Rose turned off the calculating part of her mind and gave herself over wholly to intuition. She moved forward at half speed, shifting from side to side, waiting for Zale to challenge her, but the larger girl preferred a shepherding defense. She tried to force Rose to move inward with her weaker foot, willing to let one of the other defenders get the glory of stripping the ball. This was a patience that Rose hadn't seen in Zale at the banquet, and it surprised her, but Rose made a series of false lunges that put Zale on her own bad foot, allowing Rose to spin counterclockwise and around the defender. Ordinarily, Rose would have made a pass in front of the net to one of the center strikers, but when she looked up Croh wasn't there. She didn't have a clean shot at the goal and there was no time to wait

for her teammates to catch up, but rather than charge inward as she would have done in a match, she took the awkward shot. The ball zipped through the air with a shriek, striking the far goalpost, bouncing well out of play, and rolling into the ring of trees.

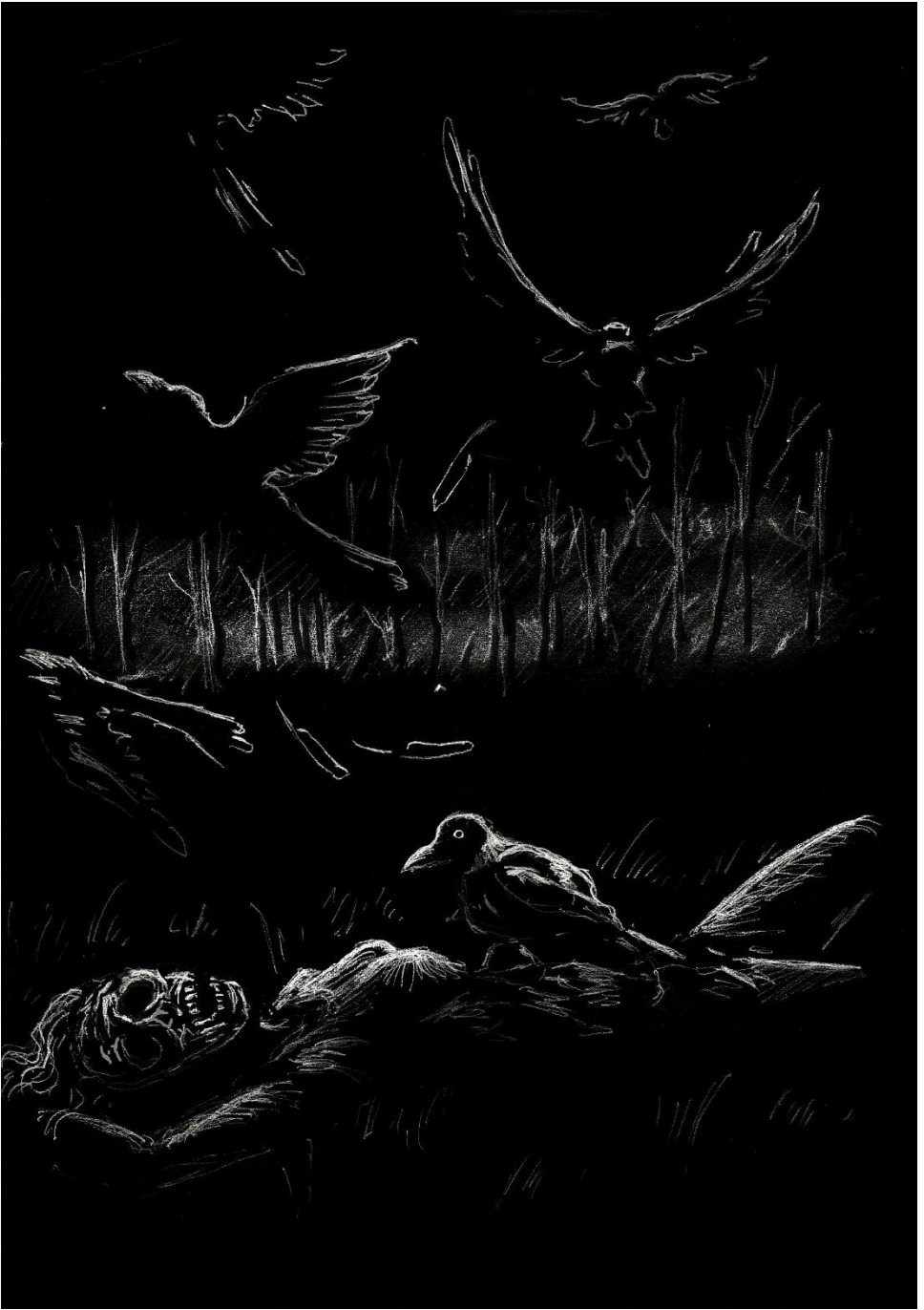
The last player to touch the ball, Rose would have to chase after it, but she just stood there for a moment, laughing. Zale joined in, and Rose put a hand on her shoulder. "You aren't easy to maneuver around." Croh shot an impatient look at Rose, who winked at Zale before jogging into the trees to find the ball.

It was dark among the trees, and cool, which Rose welcomed after the workout. A thin layer of mist hung waist-high above the ground, clinging thickly to the tree trunks. The ball was nowhere to be seen, but the ground sloped slightly downward to her left, and it was likely that the ball had rolled that way. The descent led her to the path that the residents of Robur Hall used to get to the practice field, and there the ball sat, a lonely leather sphere on a patch of dirt. Behind it, an army of magpies were pecking at their breakfast, blissfully unaware of Rose's presence. When she stepped toward the ball, however, the birds noticed her and fled to the nearest branches, croaking at her angrily, revealing the body of a student lying on the path.

Rose rushed to the girl, but even before she reached her, Rose knew that she was dead and had been for some time. Already the birds had made a meal of her exposed flesh, tearing at her face and hands, and pecking out her eyes. They had begun to rip away her clothing to get at her legs and arms, and a patch of the girl's shirt was torn and blackened, revealing a blotch of pallid green on her abdomen. It looked like a deep bruise covered by a glassy sheen, and Rose wondered if this was how the girl had died. The birds had made some puncture marks in a circle near the middle of the blotch where it was darker, almost black. Somehow it was the sight of this bruise rather than the girl's mutilated face that unnerved her. She struggled against a wave of nausea and for a few seconds everything was black.

The croaking of the magpies brought her mind back to the scene, back to the trees and the fog and the corpse of her schoolmate. The birds were loud, and now they seemed disrespectful and insensitive. Rose was quick to anger, and she shouted at the magpies until they retreated to higher perches. Rose crouched down, not really sure of what to do but eager to help in some way. It was impossible to identify the girl, but Rose saw now that she had been carrying a small lantern. Rose wondered if she had been one of the girls she and Zale had seen at the chapel two nights ago, but she couldn't believe that a student could go unmissed for that long. The magpies still would not stop croaking, it seemed even that they were growing louder. Looking up, Rose saw that they had come closer, anticipating Rose's departure, or maybe hoping they could scare her off. Rage exploded in her and she punted the ball into the nearest branches, sending the birds fleeing in silence.

She had no idea what to do next.



Chapter Two

Blythe canceled class that day. No official explanation was given, but the Gaviners knew why, and they crowded into their common room, not for any particular purpose, but just so as not to be alone. They barely spoke to each other, not even to ask the footballers what they had seen. Jasmine sat shoulder-to-shoulder with Rose, reading mostly, drawing sometimes, but never breaking the physical bond. By mid-afternoon they knew that the mutilated corpse had once been Pasque Hardwick, the daughter of the Lord Lieutenant of Peterbridgeshire. She was a fifth-year, so Rose had never met her, and somehow that made her sadder.

That evening there was a service in the Chapel, an experience wholly alien to the joy and serenity that Rose had felt in this same place just two days before. Headmistress Blythe delivered what should have been a eulogy but was in fact more of an admonishment, criticizing those who did not simply ignore Pasque's death and carry on as usual and threatening those who might question the official ruling that it had all been an accident. Pasque's friends wept, but the headmistress scolded them for it, and a simmering anger began to replace the sorrow and emptiness that had defined Rose since football tryouts. The next morning, Blythe doled out the punishments to those she deemed responsible: the Robur prefect and Pasque's floor captain. The entire school assembled in the quadrangle between the Keep and the Chapel to watch the headmistress beat the pair of girls with the Cudgel. She gave a speech about the gravity of a prefect's responsibility to the girls in her hall, but no one in the assembly sympathized with Blythe's perspective, and Rose saw nothing but pity on Holly Mersal's face.

A dark sorrow clung to the students, and it seemed that life could never really be the same again. For Rose, there was also an uneasy angst, a sense that Barrow had let her down. She had never hated Blythe more, and what had once been a personal animosity now took on the shape of a profound injustice to the entire Barrow community. How did Blythe ever attain this position, Rose wondered, and how did she keep it?

If life couldn't quite pick up where it had left off, the school's schedule did. Classes resumed after the beating of the Robur girls, and students and faculty alike tried to pretend that nothing had happened. The Gavin second-years had modern history again on Wednesday morning, but even Dahlia Scrymsher was quiet and restrained, and all day the teachers forgave their students for not having prepared their assignments.

But by Thursday the typically high expectations had replaced this temporary kindness. The Gavin football side was the first to return to the practice field, and while Prim did her best to motivate the team, their hearts simply weren't in it, even with their first match of the year only two days away. Rose and Jasmine had physics all morning, which Rose disliked and Jasmine loved. In the afternoon they had Ancient, for which they would spend the entire year reading the narrative account of the conquest of their island two millennia ago by the self-described military genius who had accomplished it. This was something of a rite of passage, a price to

be paid for the opportunity to begin reading the epic tales of gods and heroes that both girls preferred.

Uncharacteristically, Jasmine had allowed her enthusiasm for Charlotte Whitehall to overshadow her devotion to homework. She knew it couldn't last, that by Saturday she would have to set the project aside, and so at supper on Thursday she funneled her excitement into a detailed, almost breathless report of her findings thus far. She had been working with Sister Heliconia, Barrow's archivist and record-keeper, a young nun who was probably bored in the post. The school had extensive records dating back to its foundation centuries ago, and Sister Elie, as she preferred to be called, had been more than eager to show Jasmine how to navigate them, though Jasmine herself was more interested in Charlotte's genealogy than in her experiences at Barrow. Normally the purview of the school's Librarian, Sister Elie was nonetheless quite helpful in showing Jasmine the genealogical and prosopographical dictionaries, which had yielded very little information about the Porvards after the family's grim demise. She knew that two of Charlotte's sisters had taken posts at Moorfields Hospital, which was still in operation. Sister Elie had offered to write them for copies of any records there might be about Catherine and Julia Whitehall, and in the meantime Jasmine had found a four-volume history of Queen Ingry's reign that she hoped would elucidate the tawdry details of the scandal that had undone the Porvards.

Rose understood that this was how Jasmine was coping with Pasque's death, that this was how Jasmine was masking her fears and anxieties, but it was difficult for her to conceal the discomfort she felt whenever Jasmine brought up her family. Fortunately, Zale more than made up for Rose's shortcomings. The Cowanshire girl was genuinely interested in the project and thought that she, too, might have some familial connection to the story of Charlotte and the Porvards. "We could be long-lost cousins," she said to Rose as if this would be the best thing in the world.

Jasmine's report came to a hasty conclusion as Blythe descended the dais and approached the Gavin table. The headmistress stopped behind Jasmine and fixed an icy gaze on Rose. The Hall fell silent, and Blythe shifted her eyes to Zale. "First thing tomorrow morning, Ms. Reeth. Before breakfast."

"It's about time," Dahlia said from the Austin table.

Zale put a good face on it, giving her all to Friday morning's football practice. "If Blythe's going to beat me," Zale said with a wry smile, "I'm going to give her the pleasure of smelling my sweaty kit." But as she and Rose neared the Keep, Zale's pace slowed and her stride shortened. Walking up the winding steps of the northeast tower, they met a group of teachers on their way to an early breakfast, and when they had passed, Zale stopped and leaned against the wall. "I can't believe I did that."

Silently, Rose took Zale's hand, and together they entered the third-floor corridor where Blythe's rooms overlooked the quad. Despite the number of times Rose had been punished, she had never been to Blythe's rooms, and even when sneaking around the Keep she had avoided the third floor. It was barely lit, darker than the stairwell, the only light coming from two oil lamps on either side of Blythe's door a

hundred feet away. A crimson rug with golden embroidered flowers covered much of the stone floor, worn from decades or centuries of footsteps. Rose started to imagine Charlotte Whitehall walking here, and she was filled with a vague desire to learn which rooms in the Keep had been hers and to stand in them. She regretted that she had been so silent the night before when Jasmine was sharing the results of her research, and she vowed to set aside her anger and to show more gratitude to her friend.

"We've been spotted." Zale pointed down the hallway to a pair of eyes glowing in the darkness just beyond the lamplight.

Spider emerged from the shadows and rolled on the floor beneath one of the lamps, her grey fur almost blue against the rug. She righted herself and gave the girls an expectant look, an invitation to come play, but when they didn't move, she continued toward them, crouching low and slinking against the wall as if she were stalking a mouse. As the cat drew nearer she began to purr, but when Rose reached out to stroke her, Spider pounced backwards and moved playfully back down the hallway. The girls laughed and followed after her. She paused in the lamplight in front of Blythe's rooms, rolling again, waiting to be scratched and petted. There was a pair of wooden doors here, tall and thick and very old. Voices seeped through the crack at the bottom, muffled but intelligible.

"... no need for her parents to know."

"Hang on, Samantha, are you saying that we shouldn't even tell the girl's parents?" This was a male voice, a deep bass, but Rose didn't recognize it.

A third voice, a woman's, answered. "She means that we shouldn't tell them about the mark."

Rose knew that she and Zale weren't meant to overhear this conversation and that Blythe would scold them for eavesdropping, perhaps worse. For a second she considered retreating down the hallway, but her curiosity was stronger than her fear, too strong to resist. She glanced at Zale, who was too busy rubbing the cat's belly to be worried about anything, and Rose realized that being an earl's daughter meant having very little experience with scoldings. She wondered if Zale had ever been beaten before.

"I mean," said Blythe, louder now, "that we should deal with this ourselves. Of course we will inform Mr. Tare, but we will insist that he understand that the death was entirely accidental and that the proximity to Ms. Hardwick's demise is mere coincidence."

Camellia Tare was a third-year in Hepal Hall, an intelligent girl who excelled at mathematics. Rose thought that perhaps she had heard incorrectly, but Zale had stopped playing with Spider and was looking to Rose for guidance. Nothing good could come of being caught listening to this conversation.

"But it is not a coincidence!" the male voice boomed. "This is unconscionable!" He pounded his fist on a table, and now Rose recognized him as Prof. Ely, the quick-tempered but kind classics teacher. He was a rotund man with a bushy grey beard and untamable eyebrows. Something had happened to his leg and he needed a cane

to walk, but that didn't stop him from pacing around the classroom when he spoke. "Our first duty is to protect those under our care, and – "

"You make my point for me."

"Let me finish, please." Some of the bluster had gone out of his voice, and he spoke more softly now. "We must protect our girls, but we also have an obligation to set an example. We cannot tell them to be honest in all matters and then so blatantly fail to do so ourselves."

"Leo," the other woman interrupted, "this isn't a lesson."

"We are teachers – everything we do is a lesson! Not only must we provide Mr. Tare with all of the facts of the case, we must alert the police. If someone is murdering our girls, then we have a moral obligation to do everything in our power to keep them safe. Even if that means sending them home and allowing the newspapers to profit at the expense of your position."

Rose startled at the mention of "murder." And Prof. Ely had said "girls." Plural. Did he mean that Pasque's death had not been an accident?

"I think you mean to say 'at the expense of the school's dignity,' but in – "

"I meant what I said," Ely shouted, "and you – "

There was a sharp cracking sound, like the lashing of a belt or a riding crop. "Do not interrupt me!"

Startled, Spider tensed, crouched, and then bounded into the darkness without a farewell. Zale grabbed Rose's arm. "We should go. I don't want to get in any more trouble."

She was right and Rose knew it. They turned back toward the stairwell, but they were not quick enough.

One of the doors opened and Blythe stepped into the hallway. The headmistress had been about to say something to the teachers, but when she saw the girls she forgot everything else. "Stop right where you are! Turn around!" She glared at them, jaw clenched, wrist twirling. "Skulking outside my door," she said, almost to herself.

Rose looked into Blythe's eyes. "You told Zale to come – "

Blythe's nostrils flared. "You will cease speaking at once, Ms. Whitehall."

Prof. Kendal stepped into the hall, followed by Prof. Ely, who smiled at Rose through his massive beard. "Walk downstairs with me, Rose. I think you'll want to change out of your kit before breakfast."

Rose squeezed Zale's hand "I'll wait for you at home."

Prof. Ely had saved her from being beaten with Zale, and when Rose left the Keep she was feeling relieved. But the magnitude of what they had overheard sunk in and by the time she reached Gavin she was full of fury toward Blythe. Outside her door she paused, breathing deeply to calm herself so that she wouldn't upset Jasmine. She wanted to tell Jasmine about the death of Camellia Tare – the murder of Camellia Tare – but without more facts, Jasmine would likely panic, and Rose didn't want to do that to her. Jasmine would react better to an official announcement, which Blythe would make at breakfast. Then Rose could tell her what she'd overheard.

When she entered, Jasmine was sitting on her bed, a notebook open on her legs, glasses slipping down her nose, and her hair coming undone. Her head snapped up, a huge grin on her face. "You'll never believe what I've discovered."

"Is this about Charlotte Whitehall?"

"Yes, I found –"

Rose wanted to listen. She understood that this was Jasmine's way of coping with the intrusion of violence into her home, but she didn't have the willpower. "Could we just play a game of chess?"

Reading the distress on Rose's face, Jasmine silently opened a drawer in her nightstand and removed a small wooden chessboard. "You're black."

Jasmine's curates were closing in on Rose's king when Zale appeared in the doorway. Dried tears speckled her flushed cheeks and her eyes were bloodshot. She was out of breath and only barely able to stand. The girls raced to her, each taking an arm and helping her to Rose's bed.

She appeared as if Blythe had laid into her more than the usual two or three blows. Rose couldn't help but think that their eavesdropping had something to do with that. A sickening fear that she might lose Zale's friendship sent a wave of nausea through her, but she took a deep breath and drove the panic from her mind and she focused on caring for Zale. "Do we still have willow bark in the wardrobe?"

"I already have it." Jasmine was unfazed. Because of Rose's own predilections, she had developed a routine for treating the victims of the Cudgel.

"I don't think I'll be able to play for a few days." Zale was speaking just to have something to focus on besides the pain.

"For a few days even just sitting down is going to hurt," Rose said, trying to be playful. "But Jasmine will take care of you."

Zale gave a wincing smile to Jasmine. "Thanks, Jas."

Jasmine frowned. "It's Jasmine."

Blythe was not present at breakfast and there was no announcement about Camellia Tare. As the day went on without any news of Camellia's death or disappearance, not even from the other girls in Hepal Hall, Rose began to wonder if she had misheard the conversation. At supper, she tried to talk it over with Zale, but she was in no condition to talk, so Rose let the matter go, sitting instead with the football team to talk about their Saturday match.

It was tradition that the teams who had faced each other in the previous championship should open the new year in a rematch, and as a rule these were fiercely fought and much anticipated. All summer, Rose had been daydreaming about this match, about the opportunity to take some revenge on the Austin side, but she wanted it even more now that she had Zale's punishment to add to her list of grievances against Dahlia. Whether through conscious planning or simply through her natural antagonism, Dahlia used this to her advantage during the first half, needling Rose with comments about Zale's recent beating, Rose's own encounters with the Cudgel, and a host of observations about the class, regional, ancestral, and intellectual shortcomings of the members of Gavin Hall.

It worked. Rose received the ball twice in the first ten minutes, but she was clumsy, stumbling over her own feet, essentially doing Dahlia's job for her. She was frustrated and it was obvious. From that point on Prim and Croh kept the ball in the center or on the left wing, which only added to Rose's frustration. She went into the half angrier at herself than she was at Dahlia or any of the other Austiners. The team left her alone during the break as she worked at controlling her breathing, willing her rage to subside.

The Austiners came out of the break with an aggression they hadn't shown in the first half, and Dalglish and Bradshaw each scored in the first five minutes. The Gavin offense couldn't afford to play without both wings, and Rose took the ball several times. Dahlia kept up her verbal assault, but Rose had an intense focus now, passing the ball forward to Prim who made a powerful shot that bounced off the Austin keeper's hands. Croh was right there to catch the rebound, putting it in the net with a gentle tap. After that, there was very little action at either end of the field, and the match became a brutal slog between opposing mid-fielders. Still two to one with only a few minutes on the clock, the Gavin defenders strayed too far into the midfield, and when Bradshaw took a short pass, there was no one to stop her from charging the net. The game looked about to be over, but the Gavin keeper leaped for the ball, deflected it forward, and somehow recovered quickly enough to get to it before Bradshaw realized that she hadn't scored. The keeper punted the ball downfield, a risky move in a close game.

Rose and Dahlia raced for the ball. Rose was faster, but Dahlia's attempts to trip her meant that she couldn't really stretch her legs. They got to the ball at the same time, Dahlia angling for position to control it. She shouldered Rose out of the way, but Rose regained her footing in time to dive for the ball while it was still in the air, striking it with her forehead and passing it laterally to the charging Prim. This time Prim took more care with the Austin keeper, outmaneuvering her and kicking the ball into the opposite corner of the net.

Dahlia stepped in front of Rose and spit in her face. "Orphan brat."

Fury exploded in Rose, igniting her nerves and slowing the world around her. She balled her hands into tight fists, but at the last second her mind cleared and she took control of herself. "I feel sorry for you, Dahlia. You hate everything that the world has to offer so much that your only consolation is in bleeding the joy from everyone around you so won't be alone in your misery." She wiped the spit from her face and smiled. "You're a vacant wretch and I pity you."

With the match over, the lurking fact of Camellia Tare's possible murder reoccupied its position at the front of Rose's mind. Camellia was not at supper, and by this point Rose was nearly certain that she had neither misheard nor misunderstood the conversation in Blythe's rooms.

Zale hadn't joined Rose and Jasmine at the table, but was sitting with some of the other first years, talking about courses and homework. Rose tried to make eye contact with her, but Zale never looked in her direction, so Rose excused herself

from Jasmine and Trite and went to the end of the table. "We need to talk about Camellia. About what we heard."

Zale looked down at her plate. "There's nothing to talk about.

"What do you mean?"

Zale didn't look up. "I'm sorry. Blythe is beastly, but ... but ... it isn't us against them. The teachers are in charge and they'll do what's best. I don't want to get in any more trouble. Please."

Rose shouldn't have been surprised. She knew herself what it was like to be beaten by Blythe, how humiliating it was, how crushing. Maybe Zale was right, maybe the teachers did know better. Perhaps Rose was letting angst and anger cloud her judgment. Even if Camellia Tare had been murdered, shouldn't she be more concerned about the murderer than about Blythe's cover-up? But thinking about it in such clear terms only made her angry again, and she couldn't wait any longer to discover what had happened to Camellia and why Blythe wasn't telling them.

Students were not permitted to sit with other halls, and after the banquet brawl Blythe was more likely to enforce that rule with draconian measures, but Rose was too impatient now to play it safe. She shoveled the last of the potato stew into her mouth before getting up. "Cover for me," she said to Prim, and hurried over to the Hepalids.

"Let me in." A pair of upper-years exchanged an amused smile, but they parted just enough for Rose to squeeze onto the bench across from Lisianthus Dacre, the Hepal prefect. Lisi had penetrating fern-colored eyes, and she fixed them on Rose, one eyebrow raised. "Haven't you caused enough trouble this week?"

"I'm looking for Camellia Tare."

"She had to go home. Some sort of family affair."

"Did she tell you that herself?"

"Blythe told me."

As if roused by the mere utterance of her name, Headmistress Blythe called from the High Table. "Ms. Whitehall, you are out of order."

Conversations halted and spoons were suspended in the air. But Prim stood from the Gavin table. "I'm sorry, Headmistress, I sent Rose to ask about switching practice times."

"You will practice at your appointed time, Ms. Venable. And there will be order in this Hall."

Rose used the few seconds left to her. "But did you see Camellia before she left? Did you talk to her? It's important."

Lisi, unfazed by the Headmistress's attention, gave Rose a puzzled squint. "Important for what? But, no, that's why Blythe told me where she'd gone."

It was a sleepless night for Rose, who planned and plotted and then started over. She had no idea what to do next. Should she be looking for a body? Should she sneak off campus and go to the police in the City? She desperately wanted to talk it over with Jasmine, who had read more than enough mystery novels and would certainly know what to do. But now that Zale was upset with her, afraid of her perhaps, Rose

was nervous about doing anything that might unsettle Jasmine and cost her friendship.

Rose noticed that very few of the faculty were present at breakfast, but didn't think much about it until a pair of Windbury third-years burst into the Great Hall, breathless and pale. "Amaryllis is dead!"

Noise erupted and echoed around the room until some of the prefects managed to impose something that was almost order. Blythe appeared moments later and put a quick end to the students' chatter, a cold anger in her eyes that Rose suspected was more about losing control of Barrow than about losing students. "Barrow is closed until further notice," she said sharply and without explanation. "You will return to your halls and stay there until you are sent home this afternoon. Those of you without homes, will move to the Keep until other arrangements can be made. Any student caught outside of her Hall will be expelled."

No one spoke or moved and the Great Hall was eerily silent.

"Go now!"

The students trudged obediently out of the Keep, even Rose, who took Jasmine's hand on the quiet walk back to Gavin Hall. Rose knew that Jasmine was struggling against the panic of having her routine suddenly disrupted, and when the rest of the Gaviners crowded into the common room to speculate about what was going on, Rose and Jasmine slipped away upstairs. Besides, Rose knew what was going on.

"There's a murderer loose in the school," Rose blurted out as soon as their door was closed. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you before."

Jasmine blinked at Rose, her face expressionless.

"Zale and I," Rose went on. "We, when we went to Blythe's on Friday, we overheard something. I think that Pasque was murdered. And Camellia Tare."

Jasmine pulled a battered suitcase from beneath her bed and went to work filling it. "You and Zale?"

This was how things had been last spring, and now Rose felt that her silence had betrayed Jasmine's trust. "It wasn't like that. I'm sorry I didn't tell you before," Rose repeated. "But I was hoping it wasn't true. I thought maybe if I didn't tell you, it wouldn't be. Couldn't be."

Jasmine said nothing.

Rose settled onto her bed, sitting with her back against the wall, legs crossed in front of her. She rubbed a callous on her palm for a minute before she summoned the will to tell Jasmine everything she'd overheard in the Keep. Jasmine kept her back to Rose the entire time, but Rose knew she was listening attentively, like a cat feigning disinterest but betrayed by its own ears.

"What do you think Prof. Kendal meant by 'the mark?'" Jasmine's back was still to Rose, but she had stopped packing. "You didn't say anything about ... when ... after Pasque, I mean."

This was how Jasmine dealt with anxiety. She picked one detail and latched onto it, ignoring the danger of the forest in favor of one interesting tree until she was steady enough to move on. Rose didn't want to think about Pasque's corpse, but she

described it to Jasmine, who reacted clinically, and it suddenly occurred to Rose that Jasmine might make a good doctor.

"The bruise looked like pea soup that had been left uncovered overnight."

Rose thought about it and nodded. "Yes, that's right."

"That wasn't a bruise. It's necrosis – dying skin, from a venomous snake or spider. The glassy sheen you saw is the slough – the outer layer of the epidermis separating from the dead layers underneath." Jasmine grabbed a book from her nightstand, an old leather-bound notebook or diary of some sort, and flipped through it. She extended it to Rose. "Is that what the birds did to it?"

Rose rolled over her bed and took the book, but didn't look at it. "You think Pasque was poisoned by magpies?"

"Just look at it."

It was a diary, full of handwritten notes on thick, unlined pages. At the bottom of one was a sketch of a human abdomen with eight symmetrical puncture wounds. "This is exactly what I saw. What is this?" Carelessly, she flipped the book over to see what was stitched into the spine.

"Careful!" Jasmine snapped, taking the book from Rose. "That's very old." She pushed her suitcase aside and sat on her bed. "You'd better sit down."

"This," she held up the book, "is the diary of Sister Charlotte Whitehall. The last pages concern her investigation into a series of deaths at Barrow in 1707. They all had that mark. Sister Charlotte thought it was from an animal bite, and she was trying to find it."

"And she did, right? That's what you wrote me."

Jasmine nodded. "She did. Chambers called it 'the Beast,' and I think he meant 'animal.' But," she gestured at her nightstand, "I also have the sanctification documents the school sent to the Grand Curate, and, well, the headmistress at the time didn't mean 'animal.' She meant something supernatural, something ancient and evil. A demon. She called it an 'Abomination.'"

Rose smirked. "But you can't really believe that?"

"No. Not really, but the story ... The headmistress wrote that Charlotte vanquished the Abomination with a family relic that burned so brightly with a holy light that it forced the creature back into its underground lair where it died – or at least never left again."

"And you think that's what got Pasque? And Camellia and Amaryllis?"

Jasmine looked shocked. "Not the same creature, obviously, that would be preposterous. But one of its kind. Not a demon – but maybe some very old and very rare species of animal. Something that lives on rats and moles, but will come above ground when it has run out of other food."

"Maybe. But it's already killed three girls in less than a week – how could there have been that many moles in the hill? Besides, it isn't eating."

"Did you see any blood around Pasque?"

Rose thought about it. "No."

Jasmine nodded. "That's because it drinks the blood. That's what the venom does – it keeps the punctures open and it restricts the heart to ensure a smooth and steady flow of blood into the animal's mouth. Bats do it with their saliva."

"Alright, alright, I believe you. But I don't want to talk to Blythe. Who should we go to? Professor Ely?"

Jasmine wrung her hands together and looked away. "I don't think they can do anything to stop it. Last time, it killed forty-seven students, eleven teachers, and six royal huntsmen before Sister Charlotte defeated it."

"With her magic light."

"Exactly."

Rose raised her eyebrows. "We're supposed to do this ourselves?"

"You faced that ghost light in the Awdry."

Rose laughed. "You mean I should do it?"

Jasmine didn't say anything.

"So, I just have to find Charlotte's magical relic then go find the underground lair and defeat an ancient bloodsucking bat monster?"

"The sanctification request says that it was laid to rest with her."

Rose laughed again. "Do we know where her sarcophagus is?"

"Not yet, but I –" A knock on the door interrupted her.

Zale came in without waiting for a response. "I'm leaving shortly for my brother's flat in the City. He's a bit of a ratbag, but you two ought to come with me – you don't have to wait here." She looked at Rose. "I'm sorry I didn't ... I'm sorry."

Rose just smiled and shook her head. "There's nothing to apologize for." She glanced at Jasmine. "But I can't go."

"Because of Blythe?"

Rose and Jasmine looked at each other. "You tell her," Rose insisted.

"A magic light?" Zale asked when Jasmine had finished explaining. "Jas, that's absurd."

"It's Jasmine."

"I know it sounds silly, Zale," Rose explained, "but Barrow is ... Barrow is not exactly a normal place. And I want to do this." And she did, though she hadn't realized it before. The image of Pasque lying in that grove of beech trees brought a wave of nausea, and the thought of the school closing filled her mind with dread. Barrow was the only real home she'd ever known and she didn't want to lose it. Most of all, she didn't want to be separated from Jasmine. Rose wanted to protect her home, to defend her friends from whatever was stalking them, and somehow she felt like it was her responsibility. She knew that it was, that it was hers and no one else's. "But you must take Jasmine."

Jasmine shook her head. "I want to help." When Rose gave her an intense, surprised look, she added, "Oh, I'm not going down in any cave. But Barrow is my home, too, and you need someone to help you with research – you barely know how to use the catalogue."

Zale shrugged her shoulders. "I guess I'm staying, too."

Chapter Three

"At this rate," Zale smiled, "I'll have broken into every building on campus before the end of the term."

"Quiet," Jasmine hissed. She was terrified of being discovered and expelled.

Rose was far more concerned with encountering the Beast before they were ready for it, but she too wanted silence. She held her breath, listening for any sound within the darkened Old Library. Jasmine and Zale each took one of her hands in theirs, and the three of them stood there silently until Rose was satisfied that nothing was lurking among the archives.

As a rule, the students only ever made use of the stacks and study areas in the bright and spacious New Library, which Jasmine could have easily navigated in the dark. But the records that Jasmine wanted to examine were housed here, so they were going to need light. Rose lit a small lantern and handed it to Jasmine.

"No." Jasmine took a step back and held up her hands. "I don't ... can you hold it?"

Flames were not permitted in the Library under any circumstances. This was one of the few rules at Barrow for which the punishment was immediate expulsion, and they had all vowed to uphold it. Rose understood that even though they were already in jeopardy of expulsion simply by being outside of the Keep, Jasmine nonetheless needed to obey this rule.

Dating from shortly after Barrow's foundation, the single room of the Old Library more closely resembled a mead hall than a palace of learning. Like church pews, low bookcases topped with lecterns stretched into the darkness on either side of an aisle of worn pinewood. Tall, heavy books bound in thick leather sat on the shelves, tethered to them with iron chains. To Rose, the room seemed like a relic. It should be dusty, she thought, but it was clean and polished, almost immaculate.

"How do we know where to look?" Zale asked.

"There's a system." Jasmine sounded as if the effort of explaining it to them would exhaust her. She started down the aisle, Rose and Zale following, and stopped at a case near the far end, the only exit now shrouded in darkness behind them. "Construction records are kept here. St. Charlotte Hall is recent, so it's probably in the last volume, but we may as well search through the last three." Jasmine plopped a heavy volume onto the lectern, the chain rattling against the case, and Zale and Rose did the same, the three of them lined up like nuns performing compline. "Work backwards," Jasmine said. Rose elbowed her playfully, and a few seconds later Jasmine let out a reluctant laugh. "Sorry."

The last entry in Rose's volume detailed the construction of Rugborough Hall. The record spanned over a hundred pages, documenting every piece of material purchased and the name of everyone who worked on the project, from the masons to the delivery drivers. She'd had no idea how much was involved in constructing a simple classroom building, and she marveled that it ever got done.

High above them a support beam creaked. Jasmine tensed and grabbed Rose's arm and Zale whirled around, staring up at the dark rafters. They held their breath

and listened, but there was no further sound. Rose laughed a little and shrugged her shoulders. "It's an old building."

They went back to searching through their books, and after a few moments Jasmine closed hers and let out a heavy sigh. "It's not in mine. Here, let me see yours." She brushed Rose out of the way and began to flip through the book quickly, her face scrunched up, irritation at not finding what she was seeking now overriding both her anxiety about expulsion and her fear of monsters. "Right, here it is." She thumped an index finger on the book and then pushed her glasses back up her nose before aggressively scanning the entry. "Oh! There's a letter from the Grand Curate approving the request to move St. Charlotte." She looked away for an instant, blinking at the darkness. "Have you ever wondered who runs the school?"

"I'm pretty sure it's the woman with the Cudgel," Zale said.

"No, I mean, above her. Who does Blythe answer to? Is it the Grand Curate directly?"

"Does that matter right now?" Rose asked.

Jasmine shrugged and went back to reading. "Here it is, I think." Rose leaned in to see, but Jasmine flipped the page. "Oh no."

"What is it?" Zale came around to the other side of Jasmine.

"She's in the Forest now."

If they weren't in real danger of dying, Rose would have found this hilarious. She placed a hand on Jasmine's shoulder. "That's hundreds of square miles. If it doesn't say where, we should just go stay with Zale's brother."

"She's near Stewardstone Pond." Jasmine pulled a notebook and a pencil from her shoulder bag and began drawing something. "There's a map."

Rose shook her head. "We don't need one. I've been there last year, after the football cup. It's a hot spring. We can –"

Something rattled the chains on the bookcase opposite them. Rose grabbed the lantern and stepped toward the noise. Zale moved with her, and together they crossed the aisle, leaving Jasmine alone just outside the circle of light. By the time they reached the other case, the chain had ceased moving and there was no sign of whatever had caused the disturbance.

"Does Spider come in here?" Zale asked.

Jasmine came up behind them. "Please let's just leave."

Anxious, afraid, and with only the light of one small lantern, it took them nearly half an hour to make their way down the stone steps cut into the Hill's north end. There was no breeze and a damp chill hung in the air, stale but sweet, and below them a lone owl hooted, as if alerting the Forest to their imminent arrival. When at last they reached the bottom of the Hill and entered the wood, the sweetness of the air gave way to something herbal and alive.

The Blaidding Forest stretched for miles and miles to the north and east of Barrow Hill, but, mercifully, Stewardstone Pond was not far. There was a path, well worn by students and teachers and deer over the centuries. Rose knew the way and there was only the one path, but Jasmine consulted her map every dozen steps,

falling behind and then rushing to catch up. Save for their own footsteps, the Forest was silent. The lantern barely illuminated the trees around them, and the trunks looked charred in the dim yellow light.

They came to a fork in the path, and Rose turned right without hesitation. Jasmine started to say something, but stopped before she had made a noise. Somehow, Rose sensed her friend's concern and looked over her shoulder with a smile. Gradually, the herbal odor soured until it took on a lemony character. "We're almost there," Rose said. Thin wisps of white fog stretched into the space between the trees and hung over the path. The already damp air became thick and warm with moisture, beads of dew clinging to the lantern. Ahead of them, water bubbled and burbled. At last the trees thinned and they came to the shore of the Pond, visible less as a pool of water than as a heavy white cloud.

"This must have been quite a holiday spot when the Ancients built the City. Are there any ruins?" There was a genuine and eager curiosity in Jasmine's voice, as if she had forgotten both the danger and the urgency of their situation.

"We can come back another time," Rose said.

"When there is more sunlight and fewer monsters," Zale added.

"Does your map show Charlotte's priant?" Rose asked. "Or just the Pond?"

Jasmine's glasses had fogged over, and she had to squint over them to read the map. "Maybe. Sorry. Yes, it does show her, but I don't know how precise this really is. We should look to the north."

There was no clear path into the woods from the northern shore. "Why move her to such an obvious landmark and then not advertise her presence?" Jasmine asked.

Rose ignored the question and stepped into the trees, crunching years of dead leaves and acorn shells beneath her feet. The steam was still thick, and it was difficult to see, but suddenly Rose emerged into a circle that was free of both trees and steam. Freshly bloomed purple aster flowers covered the ground, and in the center was a sarcophagus of white marble, atop which rested a sculpture of a robed woman on her knees. Her head bowed as if in prayer, her right hand was balled into a fist and held high over her head while her left hand covered her heart.

Rose stepped forward and shone the light on Charlotte's face. Her eyes were shut tight, but her lips were open and Rose wondered whether her voice had trembled when she faced the Beast. Behind her, Jasmine put a hand on Rose's shoulder and said "faith shall be my shield and my rampart."

"I shall fear neither the lion that stalks by night nor the falcon that hunts by day," Rose finished the verse. "Let's get this open and go fight a monster."

This proved impossible. Besides the heavy sculpture on top, the sarcophagus seemed to be completely sealed, as if it were still a solid block of marble. "I don't understand." Rose plopped to the ground and hugged her knees.

"Is this the wrong place?" Zale asked. "Perhaps this is just a sculpture, and St. Charlotte's remains are elsewhere?"

Jasmine shook her head. "I don't think the school would have needed permission from the Grand Curate to move a sculpture. She must be in there, and there must be a way to open it." She picked up the lantern and walked around to the north side

of the sarcophagus. "There's something written here, but it's weathered. I'm going to make a rubbing."

When she was done, Jasmine laid five sheets of paper atop the blanket of aster flowers. Together, they spelled out a phrase in Ancient. Zale peered at it. "What needs –"

"Mood," Jasmine corrected. "It's in the subjunctive, so it's 'if.' 'If the need presses, drop the heart.'"

"I guess I found a new language tutor," Zale laughed.

"That doesn't seem especially helpful," said Rose.

Jasmine circled the priant, inspecting it like a drill master. After her third circuit, she jumped onto the sarcophagus and gingerly caressed the sculpture. "The stone is warm," she said, "just like Chambers described it." A moment later she laughed. "It's not 'drop – it's 'push down.' 'Press the heart!'"

She placed her hand over Charlotte's and pushed until the stone hand moved into the body of the sculpture. Muffled by several inches of marble, there was a nonetheless distinct metallic click from inside the sarcophagus, followed by a thud that vibrated the stone. Jasmine jumped up and clapped her hands. "We did it!" The square face at the head of the sarcophagus had fallen open, revealing the inside where Charlotte Whitehall lay atop a stone bier. Her body was perfectly preserved, as if she were merely sleeping. No dust had settled, no moss or mold had grown, and even her habit was fresh and clean.

"How is that possible?" Zale asked.

Jasmine scooted off the sarcophagus. "Oh. She looks just like you, Rose. Or you look just like her."

It was true: they shared the same stringy blonde hair and weak chin, the same skinny arms and long fingers. Charlotte's eyes were closed, but Rose wondered if they were olive like hers.

"How?" Zale asked again.

"It doesn't matter." Rose didn't mean that, and in fact she remained intensely curious about St. Charlotte, but she wanted to stay focused on their mission. "There are handholds. We can pull her out."

Zale and Rose each grabbed a side, but tugging with all of their might they only moved the bier a few inches. "Maybe we can crawl inside?" Zale asked. "Not me, but Jasmine might fit."

"I ..." Jasmine's voice trembled, and Rose knew that she did not want to do that.

"What are we looking for?" Rose asked. "What is the Light? Let's figure that out before we go crawling around inside."

Jasmine shone a light into the sarcophagus and inspected the body. "She's holding something in her right hand."

Zale shoved her arm into the opening. "I can almost reach it." She and Rose gave the bier one more heaving tug and then she tried again. "I can feel it. It's a necklace, I think. The chain is wound around her wrist. Jas, try to aim the beam around me so I can see what I'm doing."

“Jasmine,” she said quietly, and then moved the lantern around to find the best angle.

Rose got out of the way and peered into the darkness, suddenly aware of a profound exhaustion. Dawn must be coming soon, she thought, the robins should already be up and singing. A dread began to seep into her mind and her breath became shallow. Her skin prickled and she shivered. Amidst the trees, the steam had gathered around a sort of solid darkness, blacker than the night and heavy. She struggled against a sudden fear and tried to take a deep breath. “Light,” she ordered quietly.

The blackness crept toward her, leaving a wake of steam swirling behind it. “Light!”

Jasmine turned around with the lantern, revealing the rough contours of the shape at the edge of the grove. It was massive and full of menace, so black as to seem resistant to the light, as if it simply absorbed it or devoured it. Rose glanced behind her. “Run, Jasmine. Run!”

But it was too late. The blackness sprang toward Jasmine. She shrieked and dropped the lantern, but Zale was there, placing herself between her friend and the Beast, thrusting Charlotte’s necklace into the night.

Nothing happened.

Zale howled in pain and the necklace flew out of her hand and landed at Rose’s feet.

Though she could not see, Rose was aware that the monster was trying to consume Zale. Without a thought, she crouched to the ground and clamped her hand around the necklace. It was stone, warm and growing warmer. Suddenly it burned with a light so bright that it was almost clear and she could see again.

Zale had collapsed and the Beast was looming over her, but when Rose stretched the necklace toward it, it leaped backwards. Now in this holy light, the creature was fully visible. It was unearthly and demonic, something of a jaguar but also viperous. It had a circular maw full of long black teeth like obsidian razors but was without eyes or ears. It growled and looked ready to pounce, but now that she could see it, Rose was no longer afraid. She thought of Pasque’s corpse and of the students weeping in the Chapel and an icy wrath seethed in her. She glanced down at the wounded and whimpering Zale and the cowering Jasmine and her anger grew fiery and fierce. Nothing was going to hurt her friends. Rose stepped toward the Beast and yelled. The necklace shone brighter and a brown smoke rose from the monster’s back. It yelped and leaped backwards again before turning and bounding into the trees and out of sight.

The necklace’s light diminished to a pale glow. Rose knelt beside Zale, but Jasmine nudged her aside. “Hold the lantern so I can see.”

Zale’s sleeve had been torn just below the shoulder revealing a trio of slash marks. Blood was gushing out of the wounds too quickly and her face was turning light blue. “It burns,” Zale said through clenched teeth. Jasmine used a handkerchief to wipe the blood away, and Zale bit her lip. The slashes appeared to be rather shallow but the skin around them had already turned black. Necrosis, Jasmine had

called it. "Press down as hard as you can with the handkerchief," Jasmine ordered Rose before walking back toward Sister Charlotte's sarcophagus.

With her other hand, Rose stroked Zale's orange hair. "You're going to be fine."

Zale tried to laugh. "I'm not excited about walking back up those steps."

Jasmine returned with a wad of black cloth and began to make a bandage out of it.

Rose raised an eyebrow. "Is that from Charlotte's habit?"

Jasmine didn't answer. "All done," she said when she'd finished with the bandage. "But now we have to get you to the infirmary." She grabbed a handful of flowers and crushed them together into a ball. "People use these for sleeping sometimes, so it should slow your heart rate and your bleeding. It might help with the pain, too."

"Thank you, Jas. Thank you."

For over forty years Sister Edith had been the nurse at Barrow, and she cared for the students as if they were her grandchildren. She spoiled them, too, taking a particular delight in sneaking biscuits to her patients behind Blythe's back, and as exams were approaching at the end of term it was not uncommon for students to catch a case of the biscuit flu. She washed Zale's shoulder with a damp sponge. "The bleeding doesn't seem to have stopped, but these cuts are shallow."

The nurse had said this mostly to herself, but Jasmine took it as a conversational cue. "The animal's saliva is an anti-coagulant."

"Hmm, we'll just have to keep the pressure on it for a while." She peered at the blackened skin around the lacerations.

"Will it ever stop burning?" Zale asked.

Sister Edith prepared a fresh bandage. "The burning is good – it means the skin isn't completely dead, and it might heal. It's going to –"

Headmistress Blythe burst through the door with so much force that she nearly ripped it from its hinges. "Ms. Whitehall, of course. And Ms. Irving. But Ms. Reeth, I thought we had corrected your disobedience? Well, it isn't my concern any longer." She tugged on the bottom of her coat. "You are all expelled, effective immediately. Rides will be arranged before lunch."

Jasmine took several steps backwards and seemed to shrink in terror.

Rose took a step forward. "But we can stop it! We have a relic –"

"Headmistress, it's all in this diary." Jasmine drew the book from her bag and held it up. "Won't you please read it?"

But Blythe was already on the move. A backhanded slap to Rose's face sent the girl careening into Jasmine, knocking her over and spilling the diary across the floor. The headmistress pounced on them, dragging them up by their arms and throwing them out of the infirmary. "March!"

Blythe locked them in a room without any windows or furniture. Rose tugged at the door, and when that didn't work she beat her fists against it, and when that didn't work she began to pace the tiny room. She had tried to do something good – was going to do something good – and was being punished for it without even an opportunity to speak for herself. What was worse was that Jasmine was going to

suffer for it. The world seemed cruel and unjust. This, she thought, is what persecution feels like.

After a while, Jasmine said her name and took her hand and they slumped to the floor, sitting shoulder-to-shoulder until they both eventually fell asleep.

The door opened and startled the girls awake.

"I think this belongs to you." It was St. Charlotte's diary. "Azalea explained it to me, and I've had a read for myself. Show me the necklace."

Rose took the necklace from her pocket. She hadn't really looked at it herself yet, and she was surprised to see that it was still glowing very faintly. It was some sort of pale blue gemstone cut into an octagonal cylinder perhaps two inches long and wedged into a plain piece of gold with a thin chain. The stone weighed more than an object of that size should and it made her feel warm and full, as if she'd just finished a pot of tea. When she handed it to Sister Edith, the light finally died out. The nurse held it up to her eyes and twisted it in her fingers before handing it back to Rose, at which point the light returned, though not much brighter than a cat's eyes.

Sister Edith sighed and nodded to herself. "I'll pray for you, dear." With a weak smile, the nurse left.

Rose stared blankly at the open door for a moment and then shrugged her shoulders. "I guess I'll go fight a monster." Her voice was weary and sluggish.

Jasmine stood up. "Not by yourself."

Rose tried to laugh but couldn't summon the strength. "I thought you weren't going into any cave?"

"I can't say I'm excited about it, but I can't let you go alone. Not now that I've seen ... that thing."

"I –" Rose started and then stopped, thinking about what to say. She was proud of Jasmine's courage, but she knew that it couldn't last, that she would give into fear, and if Rose died then Jasmine would too. "I want you to stay here. I'll fight better if I don't have to worry about someone else getting hurt. Besides, Charlotte died doing this, remember?"

"I know." Jasmine looked at the floor. "And I don't want you to die alone."

Rose nodded. "But I think I'd prefer it that way." She offered a half smile to her friend. "And anyway, if I go and you stay here, Blythe might change her mind about expelling you."

Jasmine laughed and looked at the ground before throwing her arms around Rose. "I love you."

Rose had only been in the Chapel crypt once before, on St. Baldred's Day, when the whole school congregated to venerate their patron and founder. It had been bright then, hundreds of candles behind panes of colored glass, bathing the vaults in shades of green and yellow. Rose had felt like she was swimming in a sea of light and song where time had no meaning and everything was warm and close.

Now it was black. There were several chapels down here, nestled into alcoves for private prayer and contemplation, but no one used them except on holidays. To

Rose, the crypt seemed now like a dark void, a vast nothingness at the heart of the school. Standing at the base of the stairs, Rose beamed her lantern around the massive space and her skin bristled and she was suddenly aware of being cold.

According to Jasmine, the last time the Beast had come to the surface, the Sisters had gathered the remaining students here to pray for safety. That was when Charlotte Whitehall had faced it, forcing the creature to flee, just as Rose had done in the Forest only a few hours earlier. Charlotte had chased it down deep into the Hill through some ancient network of tunnels and caves. Although the sanctification narrative didn't say so explicitly, Jasmine surmised that there must be a way into those tunnels from the crypt. Neither of them had stated the obvious: that any such opening had probably been sealed after Charlotte's death. Rose didn't expect to discover a way down, but the crypt was as good a place as any to hide from Blythe until nightfall, when finding the Beast would likely just be a matter of being all alone in the open.

But she didn't want to wait in the dark. There was an alcove to the right of the stairs where Rose was able to light some candles. She sat on a bench for a while, contemplating the dusty image of St. Adda, the patron of learning and lore. He was an old man with a grey beard, bushy but thin. His eyes looked tired from too many hours spent squinting at texts. This painting didn't make scholarship seem especially appealing, but Rose was growing bored just sitting here and wouldn't have minded the distraction of some homework.

Eventually, the boredom overtook her and even before a thought had really formed in her mind Rose left the little chapel and stepped into the darkness. It was colder now and the smell of something old and damp hung in the air. An image of Pasque's corpse crept into her mind and her skin tingled and burned and she couldn't fill her lungs all the way. Beads of sweat formed on her forehead and she felt dizzy. There was an alcove a few steps ahead, and when she had lit several of the candles at the entrance her dizziness subsided and she could breathe again.

But something was wrong with this chapel. The holy icon and the altar had been shoved into a corner and the benches moved to the sides. On the floor where the benches should have been someone had used ashes to smudge a large black circle. The strokes were broad and rough, giving it the appearance of dead vines twisted into a wreath. Small red triangles lay over the circle, eight of them at regular intervals, and the whole image looked like a crown studded with dying stars. A student's jacket lay at the base of the icon stand as if it had been tossed there and forgotten. Rose picked it up and saw the Austin patch on the right breast pocket. She had never really looked at one before, and in the quiet and the cold and the dark its resting lion looked more sinister and devious than regal. The memory of the lanterns congregated outside the Chapel entrance on the night of the banquet came back to her now.

With the deaths of Pasque and Camellia and Amaryllis, Rose had completely forgotten the incident. Thinking about it now, a quiet anger welled in her. She had done her own share of sneaking about where she didn't belong, but something about this scene seemed offensive, as if it were connected to the deaths. The anger

disappeared and a sudden sorrow overwhelmed her. She thought of Zale in the infirmary, her arm bloody and blackened, and of Jasmine locked in a closet, alone and terrified of losing her place in the world. These things were her fault. She had failed to protect her friends, she had failed to keep her home safe, and there was nothing she could do to make it right. It was hard to breathe again and the chapel started to spin around her.

Rose had to get out of here. She turned and stumbled. When she had righted herself, she became aware that the Beast was crouching patiently just beyond the circle of candlelight. The weight of its menace pressed on her, crushing her heart to the point of bursting. There was nothing to do, nowhere to run, and no one to help her. Rose could stand no longer. She collapsed to her knees, barely able to breathe at all anymore, paralyzed with sadness. The creature stood up and took a slow step into the light. It had her now and it seemed almost to smile at the pleasure of toying with her. Rose knew she should be frightened, but she wasn't. She just felt sad and guilty about leaving Jasmine. She had made a promise and now she would never keep it and Jasmine would be alone and it would be her fault.

But it wouldn't. This monster was to blame, not her. It was vile and it wanted to murder Jasmine. Sorrow gave way to anger, and this gave Rose a sense of purpose and righteousness. If she were going to die, she would do it trying to protect her friend. "Faith shall be my shield and my rampart," she whispered.

Rose ripped the necklace from her pocket and thrust her fist into the darkness. A blinding light burst forth, brighter than anything she'd ever seen, so white and clean and warm. Her heart lightened and air raced into her lungs. Every part of her felt on fire, as if she were made of electricity. A vision of Jasmine reading on her bed in Gavin Hall filled her mind, and she let out a bright, joyful laugh.

The sky was periwinkle.

No, it wasn't a sky, it was a ceiling. There was sunlight, but she was cold – cold and thirsty and hungry. Her hand throbbed and her mouth was sticky and she ached everywhere.

"Hello, dear." The voice belonged to Sister Edith.

"Jas –" she started to ask, but then Jasmine was there, tears in her eyes and a smile on her face.

"Hang on, now, let me do my job." Sister Edith handed her a cup of cool tea. "We'll try some food later."

"It's mostly honey," Jasmine said. "To elevate your blood sugar."

Rose swallowed the tea. Her throat was raw, but the honey helped, and the burst of sugar tingled her nerves. "How?" Her voice was weak and scratchy.

From a chair across the room, Zale laughed, a playful sound steeped in mischief. She was fully dressed and the color had returned to her cheeks. "Jas gave you up."

Jasmine looked at the floor. "I'm sorry. I –"

Zale laughed again, clearly pleased with herself for putting Jasmine on the defensive. "You saved her life." She joined Jasmine at Rose's side.

"Easy, girls." The nurse took the empty cup from Rose. "She's had quite a shock."

"How long?" Rose's voice was strengthening. "What time is it?"

Zale shrugged. "You've been asleep since yesterday."

"Unconscious," Jasmine corrected. She took Rose's hand now and stroked the back of it. "It's Monday. We're going to have to do so much homework to make up for the lost classes."

Zale feigned exasperation. "We'd better get an exemption for saving the school. I got bitten by a monster!"

Rose laughed and she started to feel warm. "Jasmine would just do the work anyway. But aren't we –"

The door opened and a tall man in a dark suit stepped into the room. Clean-shaven and with his hair immaculately combed and oiled, he looked young, but Rose saw a weariness in his eyes. "Pardon me, Sister."

"Of course, Father."

Rose hadn't noticed the white collar at first. This man was very well dressed for a vicar, and seemed nothing at all like Vicar Rothcap.

The vicar smiled weakly. "Professor is fine. And thank you." He was polite but clipped, as if impatient to return his attention to some other matter.

"Come with me girls." Sister Edith tried to shepherd Zale and Jasmine away from Rose, but neither of them budged. Zale crossed her arms and put on a threatening expression.

He smiled again, broadly now. "They can certainly stay if Rose likes."

Sister Edith shook her head. "They need lunch, and now is a good time."

Rose squeezed Jasmine's hand. "It's alright. Bring me some lunch. Porridge. And cheese."

Rose watched them leave, and when the door opened she saw many teachers gathered in the hallway, some seated on wooden chairs, others leaning against the wall. Blythe was not among them.

When the door had closed, the priest pulled a chair over to Rose's bed and sat down. "Do you know what this is?" He took Charlotte's necklace from his jacket pocket.

This man seemed kind and thoughtful, but now Rose thought about how much trouble she was in. It hadn't occurred to her before that she could be in for worse than an expulsion, but she had violated the resting place of a saint and stolen her property and she wondered now if there were some prison under the Minster for sacrilegious thieves.

The vicar chuckled and smiled. "You aren't in any trouble, Rose. Not from me, anyway. Though your Headmistress will want some lines, I think."

"She expelled us already."

He nodded. "I think you'll find that she's reconsidered. After all, you've done something extraordinary." The smile fell away and his eyes grew serious. "Now, can you tell me how you did it?"

Rose shook her head. "I ..." She stopped and looked away. "I don't know. I just ... I just wanted to help my friends. What ..." She wasn't sure what to ask. "What is it? The animal, I mean."

The priest took a deep breath and nodded absently, looking out the window. "Something very old, I think." His gaze returned to Rose. "We're taking what's left of it to my laboratory." With a kind smile he stood up and handed Charlotte's necklace to Rose. "Don't lose it." At the door he turned around. "Work hard, here, Rose. Languages and sciences, especially. And when it's time for you to come to the University, I hope we'll see you at Claytemple."

INVERSION

— *Silvia Barlaam*

THE waiting room is always full. No surprises there, humanity is crumbling.

No one seems to realise it: it's climate change here and pollution there and recession times everywhere else. But it's us, really. We run around all the time. We tweet and connect and text and interface and blog. We chase after ourselves in a never ending quest for resolution, liberation, salvation. At some point, someone, somewhere, will look into a mirror and realize the truth: it's us we need to run away from. We're primitive simians playing grown up. But we chose to ignore the rules of the game.

Oh well.

D. is here with me. He often guides me in these excursions of mine (as he likes to call them). As if these visits were a pastime, and not something I have to do or else. I can't shake D. from myself. His part in my family is like one of those old wall clocks no one wants, and yet it still rings the hours.

We're in a medical studio. The waiting-hall is huge, all decked out in polished marble and glass, arch-shaped entrances on every side leading into meandering corridors, opening on darkened doors. There are many doctors in this studio. They are doctors, because they are psychiatrists. None of the common psychobabble for us, we in this room want the real thing. (As if it'd really make a difference.) I can't speak for the other patients waiting, strapped in the golden and purple armchairs by the invisible ties of their horrors, browsing old magazines. *Oh the frush of the turned pages, like a whiplash in the too hot silence.* But I find pathetic, in myself, this hanging on titles and after-name-letters. An insurance of future betterness if we keep coming, regularly, weekly, punctually. A sacrifice to the gods of medicine, society and mental health.

When my turn comes, I sigh and enter my doctor's den. The doorknob is cold under my fingers as I close the door after me.

This is the hardest part.

If I'm lost, this is where I'm lost the most.

"Have you talked to your mother?"

It's a thin thread. A double edged blade. *The two are not compatible.* What she asks of me, my stern, composed, long-legged doctor: to push my boundaries, leave my comfort zone now turned prison turned familiar, safe, mine.

"No." I shake my head. "She lives in shame. We talked, but we didn't say a thing. Her eyes don't meet me." *Abomination*, I see in my mind. "I'm the embodiment of what she did. I never let her forget. He points at me, and never lets her forget."

She stays silent, my beautiful dark-haired doctor. It's a game she plays, though it's cruel of me to call it so, to see her so. She's trying to help. (My generous contribution to her life style notwithstanding: fees paid every seven days, not once

missed. One day, though. One day I'll change it all. One day I'll break these chains.)

I've been coming here for a long time. She's the one who threw me a rope, and drags me back from the pit I'm in, knot by knot, all parts and facets, nooks and crannies, convoluted progeny of the one original Gordian. I should be more grateful. But I don't have it in myself. (Other things are there. I try not to disturb them). To need such help is pitiful. She takes notes with her stylus, ink-stains on cream paper. *Oh the scratch of its bronze tip, the viscous ink, the vicious memory of things I said, I've done, I forgot.*

"I had another dream," I offer. I'm not trying to change the subject. (It's always the same subject.) It's the most important, the one my life depends on, and not just mine. I'm at the centre of all things, this eye of a storm born with me. My mother weeps, my step-father thunders, and my real father...well. We never speak of him. We should, my beautiful doctor insists. Use words to untangle this web of yours, she suggests. Sounds echoing in the prison they have built for me, this life of mine: that's all words are to me. I never have words in my dreams. Only sounds, the drumming of a wild heartbeat. The rhythmical pounding of steps, a longer stride at times, accelerating, slowing, pacing itself with the turning of corners, the discovery of new pathways. *The heavy breathing of a rushed animal.*

She smiles. I cross my arms on my chest, fidget in the chair. "My father- my step-father," the difference is visceral. I can't believe I still have to correct myself. My doctor encourages me. Bless her. That light keeps me going. "He was raging, his mouth wide open. Couldn't hear anything he was saying, as usual. But he was getting closer and closer, and his mouth kept getting wider and wider. I knew he wanted to devour me, but it was like-" I finger-shape the words in the air, pluck them out of nothing. "He couldn't find me. In the dream, I'm too well hidden. So he turned around, and gulped down whoever else was in the way."

"Was there someone in the way?" She's brought the stylus to her lips. She's nibbling on it. I feel warmth in my groin. *A hard swelling of blood.* She's not aware of doing it. (I don't want to be like my real father.) I dig my nails in my palm. Make the urge pass. (In my dreams, it never does.)

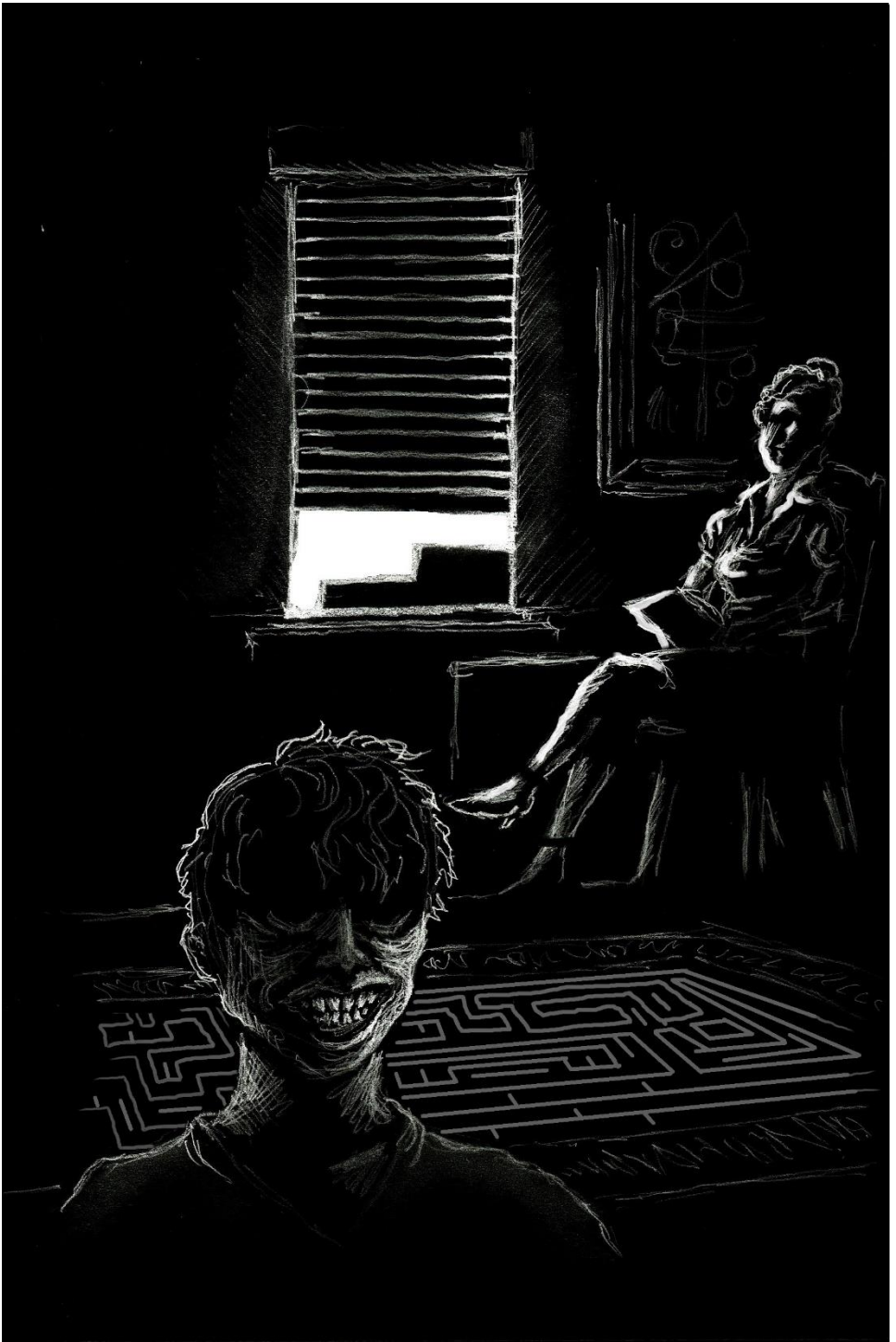
"Someone always is." It's true. There's always someone around my step-father can mistreat, disgrace and use as cannon fodder for his ire. He has no compunction. He keeps what he wants, like he kept my mother. He punishes everyone for her failings. For me. (For what she's done.)

"You're always hiding, in your dreams." She states the obvious, but I need that reminder of reality. My world is a whirlwind of lies. I stop my mind there. Denial is the first stage of grief. What was, what happened, what may be. (It's unending.)

"I can't forgive her." Our sessions are generously scattered with non sequitur statements like this. Me, my life, the intertwined corridors of this studio, the oblique pathways in my mind, the meaning I'm seeking: it seems random, and yet somewhere there's a plan, blueprints of it all. What I'm looking for.

"Talk to her," my doctor says, and I know she's right. She has to be.

There are times in-between, liminal spaces I slip through. From my doctor's



studio to the place I live, a rarefied golden haze, with a driver at my command, a luxury leather seat where I can stretch and nap if I so wish. It doesn't mean anything. (Wealth just happened to me. It came with all its trappings.) I find myself home, finally. Mother's curled on the furs scattered on the sofa. She's holding the cat close to her, petting the little beast with absent gestures.

"I want to meet him," I say. I don't sit. I want to loom over her. Force her to reveal my real father's whereabouts. She knows. (She always knew.) "My father. Who is he?"

She looks up at me.

"Mother," I say, and I can't hide that twinge of pleading in my voice, the deeper whine in my chest. (It turns into raw growling so easily, these days). Trapped as I am, I never stopped seeking her help.

"We never meant for it to happen," she murmurs.

"I know," I say. *I don't know*, I scream in my head. (It's harder to control, day after day). I don't know how you could do it, *and I want to cut your ears and chew your fingers and tear your heart out of your chest and fork the balls of your eyes and plaster the walls with your entrails, but that's the wrongness you planted in me, mother, whispering and roaring*, so I ignore it. (Sometimes I can.) It's louder when I face her.

The cat hisses at being displaced from her lap. She scribbles something on a scrap of paper. But then she eats it, chewing it in her mouth, little morsels at first and then just swallowing, her cheeks filled. I see spittle at the corners of her mouth.

D. enters the room. Like a shadow, he's everywhere I turn. He reproaches me with a glance, invites me to leave by pointing at the door. He's been with her since I can remember. He's always manoeuvred around the rocks of her and Father and me. He's covered up for her, pointed me in the wrong direction, my Father in another. D. was the one there to mediate, when it all first happened. He said, keep the child. He said, it'll work. He said, keep it quiet. He's the architect of this whole mess, as much as all the others are. All this hiding has brought us to this point. *I want to suffocate him with his own tongue, make a necklace of his eyeballs, whittle bloody swirls of confusion on his skin*. I should show him what his plans have brought alive in me. (There must be a way out. I need to find a way out, before I get in.)

I leave, as D. asked. I glance at my mother, one last time: she loved, once. The resonance of that is a shard in my chest. Breathless, I know I'll never love. Not even my beautiful doctor. Ways and turns and tricks of the tongue will get me where I want *and I'll shed the blood of those opposing me, those left for me, I'll embrace my nature and I'll-*

Days pass. Maybe months. Years? Time has little meaning for me. My quest is all there is.

I look for him (my real father). Look for myself.

I go to my sessions. I'm sane, at times.

I roar and crawl and stomp and snarl.

I dream.

This is a dream, and yet when I dream, it all makes sense. I live my life trudging

these secluded grounds, being who I really am, and not the simulation built for me, of me, in that other non-dream world. I have no regrets, no burdens. I just am. I splash in the entrails of my meals, dip my fingers and fangs in those warm recesses hidden from eyes under soft skin. I chew and slurp and exist. It's so much easier, this way. Never to be found, never to be seen. It's what they all want.

What do I want? Dream-me and not-dream-me, one and not one. What do we want?

Find my father, don't find my father, kill my father, save my father.

I toss and turn in my sleep.

I turn around in circles.

I drown in myself.

I use all the means at my disposal. I go to therapy (oh for so long). I analyse myself, the ones around me, and my family, this source of all evils. I learn to track down wild beasts, and I learn to recognize the enemy within. D's always with me, always behind me, always in front of me. It becomes a second skin I wear, another intricate play of shadow and light to lose myself into. Wherever I go, the burden of my mother's shame taints my steps. There's an invisible letter on my chest, a scarlet bleeding mark that should be hers alone and not mine.

Oh the thud-thud-thud of my stride, it echoes and ricochets, spins a web of walls around me, blind bat seeking a way out. I swell with each step; engorge myself on the ecstasy of knowledge, licking my lips with scraping cat-tongue.

I find him.

I run and I know it's not a dream, I know my wise doctor would smile and point it out, as her eyes bleed and her limbs shatter apart. I dream and I run, as the walled years of shame crumble aside, a fountain of joy flavoured with metal, dripping fluids I shouldn't know the taste of sliding in the back of my throat. I fall and roll and tumble and stumble. This melted knot of me.

"Meeting your real father will be very important for you," my beautiful doctor states the obvious once again, crossing her legs behind her desk. I keep looking at the slice of smooth skin I see, the side of her knee, the alluring shadow behind it hiding the rest. Her words slop over me and flow beyond. (I'm not really listening.)

"It'll help you in finding a balance. He may reject you, but he may not. Either way, you'd finally have all the pieces of the puzzle, know your making. How do you feel about that?"

She doesn't know. *I haven't told her.* Why should I? I tell her, and the enchantment goes. I tell her, and she asks me for answers. I had the answer I needed. Did I know already? D. didn't stop me. I wonder. If I tell her, the walls shall crumble and there'll be less darkness. I don't know that I can take it. Instead, I go smoothly from home to here, from here to home, D. a constant echo in my footsteps, my reflection in a mirror. I avoid my mother, steer clear of my step-father.

(I'm a shadow.)

I roar and slash and rip, and now I know it's not a dream, but the beast within,

the one who came at my calling and greeted and held me, the one they built of me. I slash and rip and roar, tearing the layers separating me from me, seeking a way I now know doesn't exist. I see it all in my mind, the back of my eyes, the corpses hidden, my step father mopping it all up, time after time, and he's weeping, and mother weeps too, and their tears are crystals in the dark of me.

I tell her in my head, sounds and not words: I found my father. He told me everything. His words were quiet. Each of them sliced into me, rolled heavily in my veins, rotting away under the lies of my mother's shame. I walked away from him, wrapped in my knowledge. Time passed, and I roared. It took a while to find a way that wasn't upside down, inside out. A semblance of humanity. *Oh the swift inconsistency of life and tasty lies and the crunching sound of bones under my molars, and the way everything is behind a corner and yet another, and another.*

Now I look at my doctor, lie to her as I hear none of her words, but sounds, staccato rhythm in a void of space, a reverberation of sense long lost. *I turn round and round within myself, a vortex of fleshy cells, a helicoidal swirl of rage.*

I play with the sounds in my head. They overlap and mesh and reproduce.

(I turn row and row within myself, a voyager of fleshy censors, a helicoidal swot of rain.)

(I turn rubbish and rubbish within myself, a wafer of fleshy centilitres, a helicoidal sympathy of rake.)

(I turn ruffle and ruffle within myself, a waif of fleshy centuries, a helicoidal synonym of rampart.)

(I turn rumble and rumble within myself, a wake of fleshy certificates, a helicoidal system of ranking.)

(I turn runaway and runaway within myself, a walkway of fleshy chain-smokers, a helicoidal tablet of rapture.)

(I turn run-up and run-up within myself, a wallpaper of fleshy chalice-smudges, a helicoidal tadpole of ratchet.)

(I turn run-up and run-up within myself, a wandering of fleshy chammy-snapdragons, a helicoidal takeaway of rattle.)

(I turn run-up and run-up within myself, a wardress of fleshy chandelier-sneezes, a helicoidal talkie of ravine.)

I make blueprints of my mind.

I'll leave my doctor soon. It's all planned in my head (a luminous future only I can see), a triumph of me against all odds. I'll make a exultant return, prodigal son that I never was, and show D. his plan's flaws, the exit ways they hid from me. I'll dismiss him, I'll ignore my mother, disregard my step-father.

I'll step away, step out, step off this ledge they put me upon. (And while I think, I dream, and while I dream, I run, and while I run, I think.)

I shape the sounds that mean me with the matter of their bodies.

I become the beast they see in me.

Son of incest, I devour them all.

I devour myself.

I become me.

AN END OF WAR

— Jeb Burt

A man named Savior Juan ended war, legend had it. Rumor come down from the days of free information had his birth name as Jon Wexler or James Samson, engineers in the Research and Development Laboratories of a transnational corporation working on a low-frequency electromagnetic transmitter inducing vermin to starve themselves. The instrument produced frequencies with resonance in the thalami of rodents. It gridlocked the hunger centers; the pests disappeared from the subway, basements, and home gardens.

The Savior of Man, according to legend, fiddled with the signals until instincts bound by electrical pistons gripped metabolism. He induced rhesus not to fight, or if they did, to die.

The Savior went rogue. Backed by a cadre of angel investors, he perfected the technique as the corporation and the governments of the world in the know hunted him. With his investors' help, a model of the transmitter, streaming from the telecom satellite armadas, bathed the globe.

T-cells corroded nerve sheathes and arterioles. The angered individual found a way to calm himself, or liquefied.

The first to fall victim to the device were radio and television shock jocks. Years after Activation, their last broadcasts played at commemorative holidays to remind us of what melted away the weakly temperamental. The shock jocks had dissolved on screen and on air before their awed studio audiences.

Anger killed them.

It looked like Armageddon had come: the streets flooded with liquid people. The savvy investors sieged the market when stocks plunged, taking on corporations and government debt, consolidating and declaring themselves the Fathers of Peace. The FOP ruled mankind with an eye to quarterly profit.

The FOP turned the military-industrial complexes into one interconnected R and D network that made conveniences that they sold to humanity at stout prices. Peace Corp achieved unprecedented margins. Savior Juan vanished under mysterious circumstances.

Man's collective ingenuity, focused and honed, birthed probes nearly capable of the speed of light. The probes scoured the galaxy for lucrative ventures.

Through this time of innovation, peace, and abundance, the dynasties constructed subterranean castles on the moon, submarine palaces on the ocean floors, Romanesque villas on Half Dome. They set the headquarters of the incestuous Houses of Peace in Rockefeller Center and the Empire State Building. The city lights burned like jewels on the slender necks of these luxury rises as the rest of us dwindled.

Man hit a genetic neck. The radiation ensured trouble for the strong-minded, survival of the bovine. The stressful auditing procedures of corporate accounting,

high-demand engineering and manufacture, killed all but the coolest and most impassive. A mellow rocket assembler with a solid record of fitting coolant rings sliced a finger and at the end of the surge of adrenaline was chutney on the floor tiles. After a minute, the rings were autoclaved, and an hour found an efficient replacement at his station.

We became better fitted. We pressed into life's psychic requirements like knives into bone. We worked twenty hours without complaint, two hours of sleep enough for nervous systems operating at nine-percent capacity. The device streamlined and winnowed.

Meanwhile, the Families of Peace looked on from the verandas.

They wanted to subvert the radiation that limited their freedom. They installed cages of silver in their apartment ceilings. The silver's conductivity weakened the emissions. (Secretly, they indulged hate.)

They became addicted, in time. Within domes of covert pleasure, a millennium of repressed urges swarmed from their spines like termites. Vivisections of the weak among them selected for the hungriest. They tortured pets, and drank blood. As they thrived, in the streets of the crystalline metropolises humans didn't brush on the subway, sliding on a film of efficiency, and speech tucked into a tight lexicon of eyebrow lifts and lip tightening. Scowls unknown, lost to time as anal domination by marauding Vikings. Blank squints, meaningless waiting stares (the idling between instructions), were all we needed.

Asteroids fell upon the supercities. Bogotá, Buenos Aires and the Falkland Islands were craters of char. New York stood, gratered and pocked. The satellites streaked the sky like seraphim falling from their guard. Into the ash at evening the descendants of the FOP walked onto marble balconies. For the first time, they allowed their barbarism into the open.

We didn't notice the absence of the spell.

The Descendants of Peace came into the streets with scythes, bolt-cutters. The new equanimity of the race won out: we produced probes, precision drill bits, without hesitation as we vanished in the night.



THE BLIGHT

— *Jeb Burt*

"I will bring one more..."

—GOD, Exodus 11:1

THE plague descended suddenly. It caused little surprise.

The towers downtown became polymer and styrene spire. Cars plasticized to opal propylene as their tires fused into the ethylene cement of coast routes.

The women dancing in the Jelly Julie on Sunset monstroslyly thermoset before the horny men, as the petrochemical bane reached the Central Valley. It hesitated at the edge of the migrant towns and great vale of farming land, as if to weigh how the urban populace met this change. When the people continued the old lifestyle, merely titillated by this novelty world of vinyl and epoxy, the polymerization surged on through cropland. The film moguls and actors and club musicians, porn titans and courtesans, drank piña coladas under acrylic palm fronds along Malibu sands, and Mulholland lawns of emerald isobutylene. The plague hardened the San Joaquin Valley to an inedible breadbasket of decorative fruit, vegetable.

Famine set in. Others followed the fused strippers: Melrose sidewalks crowded with mannequins in aspect of shoppers, frozen peering into windows at elegant jewelry sets. Their skin carameled in the California sun, dulce de leche, their bright eyes shining.

Those who could afford horses fled northeast into the Rockies, but seemed to bring the plague. At the ends of shotguns they were turned from mountain towns, the road an eel of hardening resin at their heels. At the eastern base of the American Cordillera, the Armed Forces erected a battery line to halt the movie moguls and starlets, haggard advertisement tycoons and champion surfers, whose wealth and love of good living kept them before the blight. The Rocky Mountains slowly vulcanized under their feet. Their horses hardened. Iced slopes became glacé. Tors of Bakelite reflected the sun like knives of moist obsidian as their clothing fused. The cursed Californians stared from ledges amid rubbered pine scrub, a long show-window of alp trekkers between seasonal shipments; they stared, doleful, across the rolling living grass of the Great Plains, from which their forbearers brought crop to the Central Valley and to which they ushered death. Slowly, bodies catalyzed. Howitzers fired upon screaming mannequins wobbling down the interstates.

The plastic blight ended at the Great Divide. As the nation mourned the West, agleam every sunset like an abandoned candy land, the Midwest and East Coast conceded the logic of such an affliction beginning in California.

A gold blight hit New York. The silver hypodermic of the Empire State shoved gold into the sun. The Chrysler Tower and architecturally verry investment banks in lower Manhattan rippled and shone. The auric creep pursued investment

bankers and commodity men through Ohio. Heavy artillery eliminated them in the rolling corn.

Southerners and plainsmen thanked Heaven for its benevolence. Two years later the black flesh manifested. Remaining Americans waited, frightened. Shined eyes stared from softening skin and dimmed.

WATERMAN

— *Jeb Burt*

RANDOLPH ran along the pier, past me. In the water below, a lone rider struggled to get outside through the churning current. Tireless, the rider ducked whitewater and sucked through troughs as towers of emerald speared from the pier.

A wall of water burst through the railing and into Randolph, who could not tolerate the lone stranger riding his swells. Crouched, he clutched the planks against the powerful detonation of the water on the walk; it tore his shortboard from him. The pale fiberglass fins snagged in the handrails. The board dangled over riptide pythons agonizing through the pylons. Raising the board, he shielded himself from the next volley, dove into the sky.

I felt Randolph paddling over swells, his conditioned mind roving, radar pinging emerald nadirs for momentum and rise. His powerful ventricle strove between his hashished lungs like molten caverns within a hot volcanic thorax. He strode over the glass. On a crest the rider shot through the crusted legs as watching children screamed.

Rondo and Charl surveyed the scene from the shade of Beach Tower Three. I shimmied down a berm pylon. Rondo's poncho had been dampened by the morning mist; its wool hood cowed him like a wise monk. Charl, moaning and holding his chest, twisted as he watched the sea.

Becky, Charl's girlfriend, leaned against a leg of Beach Tower Three, studying my face. "Will you save him, Wes?" she said, her voice soft, her tiny eyes arctic ice. "Will you save your idol when he dies? Will you cry? Will you dive into those waves, bad boy?"

Her girls, perched along the crosspieces of the shuttered tower, shrieked. Their staccato laughter crossed my skin like fine steel spiders. Their nylon

windbreakers slapped silver in the shadow. "You'll have a chance to be a waterman."

"Look!" Charl howled.

Randolph and the rider paddled for the same monster.

To tell who was who wasn't easy. The wave surged beyond the tide: buoys sucked deep into its face as its green shoulders stood over the pier.

"Someday," Randolph had always told me those glassed, still mornings when his vision of his life and the actual conditions of it touched, "I'll show you."

His trim elegance, the line he carved in the six a.m. crystal, drew the other eyes that floated in the darkness. They rooted feet deep in the water to slow their boards to see him glide. Leathered, meth-wan or wide awake, they floated along the wave shoulder, faces buoys, pacified eyes watching his genius hamstrings cut the face. As they bobbed, he sprayed the grimaces.

"Go out," Carly told me, her breath white. She huddled within his poncho. "He'll teach you. You'll be great."

I smiled every time she said this but she would already be staring at him, drifting among the silhouettes on the mirror.

Carly shifted feet now in the sand, which was getting warmer, watched the wave from the berm, her blond hair fire. The sun had drilled through the stratus gauze to ignite the sea serpentine. Onshore breezes pocked it.

The dueling men climbed the peak. Swiveling, heels in the water. Silver froth showered them in blessing, from its crown.

Rondo groaning. The girls watching silently.

Charl shouted: "No..."

The wave devoured the men and boomed. Its hungry foam coming toward the pier. It hollowed. Whitewater slammed the cement; a castle rose.

Charl pointed to the cycle of water moving northward and away from us. The riders shot from it and slalomed, white lines from boards weaving into the hole.

"Nah. I don't think so," I heard Charl say. "You can't get away. They're underwater; they're *gone!*"

A holy man with a private connection to the Divine (he knew what we couldn't), Rondo smiled into wind.

Carly semaphored her love. Slowly, her arms came down to her sides.

Randolph *was* the wave. Frictionlessly, he wove its wind-cut wall. As though puppeted, in a clean and mechanical unison, with the lone rider he turned to the pier.

Carly fainted toward the razored pillars, the glistening barnacles. "Oh no, Randolph..." she called. She reached to keep him from their sieve. Out of the roiled

water a vertical phantasm emerged. It slid over the pier in a maw, snarling walk and cement barrels, vista outlooks. A fishing ledge.

I ran, they flew. The wave jacked from shallow water and darkened the sun. Sand sucked my shoes to the ankle; I fell down the berm.

I came into the shadow of the pier. In light, Randolph's bedding shone amid pilings. They straightened into the columns. A mist of whitewater along the planking and through the pillars, over an army of ghostly arms. Randolph's eyes, pure serious, looked into mine. The lone rider cut south and out. Randolph stared into me and through me, through the ribcage of this cement passage, his one home. Pursued by phantoms we could feel, his figure cut through the crisscrossing stone. Following, I hit chainlink.

I lost him to light.

MEHITABLE'S CURSE

— *Columbkill Noonan*

THERE were no witches in Colbyville in 1692, to hear the townsfolk speak of it. All of the witches were across the border in Massachusetts; Salem, Amesbury, Ipswich. The devil's curse didn't affect us here, they said, whispering with smug satisfaction at this seeming evidence of Colbyville's superior piety and general holiness.

They were, however, wrong, though they'd never know it in life. The devil's curse was here; indeed it had begun here. Not in Salem, not in Amesbury, not in Ipswich. The devil's curse had first germinated then taken root right here in Colbyville. Only then had it spread south across the Massachusetts border.

Yes, the curse was most definitely here, lurking quietly behind the illusion of a peaceful, pious town. I should know, because it was I who started it.

My good neighbors in Colbyville never suspected a thing, of course. Even though the spirit of the very Devil walked among us, the change was so subtle, so deep beneath the surface, that no one could see it. In Massachusetts it was different, in Massachusetts there were hysterical fits and people writhing about and screaming and calling for their neighbors to be hung.

Here, at least, the Devil was quiet. Here, no little girls pinched themselves and shrieked that Goody Mehitable visited them in the night to torment them, although, in truth, I had done far worse.

What I had done was not the stuff of a child's nightmare; what I had done was instead the stuff of hell itself, the sort of hell that could last for generations if not until the end of time itself.

Why had I done such a thing, one might ask? Am I spiteful, evil; full of vengeance and malice?

I think not. I was, perhaps, too curious, too ignorant, too full of youthful hubris. If I could be accused of anything it would be naiveté, not evil. I trusted things that I shouldn't have; I peered into dark places that were better left alone.

That my daughters, and their daughters, and all the daughters of my line shall pay for my mistake is only now becoming clear to me. I wish that it were not so, but it is, and there is nothing that I can see to do about it. The Devil is stronger than me, you see, and she will take her payment whether I will it or no.

Yes, it was I who brought the Devil to the colonies, if the Devil is indeed what she is.

My name is Mehitable, and I am, I suppose, a witch. The first witch, at least here in Colbyville; but, now that it was begun, I will certainly not be the last. And for that, I am truly sorry.

Clara emerged from the tiny backseat of her Smart Car, heavy cloth bags of vegetables dangling from both elbows. She had been to the farmer's market in

town, and, it being New England *and* October besides, she had found herself tempted into buying far more than she had planned.

She had gone to the market for the last harvest of summer apples, but the colorful arrays of squashes and gourds and Indian corn had proven irresistible. So, here she was, struggling to kick the car door shut with her foot and shuffle up the walk to her door clutching a giant pumpkin between her hands while her shopping bags stuffed full of every conceivable type of squash swung to and fro like wrecking balls against her thighs.

The farmer's market had been delightful and the weather was crisp and sunny, but still Clara couldn't shake the feeling of dread that grew stronger with every step she took towards the house that she and her sister had inherited two years ago. The rhythmic thud of the heavy bags on her legs beat an ominous percussion in time with the too-loud reverberations of her heart as she reluctantly climbed the steps to the front porch and set her pumpkin down so that she could unlock the door and enter.

Clara and Sara had received the house from their grandmother, who had received it from *her* grandmother, and so on all the way back to colonial times. The house had belonged to their family since the first boards of the foundation were laid. No one other than a Colby had ever lived in the house.

Unless, that is, one counted the things that lurked in the shadows.

Clara's ancestral home was haunted, of course. Everyone in the family knew it (and really, everyone in the entire town too). Clara and Sara had never been particularly bothered by the doors that closed themselves, the strange footsteps in the attic, the plates that occasionally flew through the air of their own volition.

That their own mother had died in the house while they were still infants did not frighten the children; the ghost of a woman who had, by all accounts, loved them above all else was certainly not to be feared. That Grandma's younger sister had died in the house (as well as her aunt, and her great-aunt, and probably many others besides; the house was nearly four hundred years old, after all) did not bother the sisters in the slightest, either. It seemed to them that the ghosts of their own family could only be there to protect them, not to cause harm. If they sometimes grew irritable and slammed doors or hurled dinnerware across the room, so be it.

The shadow figures were different, though. Dark as night and opaque as obsidian, they hid in corners and stared and watched and silently threatened. The shadow figures terrified the girls, because the children instinctively knew that these would hurt them if only they could. But they appeared so rarely and, though menace emanated from them as clearly as a spoken word, they seemed powerless to truly affect any real harm.

The girls had learned to ignore the strange noises, and to close their eyes to avoid seeing the occasional appearance of a shadow figure. These things seemed to be of no consequence to the adults, who paid no mind to the happenings, and so the girls followed suit. It had always been so, as long as anyone could remember, and no one had ever thought to do anything about it.

Until now, that is.

Last year, Sara had died. Only twenty-six years old, in the prime of her life and in excellent health, she had fallen suddenly ill. To think that she might not survive had never crossed anyone's mind. Even the doctor had thought it just a severe flu, and sent her home to rest.

But somehow, inexplicably, Sara had died. And at the same time, the shadow people had come to life.

No longer did they lurk in the shadows, but instead roamed the house freely. They blotted out the sun that streamed through the once-cheery windows during the day, and made the electric lights (that she kept blazing night and day to ward off the encroaching darkness) dim and flicker before burning out altogether.

No, since Sara's death it was impossible to believe that the strange things that happened in the house were benign manifestations of ancestral spirits, or that the shadow people were frightening but essentially harmless apparitions.

They were evil, all of them, and they could do whatever harm they pleased. Why they had chosen to take Sara but leave Clara herself alive was a mystery, one that she was afraid to delve into too deeply. She feared what she might find if she investigated too much; she feared what she might see if she looked too closely.

But today things had changed. Today she had resolved to finally confront the evil that was slowly taking over her home. Because today she had gotten the idea that perhaps the shadow people had trapped Sara's spirit here in the house, and that, if so, they would probably do the same to her own.

She had no idea where the thought had come from; it had simply erupted in her mind while she ate her breakfast and tried not to look at the hulking shadow that floated in the doorway between the kitchen and the dining room. But once she had thought it, she could not *unthink* it. That was why she had gone to the farmer's market: not to buy pumpkins and squashes, but to visit the clairvoyant woman who gave readings in a stall at the farthest edge of the market.

She had asked for the woman's help, asked her to come to the house so that someone who knew something about such things might see the shadows and hear the voices. She had hoped that the woman could tell her what they were and how to deal with them.

But the psychic had refused to help her. She had taken one look at Clara and taken a half-step backwards before remembering herself and asking politely how she might help her.

"I need someone to come to my house..." Clara began.

"I'm terribly sorry," interrupted the psychic, but I don't do house calls." Colbyville being a small town, Clara knew this to be untrue and wondered at her immediate dismissal.

Seeing the look of consternation on Clara's face, the woman continued, "I'd be happy to sell you some sage, if you'd like?"

"I don't need sage," said Clara. "I need help. If you'd just consider stopping by, just for a few minutes..."

To Clara's surprise, the woman took another step back and held out her hands as though to ward Clara away.

"I said no!" the woman said, her voice nearly a hiss. "The shadows...they are all over you. I will not go to where they live."

Clara had gasped at the words. It was true then. The shadows were real; she had not imagined them.

"But I need help," Clara persisted, her voice quavering with fear. "I don't know what to do."

The woman had softened a bit at the sight of Clara's distress, and she had offered words of advice. "I'm a psychic, and a death medium," said the woman. "I speak to the dead, and they speak to me. But I can't help you with this."

"But why?" wailed Clara. "If I just knew what they were or how to make them go away..."

"You need a priest," the woman said firmly. "As I said, I cannot help you."

Desperate, Clara had taken matters into her own hands and done a thing so contrary to her usual character that she was shocked at her own actions. When the woman turned her back in dismissal, Clara's hands had snaked out, of their own volition it seemed, and hastily grabbed the items that sat out on the table.

Clara had stolen the woman's tarot cards and seeing stone. She had stuffed them in one of her bags, beneath the colorful gourds and fall squashes, and left the market, nearly running in her haste to be away.

She knew that it would be obvious that it was she who had taken them. It pained her to be thought of as a thief, but her need had resulted in a moment of moral turpitude.

Now Clara was home, with her bags full of bright fall vegetables and psychic accoutrements, nefariously obtained. A pretty little brown thrush sat on a tree limb that overhung the front lawn. It watched Clara for a moment, its tiny eyes firmly affixed on her.

"Well you needn't look so judgmental," said Clara to the little bird with its watchful little eyes. She had always talked to animals, even though she knew others found the habit a bit strange. Her grandmother had too, and Clara supposed she had picked it up from her.

The thrush merely stared back at Clara for another instant before flitting off to perch daintily on a tombstone in the churchyard next door.

Clara entered the house, piled the bags on the kitchen counter, and pulled out the contents. She let her hands play over the curves and edges of the rough crystal then riffled through the deck of cards with her fingertips, her heart beating hard with nervous excitement.

She was excited, because today she would seek out her tormenters. She would use the seeing crystal and the tarot cards to peer behind their veil and finally look them in the eye. Today, she would confront them; today, she would *do* something at last. But she was also frightened, because she didn't know what the shadow people might do to her if she were able to really, truly see them at last.

She reached for the crystal but her nerve failed her; the stone seemed far too intense and she didn't feel quite ready. Instead, she pulled the tarot cards closer and shuffled them. She wasn't sure how, exactly, to use them, but she had seen readings done before so she at least knew that the cards were usually dealt out in a pattern of some sort.

Nervously, she took a deep breath and began to lay them out on the counter in front of her. Arbitrarily deciding upon a shape to the tarot layout, she placed the cards in a broad ellipse. She cocked her head, looking at her handiwork. It looked incomplete somehow to her inexperienced eye. She put two more cards into the center of the formation, then stepped back, satisfied.

She regarded the tarot cards, hoping that some thought, some *clarity*, would emerge from the lifeless cards. As she looked at the outer ring that comprised the ellipse she saw nothing; some of the figures there seemed to be merrily cavorting, others seemed in varying degrees of distress, but there was no discernible pattern that she could make out.

When she considered the two cards in the center, however, her heart skipped a beat and her breath caught in her throat. Her body burned from deep inside with the heat of pure terror even as the air around her felt like ice on her skin.

Propelled by dread, she strode swiftly over to the kitchen window and pulled aside the curtains to look out at the old church that had stood on the neighboring lot since Colonial days. As old as the house itself, it was a pretty structure, if somewhat in need of repair, and she had never thought much about it. But now, the quaint and slightly crumbling edifice had taken on a decidedly more sinister aura. Nervously she glanced back at the tarot cards, hoping in vain that she hadn't seen in them what she thought she had.

Both of the cards in the middle of the ellipse were far darker than the others in the deck, as though the artist had used an entirely different palette to paint them. Muddy gray clouds swirled ominously around the outer edges, throwing deep shadows onto the structures pictured therein. Opaque darkness colored the windows of the two buildings, although she fancied she could see dark faces peering out of the blackness. Trapped faces; frightened faces; evil faces.

One of the cards clearly depicted the old church that stood next door. And on the card beside it was a near-perfect representation of her own house.

Her hands fluttered uselessly at her sides as she paced uselessly about the kitchen, filled with the energy of terror but unsure how to direct it. Then she saw the minister strolling up the walkway and entering the church and she broke free of her indecision.

Leaving the tarot cards where they lay, she dashed out of the house and across the yard to follow the minister into the church.

"Minister Simons?" she called, blinking her eyes to see in the gloomy interior. When the minister didn't reply, she moved farther inside. "Minister Simon?" she repeated. "Are you here?"

A rustling of feathered wings caught her ear. She followed the sound and as her eyes adjusted to the darkness she saw a small bird flying towards the far corner of the church. It landed on a life-sized stone stature of the Virgin Mary.

She moved closer, peering carefully at the bird. It was difficult to see in the shadows, but it looked like the same brown thrush that she had seen outside as she returned from the market. She briefly wondered how it had gotten in, and hoped that it would be able to find its way out again.

As she was thinking about the thrush, the minister suddenly emerged from behind the statue. "Clara!" he exclaimed, making her jump with surprise. His face was flushed and he appeared to be a bit flustered, causing her to briefly wonder what he had been doing back there. However, she had more important business to attend to and besides, it was not in her nature to pry.

Minister Simon walked quickly down the center aisle to greet Clara. Taking her by the elbow, he steered her away from the statue to take a seat in one of the rows of pews on the other side of the church.

"So, what can I help you with today, Clara?" he asked kindly.

"Well," she began, uncertain of where to begin and afraid that she might sound crazy once she did. Then she thought of the shadow figures that increasingly dominated her house, and her fears for her sister's soul, and words began to flow out of her in a torrent.

"Oh, Minister, I'm so afraid! I know you've heard the stories about my house, everyone in town has, but it's gotten so much worse. There's something in there, something evil, I know it!"

The minister laid a calming hand on her shoulder. "Now, Clara," he chided gently, "you know the church doesn't believe in such things as hauntings and ghosts."

"But," she protested, "don't ministers sometimes perform exorcisms?"

He laughed. "Not anymore. These things are just not real." His words were gentle, but Clara detected a tone of condescension in his voice.

"Maybe just a blessing, then? I know you've done those before. You blessed the Walther's house just a few years ago."

The minister sighed and turned in the pew to face the altar. When he shifted, the Virgin Mary statue came into her line of sight and she caught her breath. It seemed that the statue was now shrouded in black shadow, deeper than those that cloaked the rest of the church.

The eyes, however, glinted with a deep, shiny blackness that looked, somehow, alive. Clara's heart fluttered as she leaned forward, trying to get a better look. Minister Simon, unfortunately, leaned in towards her so that he blocked her view.

"I think that you're just imagining things," he said, taking her hand. "It's just not possible that there's a demon in your house."

"A demon?" she said. "But I never said anything about a demon. Are you saying..."



"I'm sorry, Clara", he interrupted, "but this is all superstitious nonsense. I'm afraid I can't help you." He rose and gestured towards the door, indicating that the conversation was at an end.

As he led her out she kept turning her head to look back at the statue, but Minister Simon kept his body between her and it. When they got to the door she stopped and turned around, trying to peer around him, but he half-closed the door, blocking her view.

"Try not to worry, Clara. And remember, God doesn't want us to believe in such silly things as ghosts," he said lamely before shutting the door in her face.

Shocked, she turned from the church and stood uncertainly on its doorstep. Her heart was filled with even more fear and dread. The idea that the shadows from her house had somehow manifested themselves around a holy statue in a church terrified her, and she wondered at Minister Simon's strange manner. Perhaps he was truly offended by the belief in spirits and demons.

Or, perhaps he was just as afraid of them as she was herself.

Either way, she was left just as helpless as before. She walked, defeated, her head down and her mind whirling, back across the lawn, reluctant to go back to the house but having nowhere else to go.

But as she raised a foot to climb the porch steps, a voice startled her out of her reverie.

"Hello, Clara," said the psychic medium from the market. The woman sat on the porch swing that hung beside the door. "I've changed my mind. I'm here to help."

Clara looked at her askance; after being so brusquely rebuffed by the minister, she felt terribly alone and wasn't sure if the woman's offer of help was genuine. "What changed your mind?" she asked suspiciously.

The woman looked up at the sky and exhaled noisily before turning her gaze back to Clara. "My conscience got the better of me," she said at last. "I must admit that I was afraid when I saw those shadows around you this morning, but then I realized I couldn't just let you go after this alone. Not when I can help." A small, rueful smile played briefly on her lips. "Besides, you've got my stuff."

"Oh," said Clara, flushing with embarrassment. "I'm really sorry. I was just..." She broke off, unable to think of the proper words to justify why she had stolen the psychic's things.

"It's alright," said the woman. "Now how about if we start all over, and do it right this time?" She got up from the porch swing and descended the steps to meet Clara, hand extended. "My name is Eileen," she said.

Clara shook her hand. "And I'm Clara," she said. "Shall we..." she gestured towards the front door and began to lead Eileen into the house. She sensed the woman's hesitation and remembered that the psychic had been afraid to come here. "You don't have to come in," she said sadly. "Maybe you could do a reading from the porch."

"No," said Eileen, shaking her head decisively and walking briskly up the steps. "It has to be done from inside. And besides," she added wryly, "they're just spirits, right? What could they do?"

Clara laughed, and with an ally in tow, entered her house with a slightly lighter heart. "I'd like to show you the tarot card layout that I did. She led the way to the kitchen, where the tarot cards lay scattered all over the floor. Many of them were bent or torn, and Clara gasped in dismay.

"I left them on the counter, I know I did!" exclaimed Clara as she scrambled to pick them up.

"Never mind that," said Eileen, walking slowly into the kitchen. Clara turned sharply at the sound of her voice; it sounded different somehow, fainter, as though coming from a great distance instead of just the few feet that separated the two women. When Clara looked at her she saw that her eyes, too, had a distant, glassy look.

Eileen began to circle around the large kitchen, her arms extended oddly to the sides. Her head tilted this way and that in small, jerky motions, and her nose twitched like an alarmed rabbit's. "The shadows," she said, waving a hand to encompass the entire room, "they are everywhere." She neared the window that looked over the church yard and cringed. "The church? How can there be shadows in the church?" She shuddered once more and reached out a hand, flapping it impatiently. "My seeing stone," she demanded, her voice a bit stronger.

Clara hurried to fetch the stone from where it sat on the counter, and pressed it into Eileen's hand. The psychic stiffened as her fingers closed around it.

"A woman!" she cried. "Dressed in a long brown dress, like a Puritan's garb. But she's in the shadows. I can't hear her." Eileen's voice grew tense and lost the dreamy tone as she furrowed her brow in concentration. "She is muffled. The shadows don't want her to speak." She fluttered her hands in front of her face as though clearing spider webs away, and cocked her head to the side. "A book? Under the stair? What stair? Where? Oh!"

Eileen body was flung back so that she fell heavily on her back. The seeing stone dropped from her hand and hit the floor heavily. Small chips of crystal flew in all directions and a network of tiny cracks spread out along the surface.

"Are you alright?" cried Clara, rushing over to help Eileen. The psychic shook her head as she clambered to her feet.

"I'm fine," she said, although Clara could tell by her ashen face that she was not entirely telling the truth. "I tried to hear what the woman in the brown dress was saying, but the shadows shrouded her so that her voice was almost impossible to hear. I could only make out a small part of it. Something about a book hidden under the stairs? Does that mean anything to you?"

"There's a loose floorboard on one of the attic stairs!" said Clara excitedly. "It's always been that way, since I was little. Maybe there's something there." Without waiting for a reply, she ran up the stairs and down the corridor that led to the attic stairs, with Eileen close behind.

Clara indicated which board was loose, and the two women wasted no time in prying it up. There, beneath it, lay a tattered old book.

"This is it!" said Clara. "This is what the woman wanted us to find!" She began to flip open the cover, but Eileen reached out and stilled her hand.

"Careful," she said. "I think we should wait."

"But why?" asked Clara. "Didn't the woman in the dress tell us to find it?"

"Maybe, maybe not," said Eileen. "She might have been warning us about it, instead. Remember I couldn't hear her very well. And besides, we don't know for sure if she's a good spirit, or a bad one."

"Can't you tell?" asked Clara.

"Mostly, yes," said Eileen. "But this house..." she shuddered. "It's different here. Those shadows obscure everything. Even my vision was cloudy. I'm not sure what to make of it, to tell you the truth."

"So what do we do?" said Clara, frustrated.

"You put the book in a safe place for now, and I'll go home and do some research. I'd like to know a bit more about what those shadows really are before we do anything else. I've never felt anything like them before."

"You said something about the church," said Clara. "In the kitchen. You looked out the window, and said there was something happening at the church. Do you remember?"

"Yes," sighed Eileen, "I do." She shook her head in confusion. "But I don't understand what, exactly, I saw."

"But you saw shadows in the church?" persisted Clara.

"Maybe," admitted Eileen. "But I'm not certain."

"Because I saw them in the church, just before you came. And there was something wrong with one of the statues..."

"As I said," Interrupted Eileen with an admonishing wave of the hand, "we don't know what we're dealing with. We need more information. I'll see what I can find out and come back in the morning."

Clara, impatient for answers, was about to press her further, but she saw the slightly ashen pallor on Eileen's face and the wan tiredness of her expression and thought better of it. "Ok," she agreed reluctantly. "In the morning, then."

"Eight o'clock," said Eileen. She descended the stairs but paused as she reached the front door. "I will be back," she assured Clara. "I promise. And you must promise not to read the book until then."

"Alright," agreed Clara unwillingly.

"I mean it," insisted Eileen, grasping Clara's hand. "Those shadows are evil, make no mistake. There's no telling what sort of tricks they might play." She hesitated and chewed her lip nervously. She opened her mouth and then closed it again, as though unable to decide whether to say what she was thinking. At last, she said softly, "Be careful Clara. Those shadows hate you. I could feel it emanating from them like an awful stench. They hate me, too. I think hate is the only thing can feel."

She gave Clara's hand a final squeeze and then departed, leaving Clara to face another night alone with the hateful shadows.

Clara stared at the closed door for a long time after Eileen left, hoping that the psychic would change her mind and return but knowing that she would not. At last she gave up and turned away from the door.

She walked on shaky legs into the living room. Once there she sat on the old wingchair in the corner. It was a beautiful old chair, and had been Clara's favorite since childhood. But tonight the cheer of the green toile print was subsumed by the hostile malevolence of the roiling shadows that flitted along the periphery of the room.

Clara riffled through the pages of the diary and thought back to the night her sister died. She had tucked Sara into bed, putting on an extra blanket against the fever chills. She remembered putting a big glass of water on the bedside table, and urging her sister to be sure to drink from it during the night. Her biggest worry had been that Sara might not drink enough to replenish the fluids lost to sweat from the fever, and might dehydrate.

Her sister had not dehydrated that night. Instead, she had died. Quietly, silently, inexplicably, died.

Clara had found Sara when she came into her room carrying a breakfast tray, her body as cold and stiff under the covers as the rapidly congealing mass of scrambled eggs on the quickly forgotten tray. And as she wept soundlessly, her shocked grief tearing through her until all of her muscles clenched with the pain, she had sensed the baleful figures of the shadow people gathered tightly around her. She had felt their hateful laughter as she cried, but had been too overcome with anguish to fear them.

They had mocked her grief then, and continued to torment her now. The shadow figures were emboldened, it seemed, by her pain. As her sadness lingered, as the reality of life without Sara set in and weighed ever more heavily upon her, so too had the awful shadows.

Lights glared through the window and caught her eye. Glancing out, she saw the shape of the church, hazy through the sheer curtains and cloaked in the darkness of night. Harsh light poured from its windows, flickering and flashing in shades of orange and yellow and green. There was something wrong there, of that Clara was certain; no electric bulb made such an odd, sickening gleam. It seemed to her to be the glow of hell itself. She thought of the menace she had felt emanating from the Virgin Mary statue, and shivered.

The shadows, too, were agitated tonight; either the tarot reading, or Eileen's visit, or maybe the lights in the church had excited them. Or perhaps it was all three factors put together. It didn't matter. What mattered was that there was directness to their activity, a sense of evil purpose, that frightened Clara more than any of their subtle torments and ominous lurking ever had.

Now the shadows loomed over her so that she could feel their sharp gazes penetrating into her soul. Now they rattled the windows and creaked the floorboards and rustled the curtains in a flurry. And now they danced ever closer

to her, darting in to rustle the pages in the book as though they desired to snatch it away from her entirely.

Terrified and emotionally exhausted, Clara bore the abuses of the shadows for many long minutes, cringing there on the old toile chair like a frightened child. But then something inside of her snapped. Suddenly furious, she made a decision.

The shadows would torment her no more. She would fight them, and either she or they would win. But she would no longer sit in meek acceptance of their terror. Tonight, right now, she would *do* something.

Even as she made the decision to act a sharp tap sounded on the windowpane, making her heart turn a somersault in her chest. She looked to see what had caused it and there, on the sill outside, sat the little brown thrush. Its feathers were wet and were being whipped about in a wind that had sprung up from seemingly nowhere.

Don't let it in, whispered a voice, crazily, in Clara's mind. The thrush tapped on the window again, more weakly this time. It looked like it was suffering terribly in the storm outside. She rose and walked over to the window.

The pretty little bird rapped on the window with its beak once more, as though asking to come in.

It would be good to have another living creature in the house while she confronted the shadows, she thought. So, ignoring the warning voice in her head, she reached out and opened the window. The thrush immediately flew in and sat triumphantly on the back of the toile chair.

"Alright," Clara said to the bird as she took a seat in front of it and sat the book on her lap. "I suppose we can read this thing together." She glanced back at the bird that hovered behind her head, and it seemed as if it really were trying to read over her shoulder.

She heaved a deep breath and opened the book.

'My name is Mehitable', she read aloud, *'and I am a witch.'*

Immediately the shadows screamed, a discordant cacophony of screeching and grating sounds emanating from hell-born throats. A terrible rasping laugh came from behind her and Clara whirled around. Horrified, she saw that the sound was coming from the beak of the little thrush.

Even worse than the dreadful laughter, though, was the sight of the thrush's eyes. No longer the eyes of a normal bird, they were instead the same glossy black orbs that she had seen in the statue of the Virgin Mary.

Fear gave speed to her feet as she leapt out of the chair and rushed to the door. The shadows, however, were faster. Several of them darted ahead of her. They slammed the door shut just as she reached it and held it closed against her frantic attempts to reopen it.

Panicked, she tugged on the door handle fruitlessly for a moment. Then she remembered the window, the same one that she had opened to let the thrush in. It was only a drop of a few feet to the ground from the sill.

She crossed the room in three long steps, arms extended to lift the bottom sash so that she might dive headfirst through it. Better to risk a broken wrist or bumped

head than to stay another minute locked in the room with the skirling shadows and the maniacally laughing bird.

Remarkably, she reached the window unmolested. She crossed the room, pushed aside the curtains, and lifted the window. She took one last glance over her shoulder, wondering why her escape was suddenly so easy. She felt like a bug that was allowed to think that it had gotten free of a feline tormenter, then suddenly finds its legs plucked off one by one.

Did the shadows *want* for her to jump out of the window? Was that why they had barred her exit from the door, but allowed her this easy path of egress? Was something even worse waiting for her outside?

She shook her head and pushed such thoughts from her mind. She could not stay in this room with the evil shadows and the insane bird, and there was no other way out that she could see. She took a deep breath, and hurled her body out into the night.

She hit the ground hard, jarring her right elbow and wrist. Ignoring the pain, she rolled and jumped to her feet, looking for a safe place to run. The church was the closest structure, but she instinctively shrank from seeking sanctuary there. On the other side of the house was nothing but woods. There were other houses on her street, but they all lay on the far side of the church.

She steeled herself, knowing there was nothing for it but to run past the church to reach the safety of her neighbors on the other side. But even as her feet began to push off from the ground to begin a mad sprint away from the horror that had overtaken her home a loud crash from within the church stopped her dead on the spot.

Orange-red lights that were so bright that they burned her retinas yet also somehow dark, smudgy, and dirty pulsed from behind the stained glass windows as a barrage of noises boomed out like gunfire.

The front doors of the church were flung open roughly, and Minister Simons flew from their gaping maw. He landed on his back on the church steps and began scrabbling quickly down them like a crab, desperate to get away from whatever it was that had hurled him from the church.

"No!" he screamed. "I did what you asked, I sent her away!"

A shadow, larger and blacker and more terrifying than any of the shadows she had ever seen before, followed the minister out of the church. It hovered above him, fixing cold black eyes on the cringing minister.

"Please, Mistress," cried Minister Simons. "Haven't I always served you? Haven't I kept your secrets all these years?" He reached out a supplicating hand as the terrible blackness bent down towards him.

Terrified, Clara dropped to the ground and pressed herself into the grass so that she was hidden in a deep shadow cast by one of the giant oak trees that dotted the property. She froze, selfishly hoping against hope that the thing, whatever it was, cared only for the minister and would spare no notice for her.

"Please," continued the minister, whimpering now as the thing drew ever closer. "Please, no."

His pleas for mercy went unheard, however. Clara watched in horror as the blackness overtook the minister. It loomed over him until it engulfed him completely. She heard wet smacking sounds, as though the thing was feeding on the minister's flesh.

She buried her face in the grass, not wanting to see any more, too terrified to move. At last, Minister Simons stopped screaming and she looked up. There was nothing left of the minister but a few torn scraps of black clothing strewn about the steps.

The shadow raised its head and turned its black eyes towards Clara. Too late, she realized that her hiding place was no good against a creature such as this. Of course it could see through any shadow. It was the mother of all shadows.

With preternatural speed it crossed the yard until it floated above her. Smiling, it bent down so that its face was mere inches from her own. She turned her head so that she wouldn't have to look at it, and fixed her eyes instead on her house.

Her house, that had sheltered her and her family for so many generations. Her house, that had watched as so many women had died within. Her house, that had very likely killed her sister, and seemed to have betrayed Clara, as well.

The shadow's breath prickled wetly on her neck. "Thank you Clara," it whispered. "Thank you for setting me free, you fool."

The last thing that Clara saw was the thrush sitting on the windowsill, the very same one that it had sat upon in order to trick her into letting it in. It looked at her, malice glinting in its glowing eyes, then turned its back on her as the shadow stepped towards her. Slowly, horribly, the shadow climbed atop her, first stifling her breath with its terrible weight and then beginning to devour her piece by piece.

Her screams echoed in the quiet night, unheard by anyone. Save, of course, for the thrush, who merely laughed to hear them. The bird hopped back to its perch on the toile chair and looked down at the book that had fallen open on the seat, and began to read.

I didn't mean to be a witch, the book continued. I was merely playing a silly game. Or so I thought.

There was an old tale that the children used to tell, about how if you caught a thrush that sat in a rose bush it would have to grant you three wishes.

Well, I saw a thrush one day. It was sitting on the rose bush in the back yard, and it kept its beady little eyes on me the whole while I approached it as though to say hello. "Good day to you, Goody Thrush," I called to it.

It nodded its head as if in greeting and I laughed, delighted. I stuck out my hand and the pretty little thing just hopped right onto it, as though I were a bough on a tree. I was delighted and charmed, and thought immediately of the story about the three wishes.

"So," I said, "I suppose I get three wishes now. Whatever shall I ask for?"

The thrush leaned its head closer to me, and I leaned towards it so that my nose touched its beak. Then, remarkably, it opened its beak and began to speak.

I was shocked and a little frightened, but the bird was so pretty, so small, so charming, that I just sat there and listened. I listened to every word it said, and I grew more bemused with every moment that its honeyed voice seeped into my ears.

It said that I could have my heart's desire, whatever I wished, whenever I wished it. And the only price I would pay would be a small one, it said. 'And how much could such a tiny little bird want', it asked. 'Birds want mostly just seed, and twigs to build a nest. And a few other little niceties. Such a small price', it said. Surely I could agree to that?

So agree I did. Little did I know that the 'other little niceties' would come to mean that I and my family would be forever bound to the bird's Mistress.

The thrush was no ordinary bird, you see. It served the Devil herself, and was sent to ensnare silly girls like myself to further her purposes.

'Just one thing more', it wheedled sweetly, tilting its head charmingly to one side. Just say I can be free, it said.

'Well you're a bird, aren't you?' I replied. Of course you can be free.

I immediately realized that I had made a mistake, a grave mistake indeed; for the bird opened its beak and emitted a cackle that was so foul, so offensive to the ear, that it could only have come from Hell itself.

But I was not to realize the full extent of my error until later. Later, when the rumors of witches and madness and the Devil roaming free amongst the good people of Massachusetts reached our ears here in Colbyville. Later, when the thrush would sit upon my windowsill and tap with its accursed little beak, asking to be let in, and mocking my guilty conscience with its laughing beady eyes that were black, too black, and cruel.

It came nearly every night, tormenting me, laughing at me, frightening me.

At first I cowered, afraid, trembling behind closed curtains that could not keep out the sound of the bird's infernal tapping and scrabbling and laughing. Then, as the first women began to hang, doomed as witches when I knew that they were merely victims of the bird and his Mistress (and, really, of my own hubris and foolishness as well), anger replaced my fear.

I began to investigate. I read every book on the holy and the obscene that I could get my hands on. I spoke to every minister, every priest, every well-learned person that I met to find out all that I could about the eternal battle between God and the Devil, and how good might prevail over evil.

But it was when my inquiries led me to the occult and the practice of magic that I found myself lucky. The religions of the islands teemed not only with stories about good and evil, but with real advice on how to use the forces of nature to bend the universe to one's will.

And so I learned how to do just that. And eventually, I found a way to right the dreadful wrong that I had done. I discovered that with great need comes great power. With this power, combined with my new knowledge, I was able to ensnare the bird's Mistress and trap her in the safest place that I could think of.

Sometimes, when I am in church praying with the rest of my family, I can see her eyes peeping malevolently out from within the statue of the Virgin Mary in which she

is now firmly ensconced. But I do not flinch from her glare; I look her right in the eye and now it is I who laughs at her, not the other way around.

The price for such power, the power to incarcerate the Devil herself, is, of course, cruel, and will be paid by my family until the end of time. One daughter from each generation will give her life, unknowingly. Only the life force of the young is strong enough to keep alive the magic that I have wrought.

I wish that there had been another way, but if there was, I failed to find it. So I did what I had to do, and my daughters shall suffer for it forevermore. The alternative, however, is even more unthinkable, for the Devil must never be allowed to roam free.

Written in this book is the secret to how I have managed such a feat. When it is complete I shall hide it beneath the steps of this house, so that it might never be found again. Why do I not destroy it, burn it, so that its secrets should never be revealed? Because to burn it would be to release its power into the winds, where the thrush could find it.

And the thrush must never find it. If ever the bird were to lay its eyes on this book, then it would have what it needed to free its Mistress, and Hell would be unleashed upon the world once more.

So if you read this, my daughter, hide it away once more, lock it up so that it may not be found, and do this at once.

And never, never let the thrush lay eyes upon it.

THE LITTLE MADNESS

— *David Grovesman*

As of this November, it will be nine years since I was discharged from the hellish confines of my cell at the Bellstowe Asylum. Though, in many ways, my imprisonment started long before this necessary internment. So much has happened in the span of years that it seems a lifetime has passed since I've had full mastery of my own thoughts. Now a man of middle years, I look upon the fallow youths of the nearby university with no small amount of envious contempt. Living now on the scant sum of money left to my inheritance, after the vulturous fiends of the State Department had each devoured their pound of flesh, I pore over the notes of those who treated my condition to find some profound reason why my life should have come so low.

Know this, should you wish to glean anything from reading the journals of a reformed madman: no good deed goes unpunished.

A lifetime ago, when I had been as young as the very youths I now despise, I had thought to enter the clergy, having secured for myself a scholarship with the Anglican College of New Bedford. My days were filled with study and what little time I called my own was spent on works of charity. It was in these very pursuits that I found myself attending to the swarthy vagrants who clustered near the docks and wharfs of New Bedford and it was there I first met Sydney Lansett.

Sydney was two years my senior and a theology major whose father was a well-known minister in the cloistered town of Wallham, Massachusetts. Sydney was a plump, red-faced man with a cherubic countenance and an unrivaled zeal for helping the downtrodden. With his constant prodding I soon found my scant free hours teeming with serving the needy on breadlines, clothing the naked and evaluating the very refuse of society for the greater glory of God.

Looking back on my journal from before my troubles, I am astonished to see how much I admired the round-faced young man from Wallham. He was not particularly intelligent or scholarly and he didn't curry favor with the social elite, but he had a halo of divine providence about him. It was as if he sought to do good for goodness' sake alone and not for the cathartic pleasure helping others often brings. It was because I sought to be seen as such by others that I endeavored so steadfastly to promote his charitable causes.

There was the free clinic we ran on Key Street by the cannery and the soup kitchen we manned on Channers and Vine. It was at the breadline at St. Christopher's that I think it all began. As I somberly passed a husk of day old bread into the soot-stained hands of a piteous orphan, I first glimpsed the wrongness that I had never known surrounded me.

Behind the angelic countenance there hid a terror not of this world. The corners of the thing's lips stretched and elongated into a twisting smile of inhuman proportion and as the lips parted they revealed row upon row of jagged

teeth, like that of a shark. Thinking back, I must have frozen and gawked for a long moment to burn the sight into the celluloid memory of my mind's eye. When I blinked, the sinister teeth had vanished and the child smiled up at me, innocent as a newborn babe.

I had taken the incident to be an aberrant apparition of my overtired mind and dismissed the event as such. I did, as my journals have detailed, take a brief hiatus from these multitudinous charities to focus on my academics. I felt much recovered before, some weeks later, I deigned to accompany Sydney as he gave a sermon to the longshoremen at the Seamen's Church. Perhaps, if I had declined his damnable invitation, I would have avoided all my woes.

Unable to rewrite history now, I attended this sermon. However, still tired from my diligent studying, I dozed off. Rousing myself with a guttural snore I was greeted with the sight of those monstrous many-fanged mouths among all the children who had come to hear Sydney speak with their hapless slack-jawed parents. These children, if I can accurately describe the creatures as such, looked at my friend with a wry and hungry amusement, their fanged mouths chittering and dripping with strands of saliva, as if he were a trussed up goose roasting for their Christmas supper.

I rose in a startled moment of utter panic, not knowing if I should flee or rescue Sydney from this flock of demons or collapse in abject terror, but instead I drew up short. My sudden panic had drawn the attention of everyone present and I shrank from their confused and piteous glances. Scanning about the room, I once more could not find the demonic maws that I had seen upon rousing and excused myself with some considerable embarrassment.

When speaking to Sydney after he had concluded his sermon, I made some vague excuses about my nerves being frayed. To none but my journal had I dared mention my visions for I knew them to be the sheerest madness. Sydney, stroking his jowls in a knowing way, invited me to his family's country estate for some much needed rest and reclusion. Finding no adequate method to excuse myself from attending, I reluctantly agreed. So it was that I found myself in a coach heading for the hamlet of Wallham, Sydney at my side.

Wallham was a green and hilly backwater with scant cobbled roads and the single spire of the Anglican Church the only feature that one could see above the dense forests that surrounded it. As our coach rumbled and jostled us, Sydney bubbled up endlessly with what he considered fascinating details about the history of what farmers owned which of the muddy pastures that surrounded the road. I nodded at him absently, hoping that this quiet country might offer some solace to my troubled mind.

The coach deposited us before the parish house of minister Thaddeus Lansett who embraced his son before shaking my hand with an ogre-like strength I would not have expected in a man of his rotundity. Like his son, the elderly Lansett was a corpulent figure of amiable disposition with graying mutton chop whiskers masking the porcine fullness of his rosy cheeks.



We settled in and I allowed the humble country to soothe my addled mind. Left much to my own endeavors, I wandered the halls of the Wallham parish house, browsing the odd and archaic tomes the Lansetts housed therein. Coming across a heavy volume bound in burnished wood and fastened with iron bars, I sought out my hosts for guidance in the foreign language that it had been penned in for the text had so far eluded me.

I came upon the Lansetts in their dining room and showed them the book I had discovered. Both men declared complete ignorance, Thaddeus going so far as to proclaim he'd not even known such a book existed within his collection. Not fully believing either of them, I proceeded to open the vast text and sound out what few characters resembled those I knew from my studies of Latin, Hebrew, and Aramaic. I know not if I invoked some elder power from an otherworldly sphere but the oddly formed words had a dreamlike feel to them. My incantations spilled out into the vacuous spaces that exist between worlds at the cracks and edges of reality seeping out of our own world almost as quickly as I spake them.

I had lost sight of the Lansetts as I peered down at the worn vellum pages with their oblong and frantic scratchings. Looking back to my friend and his father, I had hoped that my reading might spark a willingness to share information or at least an interest to know more. The elder Lansett was unaffected by my reading but something had changed subtly in the form of his son. I noticed the corners of my friend Sydney's mouth twisted in a wider grin than a human mouth was capable of and as he parted his fleshy lips to speak I glimpsed row upon row of teeth like I'd seen before in the children.

I am sure that I would now be dead had Thaddeus Lansett not spoken next, sending us hastily back to New Bedford without delay. It was odd that Thaddeus Lansett should part with his only son so abruptly but apparently he had sudden and urgent needs that required his son and me to return to New Bedford at once. It was as if he sensed the same violence in his son that I had but had not let it show in his placid countenance. Sydney seemed reluctant to go and seemed to blame me as much as his father for our early departure. In minutes, the coach was ready to return to New Bedford and in several more, we were jostling and tumbling down the cobbles with Wallham shrinking behind us.

Sydney and I did not speak a word to one another during the trip home. Nor did I resume my assistance to our previous endeavors. Months went by but all had changed for me. In the streets and all about me, the children smiled at me with inhuman mouths that bisected their heads, mouths rimmed and layered with row upon row of sharp ivory incisors.

My dreams too were invaded. As I slept, visions of Sydney and his father leading an army of these wide-jawed demoniac children haunted me. I watched as they devoured a man, leeching his body and draining him of all that made him living. Fat with the blood of their victims, the children-things descended and I followed them down the twisting paths that led beneath the sensible world of New Bedford, going deep into the earth beneath the streets and sewers to a realm where

the Newtonian laws of physics could not apply. Here they marched but I could go no further, for the depth of my dreams were no match for the terrors therein.

I had resolved to quit the school and travel far away in several weeks' time when Sydney entered my dormitory cell. With strength that reminded me too closely of his father's hand-crushing grip, the door was pushed open before I could ram it shut to latch the door. He was wild-eyed and mad with an unknown sort of hunger I had never seen.

"Come my friend, we've been all too long apart. I insist you dine with me this evening." His voice cracked and ran sharp at perplexing intervals that made him sound like a warped record on a poorly wound Victrola.

I couldn't know exactly what Sydney had desired of me in particular, but I knew innately that I should not let my former friend accomplish it. I grabbed up the nearest thing to a weapon in my meager possessions, a fountain pen. I burnished it defensively, holding it out like a feeble dagger against a mighty leviathan. I had expected Sydney to speak or denounce me, but instead he attacked. He sprang forward with surprising speed and backed me clumsily against the window. I could but bring the pen up in self-defense, nearly vomiting at the gurgling, popping noise of it stabbing into his left eye socket and piercing his iris.

Sydney did not flinch but instead smiled down at me. That smile grew into an inhuman grin and I bolted like a rabbit from a trap for the door but I was not fast enough. No man of Sydney's size or girth could have moved as he did in that moment but, as if Sydney were a wild cat, he did. Finding myself blocked from the exit I grabbed from my desk the nearest object, which just so happened to be my copy of the Bible and thrust it out, as if it might repel with its holy link to the Almighty, at the evil creature that stood with me in the close confines of my dormitory.

The creature that had been Sydney lowered his hands with claws that extended from his previously human digits as long as sabres and howled at me from the vacuous hole at the center of the seemingly endless rings of teeth. As he lunged forward I swung my Bible down and connected, miraculously, with the pen still protruding from what remained of his face. With a sharp click, it entered the skull at the back of the socket in Sydney's ruined eye. There was a sloppy sucking noise and blood erupted as if Sydney were an over-full keg being tapped at Quiggley's, the local tavern.

His remaining eye bulged as the over-wide mouth snapped shut, failing to line up evenly with its lower half. Unsure if I had somehow killed the creature or if he were temporarily stunned, I continued to beat the weight of my Bible against the misshapen skull of this inhuman version of Sydney Lansett that now lay as a heap on my floor.

Blood and bits of flesh and viscera sprayed the walls until my dormitory looked and smelled like a morbid abattoir of sanguinary anarchy. When one of the college's priests stormed in to investigate the noise that had no doubt frightened my neighbors, I can only guess what the scene had looked like. In that moment I was no longer myself and no longer fully present of mind.

I had assumed that the horror on the priest's face was at least partially credited to the unholy visage of the creature I had killed but I was wrong. It is true that in my considerable zeal to ensure my assailant wouldn't rise I had smashed much of the bone in what passed for his head. It is also true that I didn't cease my assault on the pulpy remains of Sydney's skull until police had forcibly removed me from the premises.

When I woke to a semblance of cognizance in the holding cell of the New Bedford police station, I admit my surprise as I discovered upon which side of the bars I now resided. It seemed that the police were disinclined to believe my assertions of Lansett's otherworldly aspect. I would have spent the rest of my years in the stone cells at Lockwood Penitentiary had it not been for the intervention of Thaddeus Lansett.

The older minister produced letters and evidence that proved, in the eyes of the court, his son's adverse intentions toward myself. The letters indicated that Sydney had been plotting an ill end for me for some time. There were journal entries where he spoke of doing all manner of foul things to me and causing me great pain. There were several daggers and a pistol that had been found hidden in his dormitory as well. His father had hoped to intercept his son before any harm might befall me but had come too late.

I decided, reluctantly, to offer my thanks to the man who had stayed on in New Bedford after my brief trial. I found him at the Seamen's Church offering baptism to the poor families who clustered about the docks. I had intended to meet with him when the proceedings had concluded their natural order of events, but that was not to be.

Thaddeus' eyes met mine in the pews of the church and locked in a frosty glare. He looked down to the infant in his arms, guiding my eyes with his own. In silent abject horror I watched as the man dipped the child into a silver vessel of water. As he did, a slimy creature the size of my thumbnail wriggled and slithered out of his own wrist and, trailing a putrid gray mucus, wriggled down onto the neck of the babe. A tiny mouth lined with row upon row of teeth attached to a mucousy black tadpole body. The little madness, as I have come to call them, bit sharply into the base of the infant's skull and slithered inside.

I looked about the room at the parents with babies in their arms and at the poor women with infants at their breasts and gasped as I realized the pervasive wrongness of it all. Beings that looked all too much like young children opened mouths lined everywhere with teeth and sank them into their supposed parents. The mouths pulling away wet with red blood and the wounds closing unnaturally without leaving a trace.

I fled into the streets and raced like a madman as far as I could. I spent all the money on my person to put as much distance as I could between the minister from Wallham and myself. I believe I entered the confines of the Belstowe Asylum as if it were a sanctuary from the little madness outside. I had thought that getting myself off the streets and behind Belstowe's tall walls would be enough to keep myself safe, but there was no escape.

When I had read those words in that baleful tome back at the Wallham parish house I had linked myself to the wrongness of the Lansetts. I knew not how or why any more than I knew what their goals might have been, but my dreams were no longer my own. Unable to do anything else, I followed them in my dreams each night, to their Cimmerian depths and Cyclopean wonders.

Where my subconscious mind had previously woken me in terror, finding the horrors too great for my sleeping mind to comprehend, I now found my way unbarred, passable as the ether that the doctors administered drove me deeper and deeper into the unconscious state.

I delved ever further, following the children that Thaddeus Lansett led into their twisting pathways beneath the world. It was likely several years before I knew which world was the dreamscape and which the waking world of reality. I was kept in a vegetative state where the worlds of consciousness and sleep were quite nearly the same. In that time, I forgot everything that might have given me direction, and so I wandered the deep and unknown places.

I will never know if the sights I saw in those unhinged meanderings were inventions of the mind, drug-induced flights of fancy, or actual places that might exist in the darker spheres. There were high-spired necropolis towers in caverns so vast they seemed to have inky black skies of their own, rivers of water, fire, oil and flesh and always the little madness. Always the children who were not children traveling deeper and deeper to a point unknown in the distant depths beneath it all.

After I wallowed in my rudderless wandering for far longer than I should have, I resolved to discover something of the root of these evil creatures with their many teeth. The demoniac children did not hamper or impede my progress as I followed their ranks deeper and deeper towards their end, far deeper than I had ever gone in my previous travels.

Finally, after what seemed like days of constant travel, the child-like beings halted, forming a slow-moving line in a narrow chasm of sharp black rock. Step by step they entered a sentient darkness that consumed all light and joy.

When I next could see, I found that I had entered a large round chamber with a high ceiling that glowed with an incandescent luminescence. Ahead, I could see Thaddeus Lansett standing at the tip of a narrow promontory that jutted out over still deeper unknown depths.

The children halted and there was a buzz of expectation in the crowd of monsters there. Minister Lansett raised up his arms to the assembled masses eliciting a chattering of excitement. He lowered them in a theatrical sweep and I was carried forward on a wave of toothy creatures. The little demons flowed up and over the cliff's edge, falling blissfully into the deep abyss below. I fought to get away but could not arrest my momentum as the tide of small bodies gripped me with their sheer mass. I locked eyes with Thaddeus Lansett as I was ushered by and the sickeningly wide smile was enough to tell me that he knew it was me who passed.

I didn't have long to dwell on the jagged grin that had been offered to me as I was carried across and over the edge of rock into the blackness below. As I tumbled in the darkness with the masses of child-sized creatures, a form coalesced below. What I saw in those moments were row upon row of razor sharp teeth in concentric circles descending down deeper and deeper into the unknown. The mouth of this great creature was far too large to belong to anything of our world. As my body tumbled past the outer rim of these teeth, the air about me grew sanguineous with the bodies of children that seemed to pop like berries when they impaled themselves. An iron smell of blood filled my nostrils as I waited for the end and woke to the sensation of intense electrical pain.

I was tied to a gurney, held with straps of thick leather with devices clamped here and there to transfer electricity to my addled brain and nervous system. Gagged, I endured the pain of this torture for several long minutes as men in white coats and rubber gloves looked down at me through ink-black goggles.

When they were done with their ministrations, my body was left ungagged and unbound while they escaped the chamber that reeked of burnt hair and ozone. When finally I stirred, it was a shock to the men who had applied their treatment. According to them, I'd been completely comatose for the past eight years with no sign of cognitive ability. When I not only proved capable of movement, but rational speech, they grew astounded and credited their attempt at electrocuting me to death with curing my mental ailments.

The doctors of the asylum were happy enough to keep me in the haze of a drugged stupor, staring out at the world through dead and lifeless eyes for years. It was only my thrashing over-excitement, brought on by my plunge into the dread below it all that had forced them to act. Why this treatment was expected to help I will never know and it is possible that the witless nurses thought only to put me out of my miserable state but, had they not, I can but guess the end that awaited me on the points of one of those myriad fangs.

Having resumed a state of general cognition, it took another two years to convince the board that I had regained my wits and could be trusted outside the facility and another nine years to compile and study the copious documents that had accumulated over my internment. It has been a most difficult existence over this time but I have endured with thanks to my unquestioned goals. Having come to the end of my research and analysis, I have drawn my conclusions and know now the course that my final days are to follow.

No doubt I will be branded as a devil, deranged and foul as any fiend that plagues mankind's waking thoughts, but I cannot bring myself to act against this little madness that still walks the streets. I have armed myself, spending all that remained of my funds to purchase all the arms and munitions that I could afford. If one thing was to be gained from my remembrance of these dark times and lost years, it was that these demons, whatever they are, can be killed. It will begin with Thaddeus Lansett and end when I or all the children of the little madness are dead.

THE DEMON INCHES

— *Evin Fanning*

GRANDMA sits beneath a willow, her skirt blending with the branches. Ferns tremble at her feet. Leaves flutter onto her lap, and she arranges them in her braid, white as the swan floating near our dock.

“Hiding,” she says. “From the Demon.”

Dry grasses rustle as I scoot closer. Grandma raises a finger to her lips, shushing me into silence, and arranges twigs along her shoulders like armor. Her mouth opens but nothing comes out. She stares at me, the Demon riding across her eyes, and rubs a leaf against her cheek.

Mom won’t like the camouflage. She’ll tell me later, after we’ve weeded Grandma of the vegetation, that I must be more attentive, not humor Grandma.

Dementia, the doctor calls it.

But Grandma translates his diagnosis into, “the Demon inches.” Her brain, she claims, is the Demon’s pathway, an endless feast. I’m too old to believe in spooky mumbo-jumbo, but Grandma has never lied to me. This doctor, however, I’m not so sure about.

“Hello, Miss, root beer float, please,” Grandma now says.

I nod, but I’m already fading into the background, becoming invisible to her.

“Where is that boy anyway?” she adds, the Demon twisting through her brain, knotting it as tight as the Queen Anne’s lace balled into fists around us.

“Where is he?” Grandma wraps her arms around herself and rocks back and forth.

“Shhhh.” I take her hand. Grandma sighs and pats my head as I rest it in her lap, disturbing the leaves and ferns. The Demon seems to fear my touch, and I sense it tiptoeing away, to where it hides inside Grandma. We share this, the Demon and I, an endless watching and waiting.

“The Demon preys on the old, taking over our brains inch by inch,” Grandma said back when her thoughts walked a trail I could follow. “We’re weak, easy to control. It practices on old Grandmas like me but someday it might come for you.” She pointed a shaky finger at me, spittle gathering in the corners of her mouth, and cackled like some fairy-tale hag.

Mom didn’t buy the Demon explanation. She went on and on about doctors and prescriptions, hoping Grandma could live with us for a long time and that she wouldn’t start wandering off and have to move into a nursing home and blah, blah, blah. I quit listening. I’d never allow Grandma to be taken from me.

“Dinner’s ready,” Mom yells from the house. I help Grandma to her feet, ferns and leaves cascading around us.

“Is my float ready yet?” she asks in a baby voice, swinging my hand.

"It's in the kitchen." I steer her to the steps. Despite her talk about root beer, Grandma no longer cares about food, and I have to make sure she eats, keeping her strong to fight the Demon.

Mom's dressed for work, so rushed she doesn't notice the weeds poking out of Grandma's hair. Her heels clickety-clack across the tiles, and she smears lipstick over her mouth, patting hair into place.

Tomato soup simmers on the stove; chunks of cheddar cheese sit on a cutting board. Apple sauce waits in bowls. Mom waves at the food. She's late and out the door. No need to tell me to watch Grandma—it goes without saying.

And no time to pester me with her worries:

"Don't you want to play soccer?"

"Go out with friends?"

"You really need a haircut."

"Honey, you don't have to spend all your time with Grandma."

I always shrug away her concerns. Mon doesn't understand I'm now a warrior.

Grandma and I sit side-by-side at the table, our arms touching. She doodles with the soup and writes spidery messages on her placemat with the apple sauce. I spoon the food into her mouth, murmuring about how yummy it tastes.

Sunlight, screaming through the windows, glints off a knife blade lying on the cutting board. Grandma, breathing heavy, scoots back from the table. She leans against the chair. I jump to my feet. The Demon's on the move, inching forward.

"Cut it out," she says.

"What do you mean?"

Grandma, moving faster than she has in years, scrambles to the cutting board. I'm quicker and grab the knife as Grandma reaches for it. Her fingernails dig into my wrist.

"Cut it out," Grandma hisses, again the crone from a fairy-tale nightmare.

The red nails, ridiculous on Grandma's gnarled hands, the result of an afternoon spent at adult day care, cling to my arm. I almost laugh. I'm fighting, actually fighting, with Grandma but her strength surprises me. She grips my hand, pulling the knife closer to her temple.

"It's the only way," she says, so clear, so practical, like the schoolteacher she once was. "Take it out, kill it."

It's the Demon speaking, has to be, trying to trick me into hurting Grandma. Yet a part of me considers the request.

A smile dances across Grandma's lips. Her pupils are huge, black as the lake on a moonless night. I wrap an arm around Grandma's shoulders. The knife trembles between us, cutting an invisible wedge but not slicing us apart.

Grandma relaxes as I give her a one-armed hug. The knife clatters to the floor. Grandma rests her head on my shoulder. Tears moisten my neck, and I'm not sure if they're mine or Grandma's.

The sun settles itself lower in the sky. Gray velvet covers the forest, and jagged shadows lengthen on the walls. Grandma and I, in unspoken agreement, stumble from the kitchen. The stairs creak as we climb to the second floor.



Upstairs, Grandma becomes deadweight, moaning in my ear, and we stagger to her room. The setting sun flames outside her window. Pink cloud-islands dot the sky. I let out my breath as I lower Grandma onto the bed.

"Tired," Grandma rasps.

I sink into the chair next to her. "We won."

Grandma's eyes flutter shut. I rub her arm, the skin so soft it seems impossible that the Demon could live within her. I slip down into the chair. The room darkens, and the sound of waves rocks me to sleep.

I awake bathed in moonlight. I reach for Grandma and feel only air. I leap to my feet and race down the hall, passing Mom's room on my way to the stairs. She's asleep on the bed, still in her work clothes, one shoe on, the other on the floor. I consider waking her, but she's not ready for battle, not believing in the Demon.

I scurry down the stairs, taking two at a time. Grandma's nowhere in sight. The kitchen is neat and tidy, the mess Grandma and I left earlier gone, as if it never happened. But the backdoor stands open. Within seconds, I pace the deck, scanning the forest and lake. The wind whispers; waves lap. Nothing appears out of place.

The moon spotlights a cluster of weeds floating close to the dock. A pattern swirls within them, and the truth blooms in my heart.

Grandma.

Her green dress fans around her like a lily pad, her camouflage finally successful. I slip and scramble down the sandy slope to the beach. Water nibbles at my toes, and almost before I realize it, I'm running into the lake, pushing off the bottom, and swimming.

When I reach Grandma, I wrap an arm around her and start towing her back to shore. No movement or sound comes from her. I'm sure the Demon has won, already moving on to its next victim. I scream. Water fills my mouth and I choke, which keeps me focused, land my only goal.

My feet sink into sand, and I drag Grandma onto the beach, where she sprawls across the sand. I drop next to her, roll her onto her back, and push down on her chest, hoping I remember CPR.

Nothing.

I curl myself around Grandma and whisper, beg, "Please, don't leave me." Guilt crushes down on me; the Demon's won.

Grandma stirs, wheezing and coughing then vomiting water. I rub her back until she stops. We're still in the moon's spotlight, like some kind of freaky reality show: Demon Meets the Family.

"Let me go," Grandma says. "I'm ready."

I shake my head, hearing yet refusing to listen. "But I'm not." I need to get Grandma to an emergency room, make sure she doesn't become hypothermic or get pneumonia or an endless list of other illnesses.

For now, though, I can't move. The lake laps at my feet, and I remember the baptism at church this past Sunday. Maybe Grandma is on to something, maybe she can drown the demon, wash it away. Or maybe my love can do the same.

Lights flicker on in our house. Mom appears in the doorway, calling our names.

I wrap my arms around Grandma. She sighs and struggles to her feet, leaning against me. Mom spots us and hurries down the steps. I hold Grandma tighter, and she squeezes my hand with a strength I know comes from the other. Red nails claw at my arm but I don't let go.

The Demon inches.

I WEAR A COARSE AND RAGGED SHIRT

— *Greg Howe*

I walk with thistle and gorse upon the mount of man,
I wear a coarse and ragged shirt.
I take refuge amongst the stones of abandoned belief,
I smell the salt spun upon the oceans loom,
I hear the voices of a timeless womb,
I silently mouth a very old song,
A song sung before my birth and after my death,
When the herds of words have not diluted my breath.

ARACHNE

— *Greg Howe*

AROUND and around and around you go
Mistress of the earth I see your delights
Dissolving as I am in your trembling heights
Wines and dines and finds and binds
There is no confiding in where you are hiding
Lofty spinner of threads and dreads
So softly you tread upon your silken bed
From under step and under stone you crawl and enthrall
Enthral and crawl and call

As patient as tomorrow, you beg, save and borrow
Crave to enslave, a slave to the grave
From pillar to post your ties are beguiling
Forever a host with no reconciling

You deceive with the finest of weaves,
Strung out on trees there is no reprieve
So good is your suck
So subtle your duct
Quiver oh quiver in your silent embrace
The finest of lace, make haste, give chase
Out of hollow out to bite
Who will be your's on this cold dark night
The cast of your net
I will never forget
There is wealth in your stealth
And wealth on your shelf
So steal and reveal, unpeel and unpeel
Kneeling and stealing is just so appealing
My fluid's potential forever your essential

Spinning around and around
You can always be found
In the hollows of my mind we're always entwined
Casting your gown, around on the ground
Leave nothing, oh nothing ever to be found

You are the artist; you know who you are,
Agog upon your easel

You are always a teasel

Arachne, arachne an outcast be you
Out cast, you out cast, upon the morning dew
So alluring your net, I can never forget
So perfect is the swell within your dell
Up and down and around on the ground
Weaving your web, ever tightening the thread

A Silk for every occasion, needs little persuasion
Seamstress, temptress, dress and caress
Spin over limb with no needle or pin
Leashing the beast that you seek for your feast
Devouring, empowering, you like to control
Your feast is the beast that you never console

Silver web windows weep in the eye of October
Ever wonder, ever wonder, why i am not sober

Drunk in the face of lace upon the grain
Drunk in the face of lace upon the chase
Receptive is the line that just keeps on giving,
Giving and giving, unforgiving the living

There is no real fight
No return to flight, when all becomes night,
Its goodnight and goodnight.

WHAT MILKY DARKNESS (LEPIDOPTERA)

— *Greg Hawes*

What milky darkness your presence conjures up,
Wrapped in your coat of ill definition,
Beguiled by the flames of mortal superstition,

Drunken spirals fall,
Tawny, black, grey, mottled, be-speckled, De-Jekelled.
Dreaded in all,

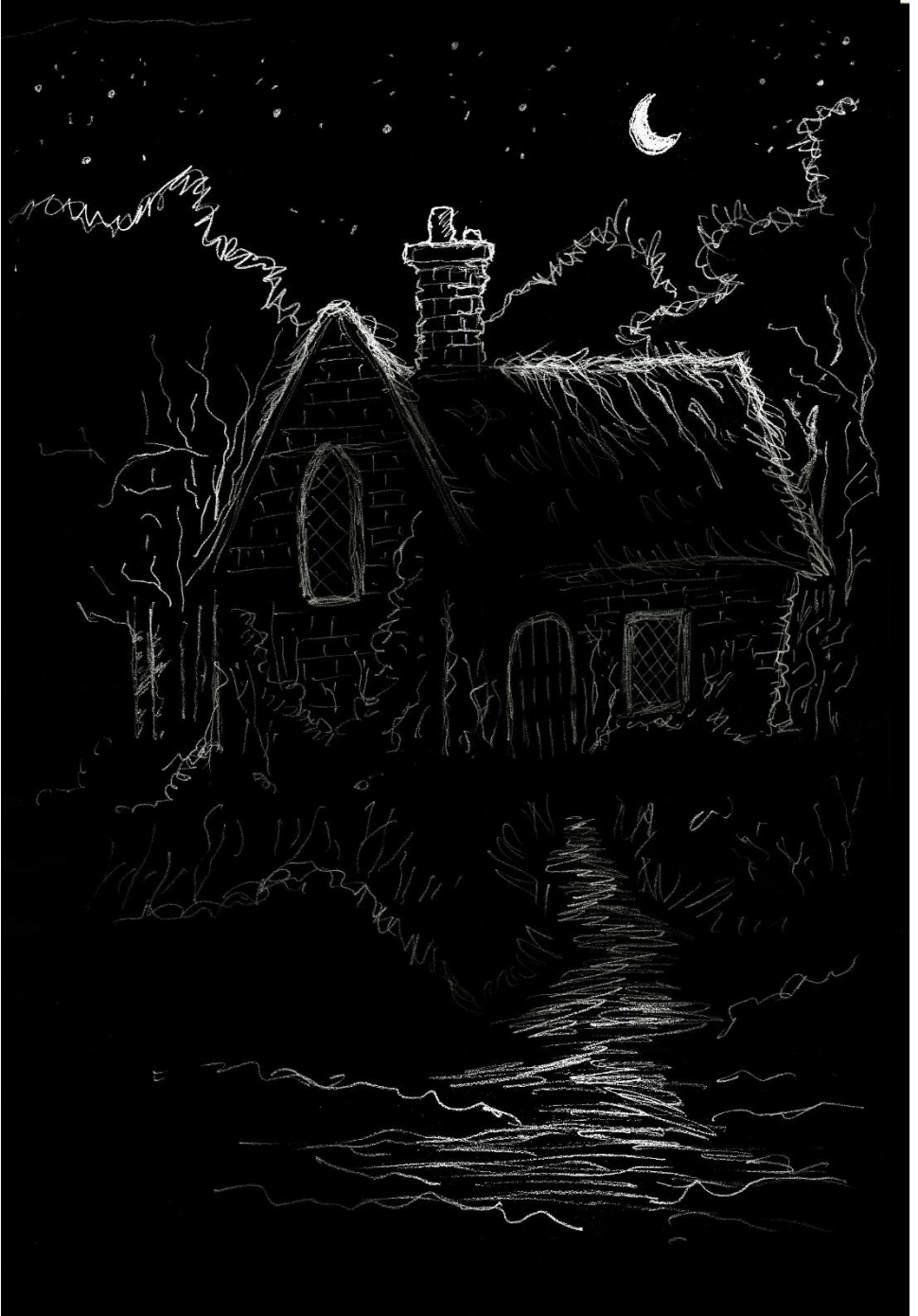
Under slate, under side, out from under a warm divide
In porch and post lies a succulent host,
Unwanted wings from moss and cold moor,
Spinning through your front door,

Cloaked in timber, cloaked in wall,
Watch how they do circle around your hall,
All your Jekylls hide, forbidden Hyde,

Arisen from the prism of dark ill-wrought dreams,
Be-winged dark stars of nocturnal edge,
Sidling and jumping through unbridled hedge.
Into your home unbidden, forbidden,

Silent is the prowler at the gates of your mind,
Making its nest where you'll never find,
Hoary silks it does weave,
Devouring its host you had better believe,

Time will tell whether it stays with you until the day does drown?
Or whether it chooses to rest in your gown...



THE OLD HOUSE – THE MASON WITHIN A DREAMER

– *Greg Hawes*

THE old house lay, somewhere beyond, beyond, a boundless property.
Although the house resided in my dreams, it was never a resident, it was a wayfarer and it did not belong anywhere at all.
Its knotted timbers were wrinkled, dark and unyielding.
I entered through many doors and yet I have never truly left.
There was no fire unto this place; the hearth was always spare, it bestowed no warmth, though I shivered not.

The house was set up amidst a wiry concoction of trees and briars,
Scraggy unnameable growths pencilled high into the twilight of the canvas.
The house itself has a wealth of inhabitants, yet its purse was empty.
Long sallow rooms of discontent hide, huddled between its shadowy eves.
Its neighbours were none; it was solitary, both in construction and conception

Although it was not bereft of windows, not once did I venture forth to look out, or anyone engage in looking in.
Its staircases were never lit; I was always blind to my destination, unadvised with out charter or quarter.
The air within the dwelling was forever autumnal, as were the creatures, within and without their webs.
Though the house spoke of short days and ceaseless winter it never died.
The house was always alone, singular and unto me, alone.
I cannot remember when it first came unto to me? Perhaps it was before I drew my first breath, I shall never know.

It is neither my sanctuary nor my saviour, though within its silent passage and passages I roam, alone, unassailed, unburdened by age or rage.
I can not say whether it possessed memories, if there were any to be found they were neither mine or thine.

Did I build this solemn place? Or was i shown a version of it so many countless times that I made it my own mine, to build and rebuild time after time, infinite, indefinite.
With the coming of night I do build, a bony skeleton of boards and beams, a vaulted ceiling afresh.

Its once smooth inner skin of lathe and a plaster, scarred with dry pools of nothingness, wounds within the walls, its façade of permanence exposed and laid

bare, though it will not die, not even, I suspect, when I go back through the vast gate of making and unmaking; it shall be either at my side, or vast and this ruinous abode will be bestowed upon another, built with the ragged stone of the moon, the mason within the dreamer.

CHRISTMAS ANGELS

— *Thomas Olivieri*

“MERRY Christmas Mr. DiMarco.”

“Merry Christmas Mr. Kittens.”

The young woman leaning on Hal’s arm giggled. “Why did that old man call you Mr. Kittens?”

The young couple had just walked hand in hand passed an older man. It was a few days before Christmas and, although there wasn’t any snow yet it was pleasantly cold and cheerful everywhere.

“Mom hasn’t told you? I thought she has told you all of my embarrassing stories.”

“It seems like she saving a few good ones, Mr. Kittens. How cute I’ve never seen you blush before.”

It was fifteen years ago when I was six...

“Seventeen years ago...”

“When I was six -- whenever that was -- I wanted an angel on the Christmas tree. but we had a star, pretty lame if you ask me. Even lamer if you asked the six-year-old me. But the day after Christmas, I was walking along and found that someone had thrown out a tree with an angel on top.”

“So you brought it home?”

“No we had a star, and my folks wouldn’t want some second-hand angel. It was a sad looking angel too. Her feathers were ruffled. But I thought that there was nothing more dejected and trampled than a discarded angel.”

“Did you talk like that when you were a little boy? how cute.”

“Well maybe it wasn’t those exact words but I felt she was a sorry sight. And I thought God felt slighted too, having one of his messengers treated like that.”



"Mmmhhmmm... I heard He was very sensitive about the state of Christmas decorations. And his is the first time I heard you care anything for His feelings"

"I was six. I thought He might be paying attention. So I climbed the tallest tree in the neighborhood, which was a big fir and put the angel on the top."

"You do get cuter all the time."

"Well I wasn't too cute then -- I was all cut up from the needles. Have you ever climbed a fir tree? It's terrible. But somehow I got to the top and put her up there."

"And?"

"And then my mother started screaming -- I don't know how she saw me up there but she said that if I tried to come down on my own she'd climb up and kill me herself I was too scared to come down -- not of the height -- of her. And she called 911 and so Mr. DiMarco had to come with a firetruck and save me like a kitten. I guess it could be worse I could have grown up with the nickname "Mr. Angel" instead of "Mr. Kittens."

"That might be the cutest Christmas story that I have ever heard. Can you show me the tree?"

"No, it was struck by lightning years ago -- with the angel still up there."

"I bet your dad got a kick out of that."

"He did. My mother not so much. The whole town called me that. When I was in highschool my friends kept trying to get me to go to a football game. But I never wanted to. it turns out the cheerleaders had practiced a 'Mr. Kittens' routine. I guess mortifying me in front of the whole school was integral to victory."

"'Integral to victory' when we're married will you talk dirty to me in Latinate circumlocutions? Oh look, you're blushing again."

"Nowadays I try not to say things that lend themselves to cheering. I did go to one of the games but no one thought to do the cheer. So there was no damage done there." Hal cleared his throat and asked: "But you never tell me your stories. What is your number one Christmas memory?"

"When I was a little girl, I saw an angel."

"And you say that I'm cute. What happened? Do tell."

"Don't laugh I did." She was holding his hand a little tighter than she had been. "when I was about ten I lived by a lake -- I'll take you there one day -- with my grandfather. You would like him. He would have liked you. He used to ice-fish for smelts."

"I love smelts."

"If I ever catch you ice-fishing, I'm going to push you in."

"You don't have to worry about that."

"No you do."

"Even your threats are cute," Hal said. It was a cold day but it seemed warm and felt the pressure of her holding his arm through his coat.

"He used to catch them and sell them, but he was sort of retired by then so he just caught enough for us."

"Did he catch the angel?"

"Yes. he pulled a giant fish out of the river and it became a dove and flew away."

“A dove?”

“It was a fish and then a dove. Or some white bird. I really wasn’t surprised. It seemed natural. The dove just flew straight up...”

“To heaven?”

“Grandfather and I were too surprised to say anything at the time and it felt foolish to mention it after. Ever since those cheap top-hatted magicians have made me a little queasy. I always feel that when they pull a dove out of somewhere, they’re cracking a joke about my grandfather. Silly thought.”

Hal wanted to ask her if any part of the story was true, but then she kissed him. And he didn’t think to ask again till it was too late, when many Christmases had past and he was surrounded by his children, putting a different angel on a different tree.

WHAT DREW ME BACK: A GHOST STORY

— *M. Grant Kellermeier*

This ambiguous little ghost story was the first I ever wrote, some ten or eleven years ago; it's influenced heavily by the equally vague supernatural fiction of Messrs. Henry James and Ambrose Bierce — M. G. K.

OHIO, 1890

I can't say what it was exactly that drew me back to my parents other than I had been gone for a very long time. It was late in the century, and a period of particular prosperity. I was a member of the young generation at the time, and after completing my education, I had moved to Chicago and found work with a profitable law firm. It was during a rare lull in the legal season that I decided a visit home was due. The days had grown long and unpleasant and I dreaded the office rather than anticipated it.

So while the other members of my firm slumped in their chairs and stared at the rows upon rows of legal texts that lined our shelves, I announced my intention to take a week of leave and rushed from the room and into the street. Taking nothing with me but my overcoat and an old carpet bag, I boarded the train and set off for the country and for home.

It was in the late stages of harvest when I left. The train rumbled through a brown landscape of shaven fields and balding forests, and when I opened the window to smell it all, a gush of frosty air made it impossible to detect the sweetness I had idealized. Something in it reminded me of my parents and I shivered. I closed the window before it could conjure any further reminiscences and wondered why it frightened me so.

For hours we drove on through towns and over bridges until the engine came to a stop in the small village I remembered from my youth. While the engineers refilled the boiler and checked the bearings on the wheels, I and I alone stepped onto the cold, damp wood of the station platform. No one waited to get on the train and as I said, none of the many travelers got off. I carried my bag to the front of the station and looked for some type of transport into town. There was none. I heard the train cough itself awake and I continued to hear its paranoid murmurings until it died out in the distance.

My family is all dead. I should have mentioned that earlier but I don't like to think of it. My mother had died a few years earlier, while I was at law school, and my solemn father wasted away from tuberculosis of the heart one miserable winter after she and I left him alone. I suppose I felt very bad about the whole matter, and so it seemed natural that when my work proved bothersome, I should come back and visit them in what little ways a man can visit someone in that condition.

Without a buggy or even a cart, I was forced to make the two mile walk from the station to the only boardinghouse in the village. It was a cold day, and the walking kept my chest warm, but my feet and hands went numb, and my arm ached from carrying the carpetbag.

Things hadn't changed much in my hometown, but a very unnatural and sinister energy appeared to have morphed it like glass windows that melt over time. The woods that surrounded the twenty-or-so edifices had an unhappy and scornful color to their leaves. They drooped like abandoned flowers, and their trunks seemed tense with agitation. Even the fields beyond the trees seemed stark and wounded, a muddy, stubbly mess that oozed pain among its jagged stubble, like the dome of a scalped man. The houses were unfamiliar in color: it all looked so yellow when before it had been white, or so I seemed to remember, and those windows were tear-darkened eyes.

It was all the same, though. Nothing had changed other than this uncanny, gaseous sensation that rose, so I thought, from the damp earth. I forced this miserable observation from my mind and went to the house where I planned to lodge for a few days. Without even noticing, I had shortened my intended stay, but this didn't occur to me until later. By the time I reached my room and had situated by bag and toiletries, it was past twilight so I fell on the bed and slept.

My father was a tall man. He was loud and red when he was angry but he was almost *always* quiet and sad. He had lost his right hand in the war, and when a rebel raiding party sacked our town, he was in a Yankee hospital in Shiloh. My grandmother's house was razed in the incident, and my father had to let his neighbors rebuild the homestead because of his wound. He rarely smiled and he often wept silent tears, especially in autumn when the grains came in.

My mother was a short woman. She was round and pink like a rotten strawberry. She loved my father when he left to fight but was sickened by him when he returned. He had the air, she said, of a dog who was too close to death to live and too far from it to die. I can't say that she was a good woman or a loving woman, but she fed my father and she made me study for school. She would have outlived my dead-living father, but her brain exploded during an argument with a neighbor concerning some arbitrary matter. Her last words, my father said, were: "Wretched sun! So bright! If only my fingers were bigger, I'd snuff it out!" He told me this story with wild eyes and a wrinkled brow.

I was the result of their only union, or so I like to imagine. It seems more poetic to think such things. I was their only common link and when I left I can't imagine what the household was like. It was probably a terrible engagement of sorrow and rage, like the thunder that strips the lonely stillness. I dreamed of those last, violently isolated days as I lay in my bed, and when I awoke, my shirt was soaked with hot sweat, and my pillow was cold with tears.

The next morning was dark and overcast. I walked from my boardinghouse into the cold streets to find any old acquaintances, like closing one's eyes in the dark to recollect the floating memories of an old song. I went from house to house without result. I was wrong about the change—everything

had changed. They had all since died or moved to larger towns. I was alone in my parents' town and my breath escaped my mouth in ghostly balls.

I met an old man on my way to the boardinghouse, warped and spectral, he trudged through the papery leaves and called me by name. He was a friend of my father's he said. He was sad about his death he said. I thanked him and shook his hand. His eyes were mist-colored and age-darkened. With a sad, lonely smile he looked into my own frustrated, reddened eyes and scoffed: "You're father wasn't sure you'd ever come back. Said you'd tried to make yourself and that you was tired of sad dreams and cruel memories. Have you made yourself, then? Did you get away?"

"No," I said. "I've tried and tried, but I've come back, and now that I have, all that's left are ghosts and nightmares." He looked understandingly at me and nodded with his small, shriveled head. "Your father had his share of those," he sang. "Your mother knew that all right. God only knows how bad he had those."

And so I went to find my father. He had been a tragic man, I thought. He had been a harrowed man and a defenseless man. I remember cold winter nights when I would chop the logs into economic chunks while the frost clung to my lips and eyes. He oversaw me from the porch, fondling his mutilated stump like the face of a deceased loved one. When he came in with me to feed the fires water was frozen in trails down his face. I could see my mother's small, red face and her black eyes glowing below the belt of her eyebrows. She stared at his hand, his horrible lack of a hand, and she was disgusted.

Outside of town there was no more or less life. It was a wasteland of shriveled grey grass, brutalized fields, and lonely forests filled with dead underbrush and wrinkled trees. There, on the top of a hill was a clearing that served as a burial yard. The trees around it cast a gloomy shadow that was cleaved by just a single ray of silver sunlight, filtered through the mist overhead. The light was cold but intense, and it stabbed the earth in the middle of the weathered iron gate that closed the plot off from the brutal animals. There, near where the silver blade pierced, I found my father's stone. Beside it was my mother's. Rotten and wet, the ground around them was infested with mold and moss, and the black fuzz swarmed over the two markers, like a clinging leprosy that grew from the ground below.

Looking at the stones I wondered why it was I had felt so compelled to leave their sides. They could have used my company perhaps. And yet the old man's monstrous words echoed in my ear: Your mother knew that all right. God only knows how bad he had those. What he had meant by that I couldn't imagine, but something in his tremulous tone terrified me and made my heart sick. I remembered my father's story and how my mother's brain exploded. I saw his wild eyes and his wrinkled brow. My imagination raced through a mottled series of thoughts. I remembered the day: her brain exploded, he said; she was furious, he said; she died screaming at the sun, he said. I saw the wild eyes, the quivering stump, the tall man's red face, and my knees weakened. No, no. I wouldn't

entertain the thought. No, it couldn't be. The black moss now looked like dried blood, splattered on and around my parents' graves.

My father's voice, lonely and abandoned, called to me from the sunken earth. I feared him, and yet I found myself hypnotized by the fantasy. I would come to him, my father, my dear, tragic, mutilated father, my father whom I had abandoned. Alone, he died. I knelt at his grave. Now I knew why it was that I must return. I looked at the cakey soil and knew that with my two good hands I could rend it, could chop wood, could embrace my father. My reason melted in the steam issuing from my dilated nostrils. Law be damned, life be damned. I thrust my hands into the infected earth and tore it from my father's casket, creating a cloud of blackness that darkened my eyes and blotted out the silver blade of the sun. Deeper and deeper my bloody fingers went, clawing wildly for forgiveness, for understanding. I had left him with her. I had left him with that terrible woman and whatever he did was on my conscience. Three inches, six, a foot! I immersed myself in the soil and forgot all thoughts of the outside world. My debt suckled on my heart.

"He's dead, you know," said the old man.

"Of course I know that."

He hobbled slowly across the dry leaves and let his hand fall on my shoulder. It was cold and bony. His eyes were tragic and serious and his lips parted like an opening tomb.

"There is nothing here for you but death, young man. Leave the dead to the dead. They have company enough amongst themselves, and too many of the living are among them as well. You ought not be one of them."

With a sad smile, the phantom turned to the yellow mist and was consumed by the wild woods. I didn't belong in this place. He was right. My father's stone stared blankly at me like a solemn face glistening with frozen tears. He was gone and I had left him. But there was no atonement I could make that would honor his wretched spirit. Here, surrounded by the parchment-colored leaves and the death-darkened soil, I realized the empty futility of my quest. The atmosphere of unhappiness had bled into my spirit and overwhelmed me, but it was the unhappy spirit residing in my own empty breast that had drawn me from my vibrant life to this land of desolation. I would return immediately, I thought. I could never embrace my father. I could never replace his hand or rescue him from my brutal mother. I could never save him from his sorrowful spirit. But I could live. I could live like he never could. From beneath the pall of moss and lichens, his stone pleaded with me silently: go, live, feel. I looked at my two hands and saw them stained with grime and gore. I buried my face in them and wept.

THE BRIDGE AT BARROWDALE

— *Daniel Pieterse*

I STEPPED DOWN FROM THE COACH, before nightfall but only just, filled with the simple joy of having reached my destination. My boots barely crunched the pebbles lining the side of the pressed-earth track before a sharp 'hey-yah' from the driver, and a whinny from the team, jolted the wretched contraption quickly on its way even further North. I watched it rattle and jump, shrinking ever smaller into the gloaming, until it dipped over a brow and was gone, like a ship dropping over the horizon. I bent to pick up my valise and looked down the narrow path to the cottage that would be my home for some weeks to come. The path, less defined even than this ghost of a road, led down the curve of a cove until it met a cable-strung bridge, crossed a small but fast-flowing river and then led onto a stone and driftwood strewn beach. From there it was a short walk to the old fisherman's cottage that lay in the lee of the sea-cliffs, long-abandoned by the locals but still warm and solid and quiet; perfect, in fact, for my wife and I to spend time walking, writing and enjoying the simple pleasure of passing the winter hours together, away from the bustle and fume of the City.

My wife? Yes, my wife had not taken the coach with me, being held in the City on business that could not be delayed. I would spend two nights in solitude before she joined me on the third. Time enough for me to learn the lie of the land and to discover the quirks of the cottage; these old buildings inevitably echoing the men who lived in them, hiding their creaks and groans until the cold winds and damp nights drew them out.

It was with these thoughts that I occupied myself as I walked briskly down to the bridge and here I stalled momentarily, snapped from my reverie. Two stout cables crossed the river, anchored at the shoulders of upraised logs. At a spacing of every two feet or so a length of rope was suspended, each opposing end tied fast to one of the main cables, and in the valley of these loops a narrow platform of planking had been secured. This made a narrow walkway with the main cables acting simultaneously as support and handrail. Sturdy country construction but, as I could see from the deserted scene around me, not blessed with regular upkeep. Still, I could see the cottage awaiting me, and the light was noticeably beginning to fade. I took a first, nervous step out onto the bridge. The metallic handrail was wet with spray from the river below and the planking walkway was no less slick so I made sure to plant one foot firmly in front of the other, letting my knees take the bounce that my progress caused. Unsettling, off-kilter waves started to build in the walkway as the pressure of my weight moved across the bridge and I suddenly had the unearthly feeling that another body was following close behind me, only a few paces distant. The river's light spray now seemed to tug at my hair and, beneath my feet, the rushing river beneath drew my gaze into its whirling eddies. My fingers cramped on the cold metal of the handrail. The unimpeachable feeling that

unseen hands grasped for my throat assailed me and I was filled, to the exclusion of all else, with icy terror. I stumbled, fumbling my grip and almost losing hold of my valise, but, with that final stagger, I pitched forward onto the clattering stones of the beach. I had crossed the bridge unharmed. With a gasp I dropped my valise to the ground and swept a hand across my brow, cold sweat trickling down my back as I did so. I gritted my teeth and turned my head slowly, full of dread at what I might see following behind me.

Nothing.

Just the bridge, bouncing gently, and the river rushing beneath.

Just my foolishness.

I stood for a moment then picked up my belongings and turned, crunching unsteadily up the shingle to the cottage.

I SPENT A UNSETTLED EVENING, sitting in a wooden chair by the drawing room's single window and staring out at the phosphorescent sea. The quiet of the cottage, so inviting in the clamour of the City, now seemed haunted by a spectral silence. I lit a small lantern as night fell but the flickering flame jittered queasily against the warped glass of the window and eventually I pinched it out rather than suffer its fevered dancing. No moon rose into the sky but a bright scatter of stars shone their sparse light down to sparkle on the breaking waves. The eerie bark of a family of seals called from somewhere offshore, rising over the susurrations of water on stone. Eventually I slept, fitfully, wrapped in coarse blankets and dreaming of sea-cold fingers reaching out of the night.

MORNING DAWNED, BRIGHT AND CRISP, and the previous night's fears suddenly seemed much more than a night distant. Tiredness and the writer's imagination could account for much, especially in such a remote place as this. I breakfasted and pulled on stout boots, then scuffed down over the shingle to the shoreline. The sea was calm now and speckled golden in the morning light. A water-slick rock suddenly raised itself from the surface and transformed into the head of a seal, gazing back at me. It glared at me like a cat, with a feline contempt for the land-bound shining from its black eyes. We regarded each other in silence for a few moments until it ducked down beneath the water. I walked back towards the cottage, gathering driftwood to leave to dry in the basket by the fire.

Then I clapped my hands together and walked down to the bridge. It looked much smaller in daylight, yet far sturdier than it had initially appeared. I clasped the handrails tightly and walked cautiously across, only to reach the other side in little more than a handful of easy paces. I found that I had held my breath. I let it out in a long exhale that steamed in the morning air. I shook my head, amused with myself, and set to walking up the path to the so-called road. The coachman had pointed out a hamlet some few miles before my stop, a huddle of buildings nestling at the foot of a sweeping hill, and had shouted over his horses' clamour

that it held an inn of tolerable cleanliness. This was today's destination and I set off with gusto, hefting my walking stick against the breeze.

I soon spotted the small cluster of buildings from the road and pulled off onto a sheep-track that led in the general direction, winding between the tussocks and heather. A hawk flew overhead, hanging almost motionless in the breeze. I smiled, free now in the open air and clear sunshine I had hoped to find in this remote location. The smile faded somewhat when I reached my destination. It was not a welcoming place. Dark grey stone, smeared black in places by the stain of dripping water, made up most of the buildings and their doorways were low, their windows glowering. One building, marginally taller than the rest, sported a carved wooden rendition of a tankard above its door. Taking this for the inn, I entered.

The public room was no less sparse than the building's exterior but a low fire crackled in the grate and the rich smell of ale warmed the soul. A handful of tables were scattered around the room, attended by stocky stools. A rough trestle acted as a bar along the wall opposite the door. One table harboured a huddled figure, wrapped in the ragged and threadbare remnants of what may once have been a cloak, but the rest were empty and appeared to have been so for some time. I thought of leaving but felt eyes upon me and I glanced up to see what could only have been the innkeeper standing in the gloom behind the bar. I intended to stay in the area for some time and was loathe to make a poor impression on the locals so I crossed the room, eliciting a coughing grunt from the seated figure, and asked the innkeeper for ale. A leathern tankard of an oily, bitter-smelling liquid was presented to me for a coin and I sipped it delicately, pretending not to notice the landlord's humourless smirk. Despite its smell, and the initial bite of some metallic herb, it was not an unpleasant brew. Suddenly thirsty from my morning stroll, I drank it quickly and ordered another with bread and cheese before retiring to a table near the fire.

I turned my attention to the huddled, rag-swathed figure. Hunched and twisted, all sense of the masculine or feminine had been destroyed by age and decrepitude. The acrid tang of dereliction lingered about it and, even while seated, it appeared to lean heavily on a walking stick. Occasionally, a hacking cough barked from the figure and one gnarled fist or the other would be beaten on its chest. When undisturbed by coughing, it rubbed its throat obsessively. I couldn't discern a face due to the hood that was pulled down low and the fact that the figure always seemed to be at least half-turned away from me. A destitute figure, no doubt, and one that reflected this lost, half-forgotten part of the country. I wondered what harrowing event or misfortune had laid it so low.

My bread and cheese arrived and my attention was pulled away. When I next looked up the figure had gone, although I had no memory of hearing it leave. No matter, I thought. Let the locals come and go as they please. The landlord appeared with a small bundle of logs that he threw onto the fire, uncaring of the few that bounced out onto the floor. Those that landed in the flames proved to still be damp, obviously scavenged from the coast's store of driftwood, for they sputtered and smoked as they threw up sparks of green and subtle blue. I gazed at

the flames for some time, sipping the bitter ale, and without any sense of transition I fell into a drowse.

AS I DOZED, A VISION CAME TO ME. Green and subtle blue colours swam before my eyes as a thin, salty mist hung about me. Bitter liquid burned the back of my throat and I coughed throatily, thick phlegm rising into my mouth. As I wiped tears from my eyes I caught the blurred impression of two pallid hands reaching out for me through the watery veil, nails caked black with filth. They touched my neck, cold and clammy, and I gasped before jerking away and...

I AWOKE WITH A START, the landlord beside me and his hand on my shoulder. In a firm tone he bade me farewell and I was given to understand that the inn was closing. What time it was, I knew not, but I stepped through the door into an outside world of twilight and mist. Had I slept the day away? It seemed I must have done, lulled into slumber by a poor night's sleep and unexpectedly powerful drink. I felt skittish, disturbed by the flitting images I had seen in my sleep, and I wasted little time in returning to the cottage. To the bridge.

It sat there in the gathering dark, straddling the river like a grotesque spider, and I lingered for some time before setting foot onto its water-slick planking. A coldness swept over me and I heard once more, above the rushing hush of sea-water on shingle, the deep mourn of the seals' lament. My hands gripped the hawser and I dragged my suddenly unresponsive body out over the river's black ribbon. Green and subtle blue swam in front of my eyes again, my face damp from spray, and I felt once more that horrible presence behind me. I could no more turn to face it any more than I could sprout wings and rise into the sky but I felt every step of its slow, inexorable advance. Its hands were stretched out, I had no doubt, and grimy nails pointed themselves at the white skin of my neck. Every step of mine seemed tortured, accompanied almost unnaturally by a tolling howl from the seals. Did they lament my torture or count out the steps before my pursuer finally stole upon me and clamped the life from my throat?

I slipped, flung my hands forward and felt my knees crunch into stone and gravel. I had crossed the abyss for a second time and I swooned, lying face down on the cold stones, as I knew somehow that I was now safe once more. One final howl from the seals and they fell silent, slipping no doubt under the waves.

Suddenly, a thought leapt to my brain. The figure from the inn! Since my arrival I had seen no other of such malevolent aspect, with hands almost born to the strangler's grip. I could countenance no motive, save perhaps a jealousy of my City finery, but the matter seemed clear to me. I clambered to my feet and, with a fire born suddenly in my chest, I walked briskly to the cottage with the full knowledge of what I must do.

I did not look back at the bridge for I knew I would see nothing. Knew, and perhaps also hoped.

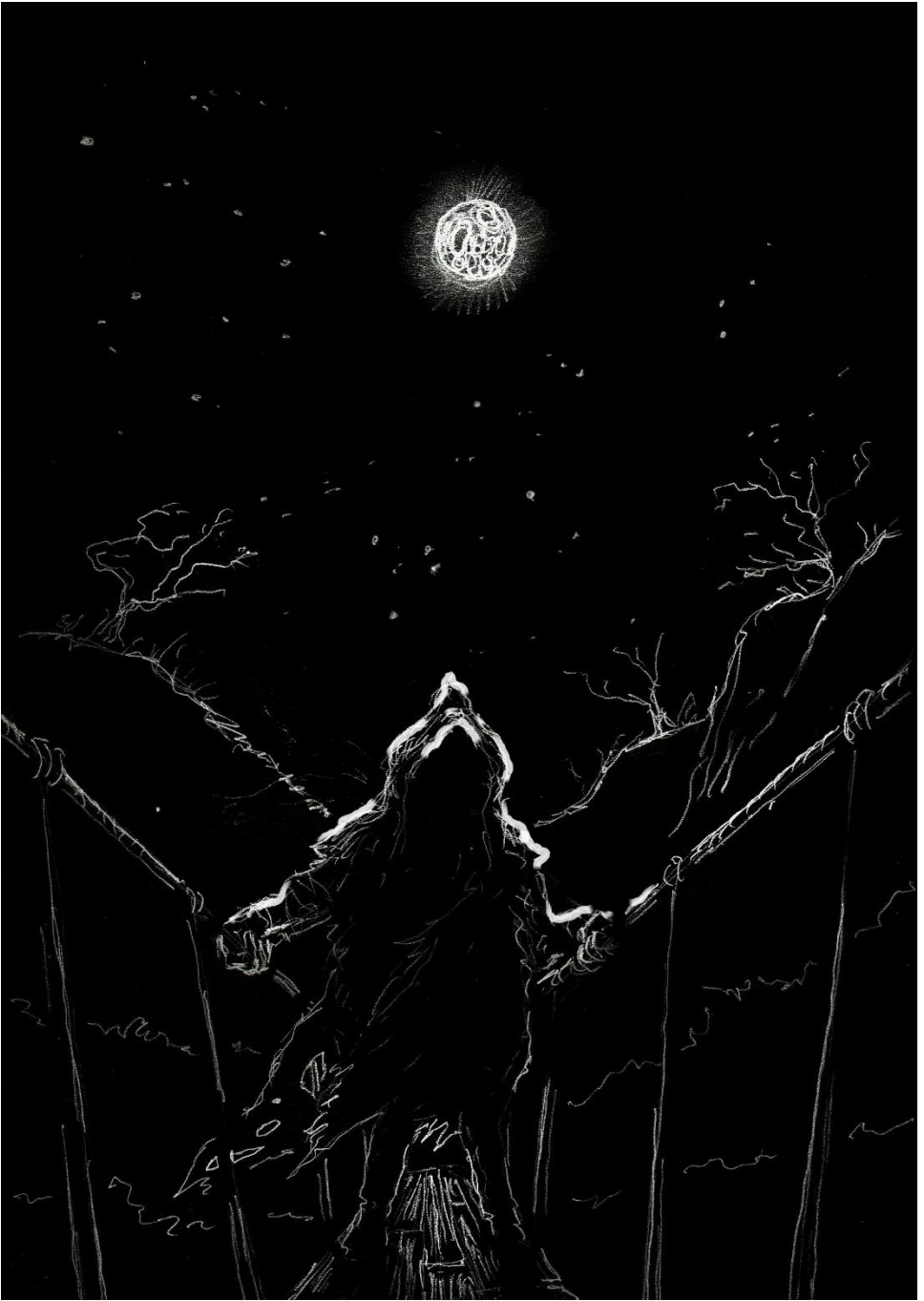
ONCE BACK IN THE COTTAGE I SLEPT, and slept more thoroughly knowing that I now had a plan. I would confront this pitiable local and demand to know why they haunted me so, when I had done nothing to them beyond exist. I awoke on the morning of the third day fresh and clear of purpose. The previous day, with its gloomy day-dreams and yet another night-time crossing of the bridge, seemed far away. The seals may have barked out their warnings through the night but I heard them not, heard neither the whisperings of the sea. I resolved to return to the rough hamlet and have the answers I sought.

Back again across the bridge, a bridge and nothing more now the sun's light fell upon it, and back again up the track to the road. Back again between the tussock and heather, back again to the water-stained huddle of buildings and the inn. Back again to a door which had swung freely yesterday but which today was jammed tight, boarded it seemed from the inside. I banged its rough-painted slats and halloed out to whosoever lingered inside but neither act summoned a human soul. I turned, puzzled, and looked at the other buildings as I thought of what to do next. As my mind wandered in thought it seemed as though something subtle, but deeply important, was out of place. Suddenly I saw it; each house was utterly derelict. Glassless windows stared out from under roofs that slumped like caved-in skulls. Weeds and creepers grew about their foundations. I turned to face the inn and saw, horror building in me, that it too lay in ruin. I stumbled backwards, half tripping over the now-fallen sign of a tankard, and clutched a hand up to my choking throat.

How could this be? I had been here only the previous night. Nobody could have called the place welcoming but it had held life, albeit meagre, and the warmth of fire and food. Now it was a corpse, picked over by those most thorough of carrion beasts; time and the elements.

I decided, through no leap of logic but of desperation, that the cloak-huddled figure must have somehow caused not only the dream-vision but also the hallucination that my supposed visit to the inn must have been. Had I wandered this dead village in a daze, mocked unwittingly by this decrepit malefactor? Had this been done to taunt me further, adding to the night-time threat of strangulation, in order to drive me away from what it no doubt thought, in some base imitation of pride, was its domain alone? I would put a halt to this nonsense.

I returned to the cottage, to a brief and flavourless lunch, and gathered up a few items for the business ahead of me; my travelling cloak, a flask of sharp spirit and my journal. The figure no doubt believed itself aware of my habits and intended to pursue me as I crossed the bridge, returning to the cottage in the evening. I intended to wait, hidden, in the gorse that huddled in the corner where the path from the road swung around to meet the bridge. From there I would watch for the approaching figure who, seeing the light I had left burning in the cottage, would cross and attempt to accost me. I had no doubt of this, no doubt at all. I settled in the bushes and prepared myself to follow the figure across the bridge. I would cease their harassment, however I could.



MANY HOURS PASSED AND I FELT INCREASINGLY FOOLISH, not to say chilled and damp. A bright moon had risen some time ago and hung now, high and clear in the sky. The sea muttered to itself as a low wind whipped at the waves. I wrapped my cloak around me and pulled once more from the emptying flask, the cold creeping a numbness into my extremities as quickly as my wits became dulled from the spirit. I was tired and I ached. I became despondent as to whether my plan would be successful but then, suddenly, a figure was silhouetted in the moonlight at the top of the path. It stood for a while, looking up and down the coastal road, then seemed to steel itself and started down the path towards the bridge, towards where I hunkered in my hiding place.

Even in the moonlight the approach to the bridge was often swathed in shadow and I often could only follow the figure's progress by the quick patches of blackness against the path's damp-gleaming stones. It moved quickly, but huddled, a cloak pulled around it and I had no doubt that this was the creature from the inn. Creature, it had become, as I now imbued it with a malevolence that no human could hold for another soul. Finally, it reached the bridge and was brought up sharp with indecision. I was not making my nervous crossing as it had expected, was not an easy target for its grasping claws. It had sought to crush the breath from my very lungs and dash me down into the rushing river but that was not to be so it dawdled momentarily on the riverside, never moving far from the bridge but equally never taking the decision to cross. The creature waited, I waited, even the moon seemed to wait motionless and cold in the night sky. The wind died along with the muttering of the sea and even the seals, ever-present watchers from the water, could not be heard. Silence only, silence and the sense of lingering malice.

Then, unexpectedly, the creature made its move and began to cross the bridge with jerking, unsteady steps. It crossed slowly, one questing arm outstretched with a pale claw at its end. I watched for a few moments and then crept from my hiding place and, bent low, stalked towards the bridge myself. The creature, moving slowly with unsure steps, had hardly reached the middle point of the bridge when I planted a foot quietly onto the wooden planking and crept along behind it. I could see the grasping hands, blackened nails on each hand, as one clutched the bridge's cabling and the other stretched out ahead of it. I moved with a stealth born of absolute intent until I was but a few paces behind the creature, and that is when I struck.

I lashed out, striking the figure across its head with the spirit flask, and it cried out in a high shriek of pain. It half-turned, arm raised in defence, and a push from me sent it sprawling back against the cabling. As it did so a shaft of moonlight revealed a glimpse of the figure. A glimpse only, but one that dashed the warmth from my soul.

The cloak was not tattered or torn but a rich fabric of green and subtle blues that I knew only too well from long acquaintance. The hands that stretched out to me ended not in filth-caked claws but in dark-lacquered nails. The face that shone out pale in the moonlight was not the twisted visage of a nocturnal thing, not even

the wrinkled face of a vengeful local. I uttered a cry that caught and died, half-born, in my throat.

Suspended before me, face frozen in shock and confusion, was my own wife! Realisation crystallised like ice in my mind. It was the third day and here she was, late but not unexpected. There was no monster here. No violence save that I had brought.

Time slowed and we stared at each other, horror etching both our faces. A thin trickle of blood held itself motionless at her hairline until time started to flow once more, dark blood flowed freely over her face, and she collapsed backwards and down into the rushing water beneath. I fell, too.

I fell into a black abyss lined only with green and subtle blues. Fell into a pit that existed far from the bridge and the river it spanned. As I fell I felt, for the third time, icy claws reach out to clutch at me. This time they wrapped around my throat and squeezed, squeezed. My awareness dwindled until I knew nothing of my actions that night, nothing of the cold that seeped into my body. I knew nothing but the constant, whispering hush of water on rock and the sardonic laughter of the ever-vigilant seals, the only witnesses to my crime.

TIME HAS PASSED UNMARKED. I thought I saw glimpses of my wife, through twilight windows and the mist-strewn moors, and yet I am sure that it cannot have been her. How can it when each time I called out to her she fled. Why should my own wife flee from me, no matter what I have done? Once I caught her and clutched her to me, clutched her so tightly. She screamed for a short while, only a short while. Why should she scream? I meant only to hold her, but she grew cold and silent. I lay her on the soft bracken to rest.

They came then, with torches and dogs.

The dogs barked like the seals barked on those nights of green and subtle blue, long ago.

I remembered.

I READ THESE WORDS I HAVE WRITTEN and know now what I have become, as reason returns to me. I am the creature on the bridge at Barrowdale, there is no other.

Once I planned to end the horror of that creature.

Tonight I will complete that plan.

Extract from a journal found in possession of an elderly human male, deceased by way of strangulation, found in the abandoned village of Barrowdale.

Identity as yet unknown but believed to be the vagrant known as 'Clutchie', often found to be walking the area and harassing young women. Report made to City morgue and necessary authorities.

ABOUT *the* EDITOR and ILLUSTRATOR.

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 18th century novel of sympathy at nearby Ball State University, before pursuing a career teaching writing at the college level.

Michael's literary interests range from dark romanticism, Transcendentalism, the Scottish, English, and American Enlightenments, the British Romantics, the Gothic novel, and German and Russian 19th century literature. He is also deeply interested in early modern European history, American colonial history, and Western history at large 1521 – 1921, comparative mythology, philosophy, psychology, psychoanalysis, religion, anthropology, and world art. By definition, Michael's critical viewpoint is a combination of Jungian and Freudian psychoanalysis, comparative mythology, and new historicism. He is also strongly influenced by feminist, Marxist, and structuralist criticism methods. His favorite non-horror authors include Hawthorne, Irving, Melville, the Brontës, Dostoyevsky, Dante, Graham Greene, Goethe, Hermann Hesse, Steinbeck, Hemingway, Dickens, and Milton.

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.