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THE  
**Yellow~Booke.**

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✠ CONTEMPORARY ✠

*Weird Tales, Ghost Stories,  
& Horror Fiction*

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**Hallowe'en Edition.**

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*Edited and Illustrated By*

M. GRANT KELLERMEYER



—WITH AN ILLUSTRATION—  
*By* OLIVER RICHARDSON



## Oldstyle Tales Press

SUPERNATURAL, WEIRD, & HORROR FICTION

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## .: INTRODUCTION

— *M. Grant Kellermeyer*

THE following tales demonstrate a deep and passionate allegiance to the tradition of the classic tale of horror. Some are written by authors who have never been in print, some by professional authors, and some by published writers who have not tried their hand at horror before, but all are fans of the Gothic literature which has mystified and titillated generations of readers.

In a different century, the sooty streets of London were filled with middle-classed merchants and housewives rushing over gritty cobblestones with the ghost stories of Wilkie Collins, J. S. Le Fanu, Amelia B. Edwards, Rhoda Broughton, Charles Dickens, and Mrs Oliphant clutched shamelessly in their hands, looking forward to opening up the magazine during their journey home by hansom, carriage, or train car. Within another seventy years the philosophical sensationalism of Lovecraft, Hodgson, Machen, Chambers, Ashton Smith, Derleth, and Bloch were lovingly collected by adolescent boys, bored playboys, and jaded war veterans whether Wall Street was booming and gangsters running rough-shod over the law, or whether the soup lines stretched gloomily down city streets and Europe was darkening under the shadow of a new war.

The novels of Bram Stoker, Mary Shelley, Robert Louis Stevenson, and H. G. Wells, the collections of Oliver Onions, M. R. James, E. F. Benson, and Ambrose Bierce, and the strange legacies of Hoffmann, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry James, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Washington Irving haunted the personal libraries, nightmares, and imaginations of many thousands and even millions of artistically-endowed spirits: painters, illustrators, sculptors, playwrights, story tellers, novelists, musicians, composers, philosophers, critics, poets, historians, and the overlooked participant of art – the passionate reader.

This collection has been designed and engineered by those same spirits. Some offer chilling homages to their literary heroes – Ambrose Bierce, M. R. James, William Hope Hodgson, E. F. Benson, J. S. Le Fanu, and others – which both emulate their styles and develop creatively upon their legacies. Some offer thoroughly unique and original works that challenge the conventions of the horror tale, building past the expectations and boundaries of classic speculative fiction. Some of the tales – you should be warned – are humorous. Some are farcical. Some are merely eerie, dark meditations. Some are wholesale landscapes of gruesome horror. Some are found documents. Some are disjointed narratives. One is a Christmas ghost story. 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, October 2017*

## ❖ AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES ❖

### *Russell Richardson*

Russell Richardson lives with his wife and sons in Binghamton, NY. His publication credits include: "Rastaghosta" (Fabula Argentea, July 2017); "Still Life" (WOLVES); "Bird in the Works" (Cheat River Review); poetry in Peeking Cat Poetry Magazine; and haiku in Three Line Poetry.

An early obsession for Stephen King and Clive Barker led Russell to other suspense writers, including the classics (Dracula; Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde; etc.), Edgar Allan Poe, Ray Bradbury, Shirley Jackson, Ira Levin, Richard Matheson, Robert Bloch, and Binghamton's own, Rod Serling.

He continues to lobby for "Evil Dead 2" to win an honorary Academy Award.

### *Igor Dmirkutska*

Born in Caraguatatuba - SP, Igor Dmirkutska is a Brazilian writer. In 2015, he published his debut novel, Senhores do Anoitecer: Lua de Sangue (Lords of Nightfall: Blood Moon), and a horror anthology in 2017, Bibliofobia: Contos Macabros (Bibliophobia: Creepy Stories), both untranslated yet. He is also the author of short stories, screenplays and comic book scripts, some electronically published, others just to come.

He can be found on facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/igordmirkutska/>

His influences are: H. P. Lovecraft; William H. Hodgson; Stephen King; Joe Hill; André Vianco.

### *Sandy Carlson*

Sandy Carlson is a native Michigander who loves water and woods, and may or may not have seen unusual creatures while alone in the wilderness. She is foremost a storyteller. Even at a young age she tricked siblings, cousins, and friends into her darkened closet to tell them tales. Among wide and varying past jobs, her main one was as school teacher, and now, writer. For her books and more, go to: [www.sandycarlson.com](http://www.sandycarlson.com)

Favorite Horror Authors: Stephen King, Mary Downing Hahn, and Dean Koontz, and many, many people who contributed through generations of word changes of regional folk tales.



## *Douglas Kemp*

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

## *Taral Wayne*

The author might appear to have a “thing” for odd numbers – having appeared in *The Yellow Booke* 2, 4 and respectively 6 – but he assures you that this was unintentional. In fact, it was quite unwelcome, insofar as the many delays in his schemes were unexpected, undesirable and unavoidable in the extreme, and on the whole the author would rather not talk about them. With any luck he will soon put the entire unfortunate affair behind him, so that he can pick up where he left off several months ago. There is also some little question in the air about the author’s “favourite” writers in the dark fantasy mode. This is a question of no small embarrassment, as the author cannot specify any ... as he has really not read extensively in that genre. However, he is pleased to admit a liking for the “Carnaki” stories by William Hope Hodgson, the work of Neil Gaiman – with whom who he was pleased to share the spotlight with as one of the guests of honour at the World Science Fiction Convention in 2009 – and a perhaps surprising fondness for *Lud-in-the-Mist*, by Hope Mirriees. Otherwise, Dark Fantasy is somewhat off the beaten tract as far the author’s reading is concerned. *Mea culpa.*

## *Don Swaim*

Don is the founder and curator of The Ambrose Bierce Site (<http://donswaim.com>), dedicated to the myth and mind of one of the icons of American imaginative fiction. The Bierce site was launched in 1996 about the time Don started work on his well-received novel *The Assassination of Ambrose Bierce: A Love Story*, published in 2016 by Hippocampus Press, New York. His fiction and articles have appeared in small publications, on the Internet, and as ebooks, and his novel *The H.L. Mencken Murder Case* (originally published by St. Martin’s Press) is now a trade paperback distributed by Open Road Media. Hundreds of Don’s long-running daily CBS Radio features on books and authors, “Book Beat,” can be heard on the Internet at <http://donswaim.com/bookbeatpodcast.html>. A career broadcast journalist, he is also the founder of the venerable Bucks County Writers Workshop in Pennsylvania.

## *James Machin*

James Machin is a London-based scholar with an interest in weird and supernatural fiction, especially of the Victorian and Edwardian eras. He is co-editor of *Faunus*, the journal of the Friends of Arthur Machen. His story in this edition of the *Yellow Booke* undoubtedly wears its influences on its sleeve: Machen, R.L. Stevenson, M.R. James, and of course Clark Ashton Smith. Other favourite authors include H.P. Lovecraft, John Buchan, M.P. Shiel, Algernon Blackwood, J.K. Huysmans, Robert W. Chambers, A. Conan Doyle, Elizabeth Bowen, Rudyard Kipling, Robert Aickman, Shirley Jackson, Reggie Oliver, M. John Harrison, Mark Valentine, and Gene Wolfe.

## *Liam Webb*

Liam Webb is a writer, editor, hospital pharmacy technician, tutor, and has formerly been an English professor, accounting clerk, and city bus driver. He wrote this story in 2015 and read it live that Christmas at a Christmas visit with friends (not unlike M.R. James). He was born in New York, grew up in southeastern Connecticut, lived in New York City a few years, and has lived just outside the Philadelphia city line for the past four years.

He has written in the science fiction, adventure, superhero, and horror genres. He dislikes physical-based horror (i.e. gore and psycho killer movies/stories) and prefers more intellectual horror, so is attracted to Hitchcock, SCPs and supernatural-based horror. He continues to write off and on when he is not at work, as well as read far too many comics and books.

He is also an academic writer, has been published academically twice, is working on a third academic article, has two academic conference presentations lined up for October 2017, and continues to work on filling out his Master's thesis into a book for publication on the transatlantic influence in the genesis of the comic book.

He is always open for writing opportunities and can be reached on Facebook or at [liamwebb3000@gmail.com](mailto:liamwebb3000@gmail.com).

Mr. Webb has been influenced by the writings of H.P. Lovecraft, M.R. James, some Edgar Allan Poe, the entire EC Comics library, some of Mignola's *Hellboy* series, and a fair collection of Hitchcock paperbacks (published 60s to early 80s, stories from earlier) inherited from his mother.

Regarding general writing style outside horror, his favorites are Leslie Charteris, Arthur Conan Doyle, Harry Turtledove, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Mark Twain, over eight thousand comic books which he has read for the past 27 years, Walt Kelly, Bill Willingham, Oscar Wilde, some W.B. Yeats, Irish folklore, the Tom Swift series (house/fake name author[s]), Alex Raymond, Fred Allen, and others he's sure he's remiss in forgetting and wishes to include. And while not "authors" per se, his style was also influenced by his father's Irish family of talkers/storytellers and his mother's enthusiasm for the English language and story.

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.

∴ SIZZA'S CLIPPAZ

— *Russell Richardson*

ILLUSTRATION BY — *Oliver Richardson*

EARLY one morning, Sizza found a flyer for a rival shop called “Family of Hair” on the concrete step outside his two-chaired barbershop. The fat man labored to bend over, swiped up the paper, scowled at it, and stuffed the notice into his jeans’ pocket. In such an irritated mood, he barely flinched at a gunshot-like bang that rang in the distance as he opened his door for business.

Later, when T-Rex arrived, Sizza showed the flyer to him. Rex had rugged, wooden features, honed by spending most of his life in a gang. He glanced at and pocketed the paper, saying, “I’ll tell those boys what’s what,” and climbed into the barber’s chair that he preferred for lounging.

“They need to know it’s disrespectful to leave a flyer here,” said Sizza.

Opening a Sports Illustrated in his lap, Rex said, “I’ll talk to them. Now leave me, be old man.”

Sizza retreated with his hands raised, cowardly. Soon after, Dub-Dubs, Rex’s lean-muscled and laconic right-hand man, entered and took his position by the front window. And as usual, a regular stream of shifty clientele visited the shop throughout the day. First the customer would slip cash to Rex and then would swipe a drug-bag hand-off from Dub-Dubs. On occasion Rex assaulted a flunky for trying some shenanigans and always Sizza would avert his eyes.

Rex and Dub-Dubs operated their enterprise separate from Sizza, but he benefited. His building’s bricks had not seen a molecule of graffiti since they’d moved in. No one dared hassle a shop with their element on the premises. And as for his own business, though Sizza possessed mediocre talent, he had managed to cut enough heads to survive for almost three decades.

At about eight o’clock that night, Sizza was whisking his broom about the floor to create pyramidal piles of dust and hair trimmings. He hummed a small song, like a harmonious bullfrog, and his baritone wobbled his neck. Finally, he shook a dustpan full of debris into the trash and dabbed his wrist to his forehead. “I think that is all for me, fellas,” he said. “Time to close up shop.”

Rex continued to peruse a magazine. Dub-Dubs remained on his windowsill perch, monitoring the street outside. Sizza returned the dustpan to its wall hook while watching the others for a response. His hands squeezed the broom-handle and he said, “Guess it’s time to close up shop.”

Rex’s fingers held a magazine page straight up for a long moment before letting the leaf drop. Without a twitch in Sizza’s direction, he said, “Hoagie’s stopping by. You in a hurry?”

“No,” said Sizza, glancing from Rex’s back to Dub-Dub’s boorish, blank face. “Getting hungry’s all.”

"Fat man," said Rex, "you could miss a meal," and he snapped another page while his crony dully snickered.

Sizza clicked off the neon OPEN sign. They all sat around, waiting for Hoagie. Another twenty minutes passed before Hoagie stepped sheepishly through the doorway. He held a six pack of beer up to his cheek. Rex said, "Yo, that's how to make an entrance, son," and the two men slapped hands in a complicated routine. While Hoagie moved to Dub-Dubs, he said, "Siz, there's a kid outside who wants a haircut."

Sizza shuffled over and found, sitting on his doorstep, a young boy of barely ten years. Nappy, reddish hair covered his head. His elbows were on his knees and his fists held up his chin. The barber spoke to him through the open door.

"What do you want, son?" Sizza asked.

The boy said, with a stutter, "My ma-ma-mama sent me to g-get my hair cut, but I sp-pent my m-money at-the-at-the arcade." He was thin and had marbled, woeful eyes, more a fawn deer than child. "She will be m-m-mad at me," he said, sniffing.

Sizza dropped his hand from the doorframe to his side. "All right, son," he said. "Come let me cut down that mop for you."

The pitiful creature brightened and quickly rose to say, "Th-thank you, sir."

"My pleasure," said Sizza, gently shepherding the boy into the shop. They'd only taken a step inside, however, when Rex delivered a thunderous, "Closed."

The boy's face dropped. Dumbstruck, Sizza said, "Come on, man, this'll take five minutes."

"Closed," said Rex, menacingly. His gaze narrowed at Sizza. "We got grown-men stuff happening here." And to the kid he said, "Scram."

Sizza opened his mouth as if to protest. He bent down to the boy instead and said, "Tell your mama that Sizza told you to come back tomorrow, alright?"

The boy said Okay and gave a snot bubble a wet snort. Sizza patted him on the head and led him out. Then, avoiding Rex's eyes, the old man retreated to the stool behind his counter and rested his arms on the surface and his face upon his arms.

An hour later, the bell above the barbershop's door chimed to signal the exit of Rex, Dub-Dubs, and Hoagie.

Sizza emerged from his slumber, raising his head and blinking his slivered, yellow eyes. Muttering, he dismounted the stool, limped stiffly around the counter, and stood, hands on hips, shaking his head. He surrendered a deep sigh and began collecting the green beer bottles from the window ledges, the floor, the arm rest of a chair. He held one bottle to the light to examine a marijuana roach floating in its last swallow of beer when the door chimed again. Barely nodding toward the sound, Sizza grumbled, "We're closed." He pitched the bottle into the metal garbage barrel with a pronounced *bong*.

The visitor, however, did not depart.

Sizza turned toward the intruder and snapped straight with a quizzical squint. He started to say, "You--?"

"Hello uncle," said the man in a funeral suit.

Sizza emitted a high squeak, leaped backward, and was tripped by an armrest and spun to the floor where he skidded away, crablike. A knocked over cup showered the floor in a cascade of cheap, black combs and his hands slid upon them as he tried to escape but was stopped by a wall instead.

The tall nephew stepped to Sizza and squatted. His tie hung between his knees and his shiny black shoes and it touched the floor like a lazy tongue. The fat barber, his hilly head beaded with sweat, wed his index fingers together in the sign of the cross. A charming smile illuminated the nephew's face, which Sizza recognized, but impossibly, because his nephew was dead.

The visitor's skin was grayish brown and his body was just shy of solid, as though a punch to his torso would pass the fist through him. He had a twilight vibe of an autumnal day at dusk, when a fluttering moth could be corporal or ghost. His hands rubbed together, slowly, showing a new gentleness. Those hands had inflicted malice in their first lifetime, when the nephew appropriated the name of his favorite boxer, Tyson.

"Tyson," gasped Sizza, "that ain't possible. You was cremated--"

"A month ago," said the erstwhile nephew, spreading his palms generously, "yet here I am,"

"It ain't--no--how? I don't believe it!" Sizza stammered.

Tyson breathed from the back of his throat and stood before his uncle. He tossed his tie over his shoulder and asked, "You need proof?" Tyson unbuttoned the middle section of his shirt, exposing his chest. He leaned forward to show the dark hole where a fatal slug had penetrated his breast.

"Oh, sweet Jesus," Sizza gasped. He closed his eyes and began praying aloud.

Tyson's shoulders rocked with an easy chuckle. "Uncle, I mean you no harm," he said, re-buttoning his shirt. "Are you happy to see me?"

Terror pinched Sizza's face and he peered up through one cracked eye. "What you want from me?" he weezed. "I'm half dead from fright!"

Reaching down and taking Sizza by the arm with a calming touch, Tyson helped his uncle to his feet, saying, "Easy, easy." The old man backed into a chair and sat, fanning his fat neck while staring at his nephew. Tyson circled to the mini-fridge behind the counter and brought Sizza a bottle of water. Sizza shook so badly, half the bottle spilled down the basketball jersey he wore.

"I'm sorry, I know this is a shock," said Tyson. He sat in the other chair to level their gaze. Fear and a faint smell of smoke scented the room. "Uncle, have you wondered who was responsible for my death?" asked Tyson.

"Oh, sweet Jesus," the barber blurted out, setting the water bottle between his thighs and waving at his face with both hands now. "You really are dead," he said. "Oh, sweet Jesus. Am I dreaming?"

"This is no dream," said Tyson, leaning to capture Sizza's attention. "And I asked you a question. Do you want to know who killed me?"

Sizza cowered and folded his arms upon his chest, looking frail and malformed. "I don't know," he murmured.

"I got shot for doing bad business with an evil man," said Tyson. A scant smile lit upon his mouth. "And the killer was your friend, T-Rex."

"No," said Sizza, shaking his head vigorously. "No, no, he didn't--he couldn't have--I didn't have anything to do with--"

"Relax," said Tyson, stroking his uncle's arm. "I'm not here to punish you. I don't blame you for anything."

"Then what you want?" pleaded Sizza.

Tyson relaxed and cupped his hands upon his knees. "Just for you to know what sort of man you allow to operate in your shop," he said. "As the good book tells us, 'When the day comes for punishment, I will punish them for their sin.' All unjust matters will be atoned for, I assure you."

Now Sizza moved forward and he said, "I'm sorry, but--but how can I get rid of him? You know how he is."

Tyson cocked his head and flicked the end of his tie. "I do. Once you allow the vampire in, he will not leave. I understand your dilemma. I only wanted you to know, that's all."

Sizza stared into his lap and a tear fell from his face. He said, "I'm sorry."

"It is what is," said Tyson, laughing softly.

"We gotta tell your mama," said Sizza, looking up and wiping his face and feeling his pockets for his phone.

"No," said Tyson. "Only you can see me. You shouldn't mention this at all, actually, or they'll lock you up."

Sizza had a sudden thought. "Am I dead?" he asked, splaying his hand upon his chest.

"No," said Tyson, laughing heartily. "You still have time." He winked, stood and brought his hands together in a prayer-like gesture. "Now, I'm sorry to abruptly cut short our visit--"

"Wait, don't leave yet," said Sizza, struggling to free himself of the chair.

They faced each other and Tyson hugged Sizza with arms that were oddly light, almost like his suit coat had been filled with feathery cotton.

"Oh, don't worry," said Tyson, as they released and he began to walk toward the door. "I'll be back tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" asked Sizza.

Tyson saluted two fingers to his brow and slipped out the front door on a smile. Sizza hurried to the glass, but the sidewalk outside was empty.

The next morning, disheveled from insomnia, Sizza struggled to insert his trembling key into the barbershop's lock. He edged the door open and eased his head through the gap and found the space unoccupied. A relieved air escaped him. He was reassured that the previous night's encounter had been a trick of an overtaxed mind.

He'd crossed to the back of the shop when the chime above the door rang. He turned and saw Tyson standing with arms outstretched. "I told you I'd be back, uncle," he said brightly. "When can we expect T-Rex?"

Panic stopped Sizza's heartbeat when Rex entered that day, but he walked past Tyson without a hint of awareness. Sizza's eyes grew enormous when Tyson stood beside Rex and patted the man's head. "See? Doesn't feel a thing," said Tyson. Sizza dropped his gaze quickly when Rex detected his scrutiny.

A little while later, Tyson stood leaning against the front window. Dub-Dubs sat close enough to brush against him, but felt nothing. Tyson leered at Rex, who stared off like he was ambling toward a distant memory of a deed both grim and satisfying. "That evil buzzard," Tyson said. "Look at that smugness. Why don't you ask him if he knew me?"

Presently pretending to take stock of grooming products upon a shelf, Sizza shot his nephew an are-you-crazy warning and his face wobbled to say a silent, "No."

"Go on, ask him," said Tyson.

Sizza swallowed an egg-sized fear down his throat. He asked, "Hey, Rex. You ever meet my nephew, Tyson?"

"Nope," said Rex. His undeterred gaze stayed flat and icy.

"You sure?" asked Sizza. "You guys never met?"

"Which one was he?" asked Rex, pursing his lips and sucking air in a sharp whistle. "That the one who get shot?"

Turning red, Sizza said, "Don't play dumb," before realizing that he would regret it.

Rex's hand moved in a flash to his ear with a speed that showed his impatience. He stroked the lobe, feigning cool, but a hot cinder lit his eyes. Bright light struck upon his sharp, wolf's teeth. He said, smiling, "What you getting at?"

"Nothing at all," said Sizza. He withdrew to a safe spot behind his counter, his nerve quickly diminished. Tyson shrugged and crossed his arms.

A cynical and cryptic expression darkened Rex's face. He said, "You ain't suggesting I had anything to do with your nephew's untimely demise?"

"I didn't say that," said Sizza.

"How'd that sound to you?" Rex asked of Dub-Dubs.

"I only asked if you knew him," interrupted Sizza. "I'm just feeling bad for his mama, that's all. It's been hard to see my sister suffer that loss."

"Maybe if she had been a better mama," said Rex, with a voice that seemed to curl out of him like smoke, "she might have saved herself a funeral. You know what happens to stupid people that get in over their heads." He cocked his index finger and thumb at Sizza's long face and pantomimed a shot. He mouthed the word, "Pow."

Sizza looked up for help, but Tyson had gone.

The next morning, Sizza found Tyson waiting for him in the shop. And he had another spirit with him. This ghost was a young man in a backwards baseball cap and baggy jeans. He had a long white shirt with a circular red stain in the center around two dark bullet holes.

The two visitors greeted Sizza with smiles.



"This is Luther. He used to be called Bug-Out. Now he's checked out," said Tyson, slapping his friend on the back. "He never met you in life, so you two can't communicate. You can only converse with people you knew. But you can see him, and touch him."

The man nodded his head emphatically. He grabbed Sizza's hand and pulled it to his chest. Sizza recoiled from the touch of blood, forever damp and wet, and held his hands together as though he'd been burned. The contact clearly pleased the ghost, however. His face beamed benevolently.

"Poor Bug-Out was another one of Rex's victims," said Tyson. He asked the spirit. "Now, why did he kill you?"

Bug-Out whispered into Tyson's ear. Tyson tilted his head back and said, "Ahh, smudged his sneakers, if you can believe it. Don't muss a man's Nikes, I guess. Anyway, we're going to hang out here today. Luther's looking forward to seeing old Rex."

"I don't understand what you want," Sizza said, his voice a hoarse whisper. "Why are you doing this?"

"So you know what sort of man is operating in your shop," said Tyson, taking Sizza's shoulder in an affirmative grip. "Mark my words, 'When the day comes for punishment, I will punish them for their sin.' So, for now, don't worry. And look--a gift."

He directed Sizza's attention upward. An ornate, golden chandelier with the white-hot energy of souls substituted for light bulbs had appeared and blazed brilliantly overhead.

Wrapping his arm around Sizza, Tyson said, "Now, those guys were only killed by Rex indirectly--victims of his cohorts and fellow gang members and such."

Sizza shielded his eyes toward the ceiling.

"They sure do brighten up the place, don't they?" asked Tyson. He turned to Bug-Out and said, "C'mon, buddy, make yourself comfortable."

Sizza couldn't tell if Bug-Out was pleased to see his murderer, because the barber avoided looking at his phantom guests as often as possible.

The next day, Tyson and Bug-Out brought a third victim, a drug-addicted street-rat whose pallor was actually improved by death. The kid had overdosed on drugs bought from Rex, which, Tyson explained, technically qualified as murder. On the following day, Tyson brought a fourth guest--this one an older man, who bore a passing resemblance to James Earl Jones, clipped by a stray bullet from Rex's gun. With a new ghost introduced on each sequential day, soon Sizza had a shop-full of unwanted guests underfoot.

One of the spirits, once an energetic hustler of powdered drugs, darted past on a whiff that stunk of charred wood and made Sizza pinch his nose. Another ghost, a wide-backed man who'd been muscle for a rival gang, moved lethargically ahead of Sizza and impeded his passage through the shop. Rex, Dub-Dubs, and a customer waiting in the front chair all watched the barber with strange expressions. Sizza cleared his throat and said, "Feeling off today."

“Looks like feeling crazy,” said Rex. “You moving all herky-n-jerky-n-shit. Is your gout flared up?”

Sizza waved his electric trimmer dismissively and started shearing the customer’s head. Standing beside him, Tyson whispered, “What a guy.”

One day, Dub-Dubs didn’t show at the barbershop and Rex felt bored. Thinking the shop empty--for how could he know that the number of phantom bodies in the place had hardly left Sizza any room to move?--Rex told Sizza to cut his hair.

“Hop to it, fat man,” said Rex, snapping his fingers. “It ain’t like you got other things to do.”

Sizza weaved his way around the loitering spirits and stood behind Rex’s chair. The encircling crowd craned their necks to watch. One young woman with a nasty, wet gash across her throat sat on the edge of the opposing chair, an expression of malevolent glee dancing upon her face. At Sizza’s elbow, Tyson said, “Give him a good cut, uncle. Something real sharp.”

A stream of sweat dribbled down Sizza’s chest as he prepared his tray of barbering tools. He smeared his moist brow with his forearm and then spritzed Rex’s head with a spray bottle.

Rex glanced sideways over his shoulder. “I’ve been thinking. You know what barbershop term people would never use to describe you?” he asked, already chuckling. “Trim.”

“You’re a real cut-up,” Sizza mumbled while fastening a paper bib around Rex’s neck. He switched on the electric trimmers and they buzzed, numbly, in his hand.

“Alright,” said Rex with his macho, husky voice. “Give me the usual, and don’t screw it up this time, shaky.”

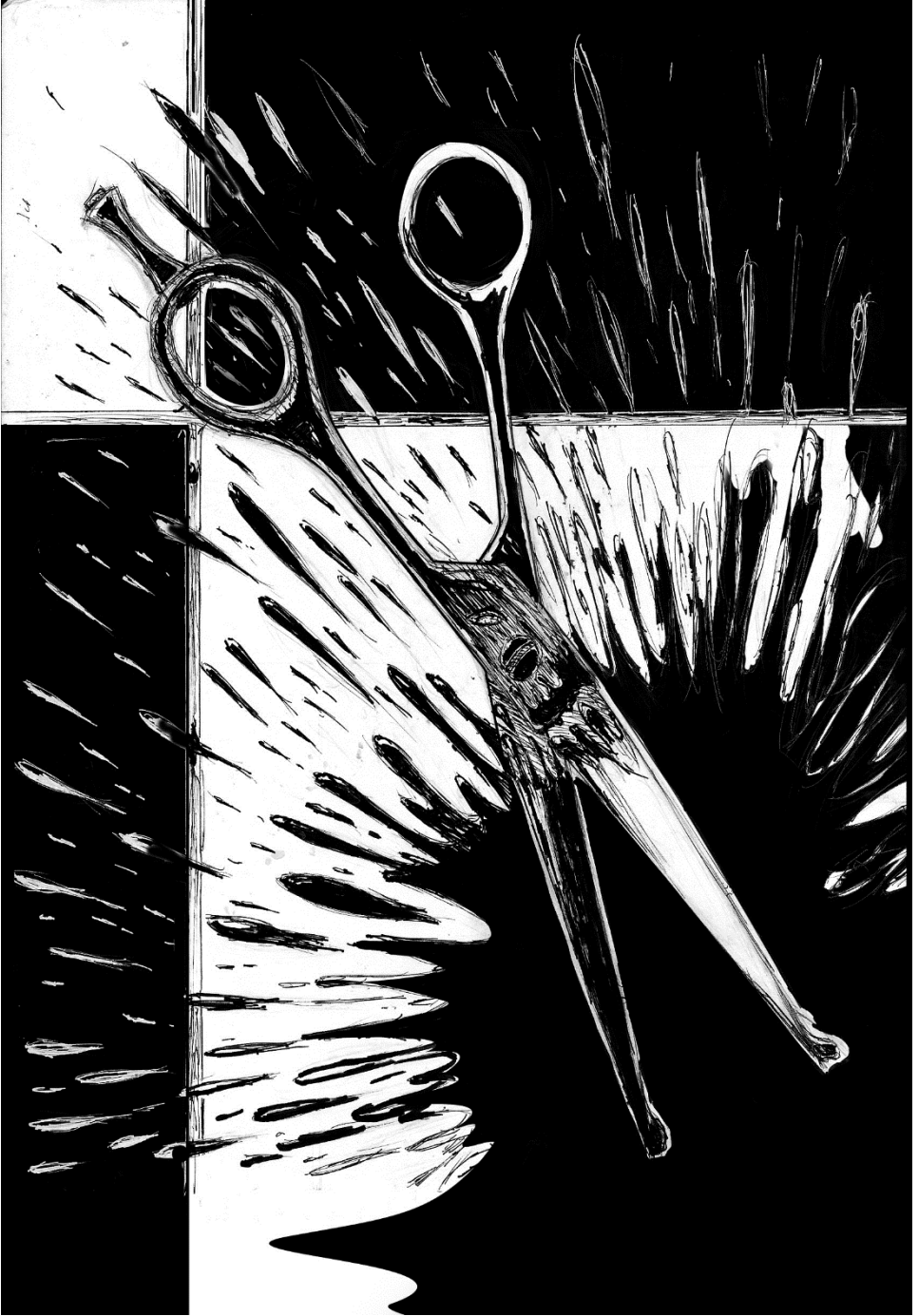
Sizza lowered the humming clippers toward the nape of Rex’s neck.

“Feel you shaking already, old man,” growled Rex. “Swear I’ll kill you if my head gets jacked up.”

Drawing a deep inhalation to steady himself, Sizza carefully applied the clipper’s gnashing blades to Rex’s hairline. A droplet of sweat coursed down Sizza’s temple and near his eye. He swatted at the annoyance and then used both hands again to stabilize the clippers. He had almost finished evening out Rex’s neckline when the chime rang from the front door.

Sizza raised his eyes to see who’d come. His face grew even more nauseous.

The crowd parted to grant passage to the auburn-haired boy in a small black suit. He’d finally returned for his free haircut. But now, gaping above his right eyebrow, was the gory crater of a bullet wound. “Hello, S-S-Sizza,” said the boy. “Re-mem-member me?”



A rush of sickness burbled up from Sizza's stomach. In the approaching boy's red wound, the barber saw a white rim of bone, the darkish purple of bloody brain matter. Sizza stuffed his forearm into his mouth, stifling a scream.

"What a shame," said Tyson, still lurking beside Sizza's ear. "Another stray bullet, another tiny coffin."

Rex swiveled a quarter-turn and barked over his shoulder, "Have you got all day, tubby? 'Cause I don't."

In a sudden, searing rage, Sizza reached to his tray of tools and snatched up a shining pair of metal shears. With both hands he swung the shears high into the air and, ferociously howling, Sizza plunged them deep into the back of Rex's neck.

The stabbed man sputtered. He clutched at his throat as he tumbled forward, out of the chair. He couldn't cry out, for he couldn't breathe with the metal blocking his windpipe. The blades had punctured all the way through to the front. Squirming and twitching on the floor's tiles, Rex smeared the blood quickly pooling around him as violent death seizures took over.

The little boy and the spirit crowd had gone completely silent. They listened hungrily to the thumping of Rex's flailing limbs, the whispers of his final, thin breaths. When he came to a stop with one last twitch, and the end of life was assured, the crowd let out a quiet, collective gasp.

Tyson curled a hand gently over Sizza's shoulder. He whispered, "Thank you, uncle."

Sizza, finally unfrozen, edged forward to inspect the tangled body. He was unable to comprehend what he'd done. And he sprung backward when suddenly Rex pushed himself up.

Releasing a loud, sustained groan, as if drawing a full-force gale into his lungs, Rex climbed to his feet and, teetering, lowered his demonic eyes upon Sizza.

"You," he hissed, with a voice now made even grittier by the wound in his neck and the weight of death. He reached one hand slowly for the shears still embedded in him, but his gaze drifted to one spirit's face, then another, and his hand stopped mid-air while he realized what a crowd surrounded him.

Unsteadily on his feet, Rex blinked at Sizza. "Where did all these people come from?" he rasped.

Instantly, the sprits pounced upon Rex with their mouths snarling, wrenched open to reveal teeth that were now gleaming, sharpened points. Their hands had turned to black-daggered claws. A howl of pleasure rose up as the horde of greedy, writhing bodies closed upon Rex.

Sizza watched, horrified, barely able to keep his feet. He could not see through the devouring mob that muffled Rex's shrill cries of agony.

Tyson returned to Sizza's side. He slipped his arm around his uncle's waist. Into Sizza's ear, Tyson whispered, "Can you see? Can you see? Remember what I said: 'When the day comes for punishment, I will punish them for their sin.'" And Tyson bit his fangs into Sizza's throat.

# ∴ THE HAIRY MAN

— *Sandy Carlson*

(THIS IS BASED ON A HISTORICAL EVENT.)

LIVING on the Icelandic sea along an unfriendly coastline, it was not unusual for the remains of shipwrecks to drift ashore. One day, centuries ago, villagers found a large body upon their beach. At first, they thought the man was clothed in a grey robe. It looked human enough from a distance, but as they neared, it became obvious that the body was covered from head to toe, not in a robe, but with long, coarse hair. Several women screamed at the sight and ran back to their homes. A few men – braver they were in numbers – knelt beside the creature and rolled him onto his back.

They each were relieved to find him drowned. At an estimated seven feet tall, and hideous enough to look at dead, if they had found breath within him, there were more than a few men who would have scrambled back to their homes, too, and barred their doors.

“Let’s throw it back into the sea,” a farmer suggested.

“No!” several voices cried out at once.

“Would you want to drag that up into your net?” one of the fishermen asked.

The men gave a collective shiver.

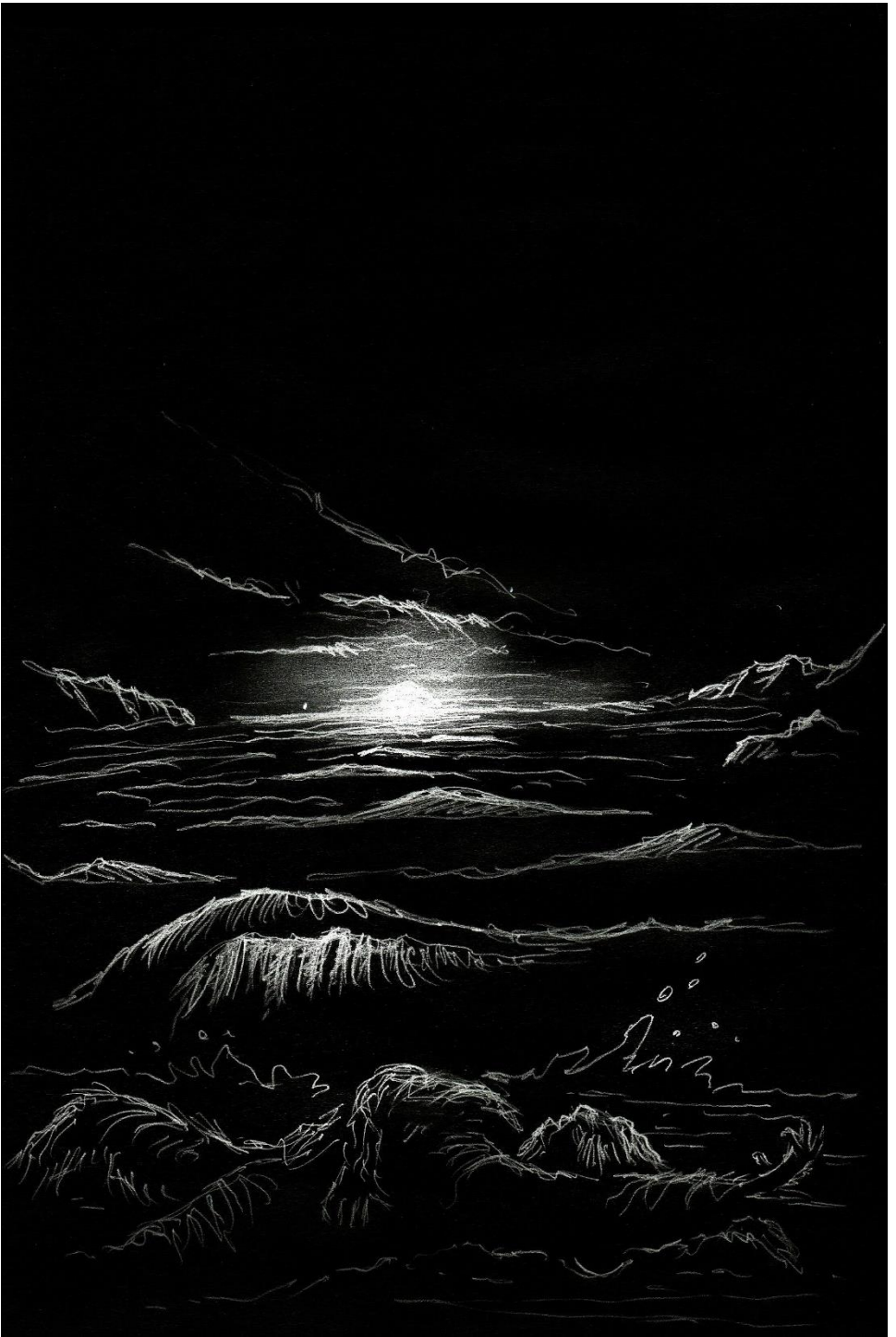
“He can’t be buried in the church cemetery,” the priest said. “That’s holy ground, and I’m fairly certain this thing wasn’t a Christian.”

After much discussion, it was unanimously decided, “Into the woods.”

They rolled the creature onto an old quilt. It took twelve strong men to lift it. All of the men of the village, and several women with a handful of older children made for a large funeral procession. Many carried shovels or hoes. They were followed at the last by the priest, carrying with him his heavy Bible. Perhaps so many came because they wanted to witness with their own eyes the final resting place of this stranger among them.

As they neared the forest, one of the hairy man’s arms flopped out from the quilt. The two men nearest to the appendage yelped and dropped their part of the funeral shroud. At the imbalance, the hairy man tumbled onto the ground. People screamed, and several danced from one foot to another as though the dead could snake his long grey arms over to where they stood.

Back onto the quilt, this time with renewed grips and determination, they followed the trail through the willow scrub and walked into the taller forest. As they entered, the aspens quivered. This was not that unusual of an act. In fact, aspen leaves of ancient Iceland often fluttered in the sea wind. What was strange was that at that time there wasn’t the slightest breeze on the hillside. The villagers knew that even the woods sensed there was something not right about this beached creature.



“There. Over there,” the priest said quickly.

They buried the hairy in the side of a ravine off the well-worn path, wrapped with the quilt and covered over at last with the dirt. The priest opened his Bible. He said nothing, keeping his face on the words of Scripture. All eyes turned to him. He slammed the book shut, causing several to flinch.

“I can’t,” he said, then turned to go back to the village, but he stopped suddenly. He pulled in a deep breath, looked back at the grave and said, “May God have mercy on his hairy soul.”

This should be the end of the story...but it isn’t.

In the years which followed, some from that area of Iceland have said they have spotted the giant hairy man, standing on the edge of the same ravine, silently staring, staring, staring at them as they walked the path. Others swore that when the land wind blew out to sea, they’ve seen a hairy grey hand in their windows, or even reaching for them in the fog.

Truth or not, I will not judge. I only know what I’ve been told.

## ∴ CHRISTMAS SPIRIT

— *Douglas Kemp*

WHEN I was a child, I loved Christmas. But after inheriting my Aunt Charlotte's home some years ago now, I do everything I can to avoid this time of the year. I've even gone to Israel and some years to Hindu and Muslim countries to escape the pervasive and creeping foreboding I now associate with the season. This is not really a solution, though, and wherever I happen to be during Christmas time, I am deeply troubled. In some respects it is partly my own doing, though I imagine that in a court of law there would be a consideration of extenuating circumstances. Not that I could ever face such an examination in a legal trial, and I do not think it would now do anyone any good either. But the greater part of it remains utterly inexplicable and I really do not think I can take responsibility for it.

I am now just over sixty and retired. I live alone, and that is how I wish it to be; my wife and I had no children before our separation and James, my elder brother died some years ago. But much of me lives in the past and I suppose a psychologist would say that I have been messed up by it.

Christmas starts earlier every year. As a child, it was November when cards, gifts and decorations started appearing in the shops, but now it begins in October and is even creeping into September. I cannot tolerate the crass advertisements that dominate television and the constant exposure to saccharine songs in the shops drives me out and back to my house. These days I rarely watch anything on television and when I need to do shopping in the weeks, and months, leading up to Christmas, I mostly do it online, where I can avoid much of the seasonal associations.

I feel I need to put down on paper an account of what happened in the home my Aunt Charlotte. I don't intend to leave it to anyone to discover after my death, or to try to exorcise the demons of the past as some self-help class or well-intentioned counsellor might suggest. Neither do I think I will be able to elucidate what happened any better – for I have gone over it in my mind countless times. And while some of it just does not make sense, one aspect of it is clear and unavoidable, and needs no further analysis or explanation.

My father, who was a bank manager in the small town of Barton, had just one sibling – a sister ten years his senior. My mother was a single child and thus it would be unnecessary to say that Charlotte was my favourite aunt as she was the only one. But I did care for her deeply. Charlotte and my father grew up in a privileged upper middle-class household in Sussex between the Wars. They had domestic staff and enjoyed a seemingly idyllic childhood, though the disparity in ages meant that they were not close playmates and my father was sent to board in preparatory and public schools.

Charlotte was an exuberant and artistically talented young woman. Although I don't know about all of her life, I know that she did some acting on the



London stage, and then spent time in Paris. She had a wonderful singing voice, which she also used in her acting roles. In the mid 1930s she married a wealthy businessman, Alfie Perrins who, I imagine, had been entirely smitten by her personality. Charlotte was not what you would call a classic beauty, but she was one of those rare people who have an innate degree of dynamism and charisma, who are seemingly able to impose themselves on the world without even trying. At no point did she need to seek out a career to support herself – her family and then her husband provided her with a comfortable lifestyle, one which allowed her to pursue her interests and develop her skills as an actress. She later wandered into painting and sculpture, both of which she had an untrained and inherent talent for. I have some of her pictures and they demonstrate a generous ability to capture accurately and with meaning whatever she painted, whether it was a quick portrait of a friend or a landscape filled with sunshine and the rolling hills of her beloved Tuscany.

There were no children in their marriage and my parents seemed to suggest at some point that it was not down to a lack of desire for offspring on my aunt or her husband's part. Back in those days, there was very little that could be done for a seemingly infertile union. The arrival of the War led to an interruption of this hedonist lifestyle, not least when Alfie joined up as an officer and by 1944 had become a Captain. He took part in the D-Day landings and was badly wounded in combat a week after the initial invasion and subsequently died of his injuries in a military hospital. Thus was Aunt Charlotte left a childless widow at the age of thirty, a situation that was not exactly uncommon during those times. She had been left very well off by her husband, and had a large house in Oxfordshire as well as a London townhouse, which had, fortunately, been mostly undamaged during the Blitz. After the end of the War, Charlotte sold off the house in the country and perhaps, surprisingly, the London property as well. The Oxfordshire house was probably too large for her and I do wonder now whether her London home, the centre of her social universe, held too many painful memories. The upshot was that she used just part of the proceeds to buy an elegant Georgian property in the centre of the small village of Peatlingswell in the south of Leicestershire.

I'm not sure why she chose this village; there might have been any number of reasons, but it seems a little strange knowing her outgoing personality that she should suddenly move to such a quiet rural place away from the society and culture that she loved. I regret now that I did not take the opportunity to find out a little more of her fascinating past while Aunt Charlotte was still alive. She has been dead nearly fourteen years now, and so much of her story has to be just informed speculation and reporting of what I think I remember hearing from my parents and from my Aunt herself, which was necessarily revealed to me in an ad hoc way. It was not just that she wanted to quietly tuck herself away anywhere, and it wasn't that her vivacity had been permanently killed or even considerably damaged by her bereavement; all the time I knew her from my very first memories, she had been that bouncy ebullient figure I loved and enjoyed being with. Possibly,

she wanted to start again in a new home away from her old, upsetting memories and she discovered a niche for herself in the Leicestershire countryside.

Our family home in Barton was around fifty miles from Aunt Charlotte's village – in those days a sufficient distance to discourage routine or frequent visits. We thus only met for special family events – such as a milestone birthday, or possibly the wedding of a distant relation. But it was Christmas that was the one seemingly enduring occasion when we were together, without fail. I do not know when the tradition started, but as early as I can remember my family of four always spent the Christmas holiday staying at Aunt Charlotte's house in Peatlingswell.

Raymond House was a detached but moderately sized red-brick property that stood at the centre of the village on the street, looking over the small green, with just a cobbled pavement between it and the green. My father always said that Aunt Charlotte was ideally placed to be able to see just what was going on throughout the village and who was passing, without the inconvenience of noise and traffic from an adjacent road. As with most Georgian properties, it had an elegance and symmetry that seems to have now been lost in the construction of modern houses. There were two large windows each side of the glossy black front door, which was located precisely in the middle of the house. The rooms were wonderfully proportioned, with high ceilings and intricate mouldings and wainscoting.

The house was always immaculate, but Charlotte was not one of those hosts who make you feel uneasy that you are invading their clean and well-maintained space. She was wonderfully welcoming and was tireless in ensuring that we always enjoyed our Christmases there.

If you grow up with something then you always assume that it has been there and that it will always be there. You don't question or even especially appreciate it. And thus because I could not recall a time when we did not go to stay with Aunt Charlotte for our Christmas holidays. It was only when my I was much older, and my Aunt had been unable to continue her hosting activities because of her illness, that, with hindsight, I really began to acknowledge how valued those times with her were for me, and indeed, at Christmas wherever I was, how much I missed them when they stopped. They seemed precious and irrecoverable, and I wished I had not just blithely accepted they would always be there for me. O, the arrogance of youth!

The routine was that my father drove the four of us to Peatlingswell on the afternoon of Christmas Eve. For many children, that special day is one of unusual anticipation and excitement, and it was only when we were in the car, with gifts loaded into the boot and the prospect of the drive to my Aunt's house ahead, did I truly know that Christmas Day was very close. With the child's propensity to memorise roads, houses and features on the way, I mentally ticked off each place we drove past as we approached Peatlingswell – the windmill, the large house set back from the road with a bridge over the drive and the White Swan coaching house in Dunmorton.

Aunt Charlotte's house had an enticing aroma that was, I suppose, a combination of lovingly polished furniture, books and rich cooking. It is an odour that if ever I smell it elsewhere I am immediately transported back to Raymond House and the emotions and pleasure of my days there can be exhumed to provide a poignant and wistful nostalgia, though I am a little more ambivalent about this now. Charlotte was always so welcoming and appeared genuinely pleased to see us, as she announced that Christmas could truly begin now that we were there. Although I do not have any of Aunt Charlotte's acting or musical skills, we did share a love for books, and while I was much more reserved than my outgoing Aunt, I think she saw and wished to nurture in me an abiding passion for books and the past. James was much more of the traditional boy in his preferment for sports and robust outdoors activities, and while Charlotte was unfailingly kind and indulgent towards him, I did not sense that she had the same instinctive affinity with him that she and I seemed to share.

She had a tastefully decorated Christmas tree (genuine, naturally enough) in the drawing room, with piles of enticingly wrapped gifts underneath. Charlotte had many little seasonal trinkets that she strewed around the downstairs living areas and provided an annual source of pleasure and wonderment to me as a small child. I suppose most of today's more cynical youth would only scoff at these little festive decorations. She would have well-banked log fires burning both in the drawing and dining rooms and what was her study/art-room, and the large number of Christmas cards that covered every available surface was a testament to her popularity both in the village and wherever she had gone.

I instinctively knew that Aunt Charlotte was a cynosure of sociability in the village. On Christmas Eve, there were often some neighbourly visitors who brought with them gifts or cards or sometimes even food or drink. They were invariably invited in for a sherry and mince-pie and Charlotte was keen that I should meet her friends and neighbours, possibly to show me off, but for what reason I'm not fully sure; for I was not a particularly elegant or accomplished boy. Not having any of my own children or indeed close family relations, it is difficult to understand how one may have close feelings for a young family member. Whatever the case, I felt loved, wanted, and cherished while I was with my Aunt. Not that my own parents neglected or mistreated me, but they just did not have the fascination and pull of my Aunt's vibrant personality. As befitted parents of their generation, they were generally laconic and emotionally lukewarm people, my father in particular. Such a contrast to the bubbling excitement that Aunt Charlotte demonstrated.

Charlotte would regale us with all manner of amusingly narrated anecdotes of the behaviour of the villagers – their oddities and eccentricities, all of which she seemed to know about. She simply appeared to know everyone, and she participated in all the social activities of the small community of Peatlingswell. During the years of my childhood, I got to know many of her neighbours in a vicarious way, purely via the tales and little character sketches that she threw off so easily. I found them captivating, though I rather think my father was more

irritated than anything else by these little performances, as he most probably saw them.

I could never understand then, as a child, why both my father and mother did not seem to share the fascination that Aunt Charlotte had for me. I can recall rather hushed conversations in the car on the drive back home after the end of the few magical days, when both of my parents made some rather ungratefully acerbic comments about my Aunt and her behaviour. I imagine that for someone of my father's stoic personality, he generally found Charlotte's exuberant behaviour annoying, especially since he had a different perspective from me – in having to be a sibling to Charlotte and growing up together. As an old man now, I can see things differently, but I did and do not wish to lose the idyllic childhood memories I have of Aunt Charlotte, notwithstanding what happened many years later.

Each Christmas followed a similar pattern. After the bags and boxes were removed from our car, James and I went upstairs to our shared bedroom at the front of the house. I unpacked my few things and then went downstairs, to sit in front of the fire. We had a light dinner in the evening, and Aunt Charlotte went through the same routine every year in persuading my father to allow James and me to have a small glass of wine with the meal. After an evening of conversation, with occasional festive visits from a neighbour or two, it was time for my brother and me to go to bed.

Like most children, I found it difficult to go to sleep on the night before Christmas. But I also deliberately tried to stay awake, for I felt safe and secure with the sonorous chimes of the clock of the village church of St Mary's marking the quarters and the hours. James would usually be asleep quite quickly – he had the ability of those who, fortunately or not, seem to have little propensity for introspection or self-reflection, and would sleep soundly anywhere and on any occasion. I would listen to my parents going to bed, with the creak of the stairs and the walk along the corridor to their bedroom and the bathroom. Aunt Charlotte usually attended the late midnight church service and occasionally I heard her quietly return to the house and, in turn, go to her room.

Christmas Day was a delightful litany of gifts and fine foods. Charlotte included fine culinary skills amongst her myriad of talents, and she served a beautifully prepared Christmas dinner, which we had in the early afternoon and then later a cold supper. There were nuts and sweets always available, and a range of soft drinks which we rarely saw at home. My mother helped with the serving of the food, but most had been prepared beforehand, and Charlotte had that rare ability to achieve so much without ever appearing to be busy or under any sort of pressure.

The time seemed to pass so quickly. Charlotte was generous with her gifts and always seemed to buy me absorbing and attractive presents. There were games to play and more conversation, and as the cliché has it, I did rather hope that every day in the year could be like these. It was the simple scarcity of these days that made them so precious.

The most cherished occasions, though, were when Aunt Charlotte took me to her study and showed some of her latest books and we leafed through them together. I was also fascinated to see what pictures she had been engaged upon and to look through some of her art books or albums of photographs that she had on the bottom shelves – which recorded scenes from her impossibly glamorous and, to me, long-gone past. The photographs of a strangely young-looking Charlotte with her husband in the happy years before the War must still have been painful for her, and although I sensed that there was a degree of wistfulness for my Aunt in seeing these images from days long ago, she never expressed anything approaching sadness or regret. Charlotte would have been around fifty years old then, an age which to me, a boy of ten, seemed old.

On Boxing Day, we went out for a long walk, which included seeing the local hunt assemble on the village green. Aunt Charlotte was greeted by her friends and neighbours we met and we halted for many conversations, but I was captivated by how popular my Aunt was, and how much she knew about everyone's life in the village and how interested she was in them. The food and drinks continued, but my enjoyment of the day was tempered by the knowledge that the festive time with my Aunt was coming to a close, and that what I had eagerly anticipated so much, would soon be over. I tried to capture and value every hour that passed in the house, revelling in the familiar cosy odours and images of pleasure, for I knew that they would soon be finished for another year.

While we did occasionally visit my Aunt at other times, and I also eagerly looked forward to seeing Charlotte again and being in her house when such times were arranged, the calls did not have that instinctive appeal of those I enjoyed for Christmas. Of course, it was the same house, but it did not seem quite the same; at the height of summer, for example, with windows open, the sound of birdsong and light filling the large rooms. They seemed rather bare without decorations and the house lacked the spicy alluring smell that possessed it so strongly over Christmas.

We would depart on the morning of the twenty-seventh. My case was packed and the presents gathered together. When I was a little older, Aunt Charlotte would often give me a book or two that we had discussed during the stay, and I treasured these personal loans, always ensuring that I read the volumes, so that I could discuss them with her when we next met. I wanted to demonstrate that I valued her largesse and embracing nature and that I needed them to continue.

James and I were usually given some Quality Street sweets and a mince pie or two to eat on the drive home, but these did little to assuage the sense of loss that I felt, as well as the annoyance to hear my parents, my father in particular, comment negatively about Aunt Charlotte. My father always seemed much more cheerful on the return home than he did for the journey to Peatlingswell. As a boy, it seemed wholly inconceivable that anyone could not enjoy my Aunt's bountiful nature and her welcoming, open house. But then I saw matters in much more simple and innocent terms. How good it would be to turn back the clock and be that naïve again.

One year, in the mid-1960s when I would have been eleven or twelve, Charlotte was not well – she was struggling to shake off influenza, and I recall my mother speaking rather sharply to her that Charlotte should have informed them of her illness and we would not have come because she had really been too ill to prepare for our visit. In my youthful selfishness, I think I was just happy that we had not been put off, even though Aunt Charlotte was not as vigorous as customary and the preparations, not surprisingly, were not up to her wonted high standard.

I would be in my mid-teens, I think, when I began to lose a little of the eager anticipation for the Christmas holidays in Peatlingswell. My father complained that he never spent a Christmas at home with his family and one year James went abroad at Christmas with his school on a rugby tour. Aunt Charlotte still treated me as a young boy, and not the more cynical and critical teenager that I had become. Her constant, inconsequent chatter began to irritate me just a little.

When I was eighteen, I went off to study at Durham University, and although I was at home for the holidays, the pattern had been broken. I think there had been some disagreement between my father and Aunt Charlotte and then she developed the initial signs of multiple sclerosis, which was to afflict her final years. All of which meant that our traditional three-day stay had finished. Initially, we went over just for Christmas Day, and then it was moved to the following day so that Charlotte would not have all the trouble of preparing the food and having to entertain. My parents invited her to stay with us over Christmas, or just come for the day. But she would never countenance leaving her own home for any part of the Christmas holidays.

As I reached adulthood, all this became just a very minor element of my life and I felt little regret then that things had irreversibly changed, they had moved on as all things do for every one of us. And thus Aunt Charlotte drifted away from my life. I had my own interests and then my career to follow. Naturally, my family updated me with news about her illness and her state of health and we continued to visit her over Christmas, but as I developed my own life, the times at Peatlingswell seemed to be just a childish thing, and as you are supposed to do with childish things – I put them away. The occasional memory and association could throw me back into the nostalgic pull of the past and for a time I fervently wanted to be back for Christmas at Peatlingswell. But such thoughts did not last long and were soon absorbed by the rush and whirl of my life.

I married in my late twenties, and although Aunt Charlotte came to the wedding, I had very little time, or indeed inclination, to speak to her during the day; I remember being more interested in socialising with the friends and work colleagues that Emma and I had invited. Charlotte had come with her paid companion/nurse – a rather imperious younger woman called Janet Smith. By this time, Charlotte's health did not allow her to live alone, but she refused to leave her home and move into some form of assisted living arrangement. Instead, she paid for Janet Smith to look after her, which I admit she did very well; she was conscientious and somewhat overly protective of my Aunt.

Emma and I moved to the United States with my career, where the first cracks in our relationship began to be clear to both of us. I saw my own parents perhaps once a year. They had retired to live in France and thus I had little other reason to return to England. In 1992 both my parents died in a car crash in the Dordogne when a truck ploughed into the back of their stationary vehicle. I arranged for their funeral in France, for that is what they wanted and Charlotte was too frail by this time to make the trip to attend. I returned across the Atlantic without seeing her – actions which now seem to me to be selfish and callous, but which at the time seemed to make sense to me. By this time James had already died of heart disease – he had been hugely overweight, drank heavily and smoked constantly. It was a dreadful shame, especially as nobody really regretted his early demise, for he was a difficult and churlish man. Eighteen months later, Emma and I separated, and while I was preparing to make the move back to work in London, I received the news that Aunt Charlotte had died. It was not exactly a shock, for she had been in very poor health for some time. I was more focused on the collapse of my marriage and my return to England rather than grieving for a family relation whom I had not had much contact with in the previous decade or so.

I was surprised though, when I received a letter from her solicitor, advising me that I was the joint executor of Aunt Charlotte's estate, in conjunction with Nyman and Bloomfields, her law firm – I could not recall being asked if I would do this, and I'm fairly sure that putative executors are supposed to be consulted in advance. The letter requested me to arrange to visit Nyman and Bloomfield's office at my earliest convenience to discuss elements of my Aunt will – which given that I was returning to England anyway, was not as bothersome as it might otherwise have been.

Thus, a little more than a week later, I was sitting opposite a Mr. Nicholas Bloomfield, partner in the firm in the small town of Luttingsford, about five miles from the village of Peatlingswell. I had thought little about this meeting in advance, and just wished to have the business completed as soon as possible, assuming that he and his firm would take on most of the executor responsibilities. Bloomfield seemed surprisingly young; I suppose I expected him to be a rather aged, crusty family solicitor, happy to plod along in this sleepy market town until retirement. He could only have been in his mid thirties, although he had already lost most of his hair.

The usual civilised preliminaries dealt with, he soon got down to the core business of my visit. He held the will, scrutinising the contents even though he must already have known the main details. "As we said in the letter, the deceased, Mrs Charlotte Perrins, has appointed you executor of her estate in conjunction with my firm. I will not read out all of the will for I will let you have a copy to take away with you, but the essence is that except for a few monetary bequests to other beneficiaries, you inherit the bulk of Mrs Perrins' estate, which includes her property in Peatlingswell. I should say that in case you are not aware of the deceased's financial circumstances, not including the property, the book-value

assets of the estate, in particular the current valuation of stock and shareholdings of your Aunt, push the total to probably over seven figures.”

My face must have expressed a measure of surprise, for Bloomfield stopped and raised a quizzical eyebrow at me. Then again, many legatees in this situation, having just learned of the particulars of the intentions of their relations, close or otherwise, may well show an element of wonder, be it good or bad, and it was a good place to pause and allow the other to take in what he or she had just heard. I felt that he was waiting for me to make a response before continuing.

“Well, that is a surprise. I hadn’t really anticipated this at all. This changes things a little.”

Indeed, it did, and one of the first thoughts was to wonder whether my estranged wife would now be able to claim a substantial portion of this legacy, as she had so far been thorough and conscientious in demanding more than half of our assets while the divorce was being discussed. Whatever the case, I was certainly better off than I had expected to be.

Bloomfield continued, “there are one or two perhaps unusual clauses which Mrs Perrins had inserted into the will. I should be clear that the legacies do not depend upon the fulfilment of these, but there is one that is addressed to you, Mr Clifton, and it is, shall we say, an expression of the deceased’s preference – it is entirely up to you if you meet this, or not. Let me read the precise words: ‘I wish my nephew Simon Clifton, to inherit my house and all its furniture, with the exceptions of the items listed in Annex A. While I cannot and do not expect my nephew to permanently live in the property, I would like him and his family to enjoy one more Christmas there – to try and relive some of those happy times we had together when he was a small boy. I know we can never recapture the past, and it is just to indulge the whims of an old woman to know that a festive time will be created once more in the house that I loved so much’. Mrs Perrins did specially ask us to make sure that you were made aware of this request. As I say, it is just that, and the legacy does not depend upon its fulfilment.”

We talked over some of the procedures and administrative arrangements, with Bloomfield indicating that he would provide whatever support and advice I required to discharge my duties as an executor, with their costs to be taken from my Aunt’s estate, naturally enough.

In the weeks that followed, there was much to keep me occupied. I drove over to Charlotte’s house in Peatlingswell the next weekend, with the sets of substantial keys that I had been given by her lawyer. I had not given much thought in advance to returning to the house, but as soon as I had parked my car on the green, nearest to the house, childhood memories that had been hidden for many years began to re-emerge. It was a sunny August morning, and the house seemed bright and restful. A local property management firm had been employed by the solicitors to look after the house until I was able to claim my legacy, and I intended to instruct them to continue as I presently did not have the time or, just then, the inclination to motor down every weekend or so to ensure all was well in the house and gardens. All was neat and quiet, and I was taken aback by how quickly and



forcefully, all sorts of distant memories bubbled up of my past in the house with Aunt Charlotte and my family. It was almost as if the intervening years of my growth into adulthood and all that happened with Emma was just a brief interlude – that this was my proper ground, revisited and rediscovered.

As I walked throughout the house, rekindling memories and familiar smells and sounds – it felt bizarre to be the owner of such an elegant and substantial property, a repository of near-forgotten memories, each one popping up afresh. There had been changes to the house – my Aunt had a rather incongruous-looking stair lift fitted, which allowed her to occupy her old bedroom rather than having to sleep downstairs. The room I used to have during those Christmas holidays had not changed, however. Still the same striped wallpaper and patterned carpet, and the tall ceilings with the coving and plasterwork moulding that I recalled examining while I lay in bed, waiting for the other occupants of the house to stir on chilly December mornings. James would sleep in the adjacent bed, and only reluctantly wake and get up at the last minute to ensure he received more than his fair share of breakfast.

I stayed much longer that day than I had planned – wallowing in reminiscences, an emotion that at the time was quite unusual for me, as I wandered the rooms, still with a vertiginous sense of shock that it all belonged to me. There were so many possessions – all the drawers of every cabinet were neatly filled, wardrobes full of my Aunt's clothes and her books on shelves. All were now my responsibility and had to be dealt with one way or another. I quickly came to the decision that my initial idea of bringing in someone to do a property clearance so that I could make a quick sale of Raymond House was not what I wanted at all. With that renewed sense of closeness that I felt for my Aunt, I could not callously dispose all that was left from her life. At the very least, I would go through all of her possessions myself and decide upon their destination. I also felt that I would not wish to change much – that by keeping these things then in some way I could preserve what was left of Aunt Charlotte and the memories of my happy childhood days with her. When everyone and everything else had changed, for the worse I might add, this was a valuable, tangible evidence of pleasant days that I would be hardhearted indeed to discard, now that so little from my childhood was left to me. It had also crossed my mind that by quickly selling the property (which a local estate agent had initially valued at a figure I thought at the time to be very high) I would also be upping my liquid financial assets in good time for Emma to make a renewed assault on this increased wealth.

I walked into the attic, where there were stacks of old pictures and some of my Aunt's sculptures. There were boxes of books and magazines, furniture and the usual random piles of bric-a-brac to be found in most houses of the elderly. But I knew that I had to go through all of these before I could make a decision about them.

In the study, there were the painstakingly assembled photograph albums that covered all the ages of my Aunt's long life that I remembered going through with her. From her happy childhood to her bohemian days of youthful exuberance

in London, the romance with my unknown Grandfather Alfie and seemingly happy holidays in Italy and elsewhere on mainland Europe – all were recorded and neatly laid out. And later, the many family photographs, taken during our Christmas visits and recording the growing up and ageing of my parents, my Aunt and my brother and me. Many of these later photographs I did not recall seeing before and could not remember being taken. When you look at photographs of people now dead, they seem to look at you with a different expression, a sort of awareness of what lies beyond the mess and contingency of life, even if it is just an abyss, a nothingness. And in those family photographs where I was then the only one left alive, there seemed a painful poignancy about the temporary nature of life, and it engendered a vulnerable sense of loneliness and loss.

Even though I immersed myself back in my new job in London, having found a pleasant Kensington apartment that allowed me to walk to my office on dry mornings without having to suffer the unreliable unpleasantness of the underground, each weekend I was drawn back to Leicestershire and Raymond House. I drove up either on Friday evening or early Saturday morning and only returned on Sunday night in time for the new week. Each weekend I devoted to going through the furniture and possessions, ostensibly to decide what was worth keeping and what would be usefully sold, but most of the time I looked through old photographs and books, and examined my Aunt's paintings. I would buy a few basic provisions from the village shop or occasionally went out to Luttingsford for supplies, and I even had lunch at the Royal Oak, just a minute's walk away from Raymond House – but I did not feel very comfortable eating alone or having to make conversation with the locals, even though they knew who I was, and were often keen to talk about Aunt Charlotte, who remained a popular figure in the village, even after her death.

The property company maintained the gardens and performed any basic work that needed doing, and Nyman and Bloomfield paid their bills out of the cash assets of the estate. And so as autumn advanced, not having given much prior consideration to the request in my Aunt's will, I decided that I would indeed spend Christmas at Raymond House. My London office closed down two days before Christmas and did not open again until the second day of the New Year. I was by now accustomed to being alone and I could just as well work in my house in Leicestershire than my rather functional apartment in London. There was some tedious strategy paper that I needed to draft, just in case time lay heavily on my hands. I organised a delivery of food and drink, enough to keep me comfortable for however long I would stay there. And so I drove to Raymond House in mid-afternoon of the day of the twenty-third. I had clothes packed, some walking boots and books that I rather hoped to read, even though there were thousands of volumes of my Aunt's.

I should point out I think that in the light of subsequent events at my Aunt's house, I had never felt a sense of anything untoward there after taking up my inheritance. The childhood romance of the place was modified by my own adulthood. I enjoyed being there, but I mostly felt, I believe, that I was there

primarily to manage the house and its ultimate destination, along with all the furniture and belongings, rather than a constant and permanent opportunity to wallow in the nostalgic mists of my long-gone childhood. In the first few weeks of visiting the house, I did feel an almost painful nostalgia but this was now being mitigated by a renewed familiarity with the property, un-lived in except for my weekend visits.

Two or three times I had seen Janet Smith, Aunt Charlotte's companion, in the village. She was rather an eccentric woman and seemed almost hostile to me, as if she saw me as an alien interloper in the sanctuary of the life and property she had shared with Charlotte. Even though she showed no overt interest in the house and just about all trace of her occupation had been removed, presumably by her after Aunt Charlotte's death, I did not feel that I wanted to encourage her in any way, certainly not to visit the house, and I used my sense of her unfriendliness to keep a distance between us. I can recall her speaking to me once, when I was walking back to the house having visited the village shop.

"So, are you moving in then? I hope you won't just sell Charlotte's home, and let a complete stranger in – it's bad enough that an outsider like you is here. I don't suppose you have much feeling for the house" She stumped off, leaving me a little flummoxed and before I had even started to respond that I was my Aunt's closest relative and I did not consider myself to be that much of an alien to the village.

Despite Janet Smith's eccentricity, I was therefore utterly unprepared for what happened, or what I think occurred that Christmas. On arriving at the house, I took a walk around all the rooms just to ensure all was well, and there were no water leakages or anything else that required attention. I was puzzled on going into the attics to see that a number of boxes had been left out in the centre of the room and opened. They contained my Aunt's Christmas decorations, and while I thought I had not left them like that at the end of my previous visit in early December, I couldn't be absolutely sure, and soon dismissed the matter. I looked through them, and feeling rather foolishly sentimental, rescued some of the favourite pieces that I recalled from my childhood and had not seen for many years, placing them on surfaces downstairs. On Christmas Eve, as is often case in England, the weather was mild, so I took a walk in the afternoon through some country lanes and byways. On my return I made a start on my business paper, quickly laid it aside as it was intolerably boring, and listened to some music instead. I had a light dinner/supper, read my book and feeling that I had come to the limit of my parochial activities in the house and feeling no enthusiasm to start doing anything else, decided that I might as well go to bed.

I continued reading in bed and heard the gentle chimes of the village church. There would, I suppose still be the midnight service at St Mary's, which I remembered my Aunt would attend while my parents stayed in the house and monitored my brother and myself. I had brought to my room some of Aunt Charlotte's art books and looked through them, remembering some of the pictures and prints that she showed me – a deliciously gory set of drawings from Goya were

familiar and took me back to when I was about six and my Aunt showing me the reproductions in the impressively solid books that she possessed.

Feeling drowsy, I put down the book, switched off the bedside light and drifted off into a comfortable sleep between the fresh sheets. But I could not have been asleep long before I woke with a jolt – a noise that I thought, on the edges of my less-than conscious mind, was the sound of the front door shutting and being bolted in the hall downstairs. I knew immediately that this was highly unlikely, but I remembered the same noise, hitherto forgotten, from my childhood when I would still be awake and would hear Aunt Charlotte returning from the church service. The clock on the bedside table showed it was 1240, which would, I suppose, have been the time that the service would end. I had to investigate, even though I suspected what I had thought to be the sound of someone coming into the house was just the beginning of a dream. Downstairs I went, having draped my dressing gown around me, switching on lights. There was no-one in the hall, naturally enough. The door was as I had left it, and there was no sign of anything having changed in the house. The only thing amiss was one of the photograph albums that I thought I had returned to the shelf was lying open on an occasional table in the study. It was open to a photograph of my Aunt and me, taken laughing together standing by the Christmas tree – I was perhaps seven and we both wore those silly flimsy hats to be found in crackers. I must have inadvertently left it out. I returned to bed, annoyed that I had disturbed myself on a fool's mission like this and settled down to sleep. But it took some time for me to drift off again.

I woke without alarm to a dull, misty morning. There was that essential quietness that characterises Christmas mornings in rural England – very few cars, and not many children trying out their bikes and pedal cars for the first time. Even though I now lived alone, and was used to the solitary state, I felt quite surprised at how much of a sense of loss or absence I felt during the morning. Even though I could not think of anyone I would want to be with at the time, the solitary state did not feel right somehow. Maybe it was that atavistic memory of different times in the house when there were adults that gave me unconditional love (well, Aunt Charlotte at any rate) – and I could not but compare those pleasant times with my current rather pursed up existence. I was financially comfortable, in good health and had few family worries (once I could be certain that Emma would be reasonable and not attempt to drain me of most of my accumulated assets). Yet, I felt disconnected, a sort of anomie that was not customary for me. At least I did not have to go through the lottery of giving and receiving unwanted presents, though I did promise myself that in the New Year, with the proceeds of Aunt Charlotte's bequest, I would upgrade my motor for a new top of the range Jaguar.

I did not give the matter much thought at the time, and it only seems to have significance in the light of the subsequent events, but I was almost certain that some of the Christmas decorations that I had put out yesterday were not where I thought I had placed them. On reflection, I considered that that I had not given the issue much attention when I arranged them. Though I was a little surprised by the large German musical carousel that played a number of Christmas

carols that was in the centre of the dining table. This was one of Aunt Charlotte's favourite decorations, and I had no recollection of bringing this particular item downstairs from the attic

It was a slow day. I did not venture out, but loitered over meals and cups of tea and coffee. I read, listened to music and watched some dreadful television. And still the day dragged. I could not help but compare the rather lonely and bleak timeline that I was experiencing with the equivalent days as a boy here. It was early afternoon, for example, and while I had just finished a cold meat sandwich, with a glass of beer, I could not help but think that forty years ago in this house, we would be settling into a huge Christmas dinner, encouraged by Charlotte to eat as much as possible of the enormous turkey and the tender joint of beef. I almost began to think that it had been a mistake to stay here over Christmas, raking up long ago memories.

I later attempted a hot Christmas dinner of sorts – a roast turkey breast, but I felt a little self-conscious sitting alone in the large and rather underheated dining room to eat it. At least I had saved an excellent French red to have with it, and deciding against microwaving the pudding that I had rather sentimentally bought, I took the bottle to the drawing room and settled down, the curtains drawn and a fire crackling away in the grate. I was thinking on nothing profound, when I distinctly heard the sound of a human voice in song. It was directly and shockingly familiar – for it was Aunt Charlotte singing, a gentle and clear voice that I not heard for so many years. I was a small boy, perhaps five or six, and she sang some lines from the song “Pretend” by Nat King Cole as we played a game together. I am sure that I was not mistaken, even though I have very little musical talent; it was her clear, distinctive voice singing the same song, unaccompanied. I looked around, and then went into the adjacent rooms and upstairs, looking into the quiet, chilly bedrooms, but I was quite alone. I wondered if somehow a recording of her voice had been activated by a record or cassette player, but that was preposterous, though no more absurd than the notion that it either was someone making a damned good imitation, or that I had started to hear things that were not here.

Recalling the incident of what sounded like the closing hall door from the previous night in bed, I did begin to wonder if I was beginning to hear things that were not, objectively, happening. But as I felt no different and certainly had experienced no other indications of this descent into some form of mental decrepitude, I was convinced that my own weakness could not be to blame for these unaccountable events.

I certainly felt deeply unsettled, and the house seemed unusually quiet and pensive, almost as if it was listening and waiting for fresh outbreaks of inexplicable sounds. It was difficult to focus on my book, when a very slight sound from the fire shifting, or a joist creaking or settling, made me promptly alert, wondering if a new voice or noise was about to challenge my poise and rapidly shrinking sense of ease and confidence. At the time, I rather hoped that someone was playing a rather sinister trick on me, but as much as this would explain the

noises and singing, I could not see how they had secreted themselves in the house like some poltergeist, or indeed, who could be doing such a thing. It was indeed puzzling, in a most uneasy and discomfiting way.

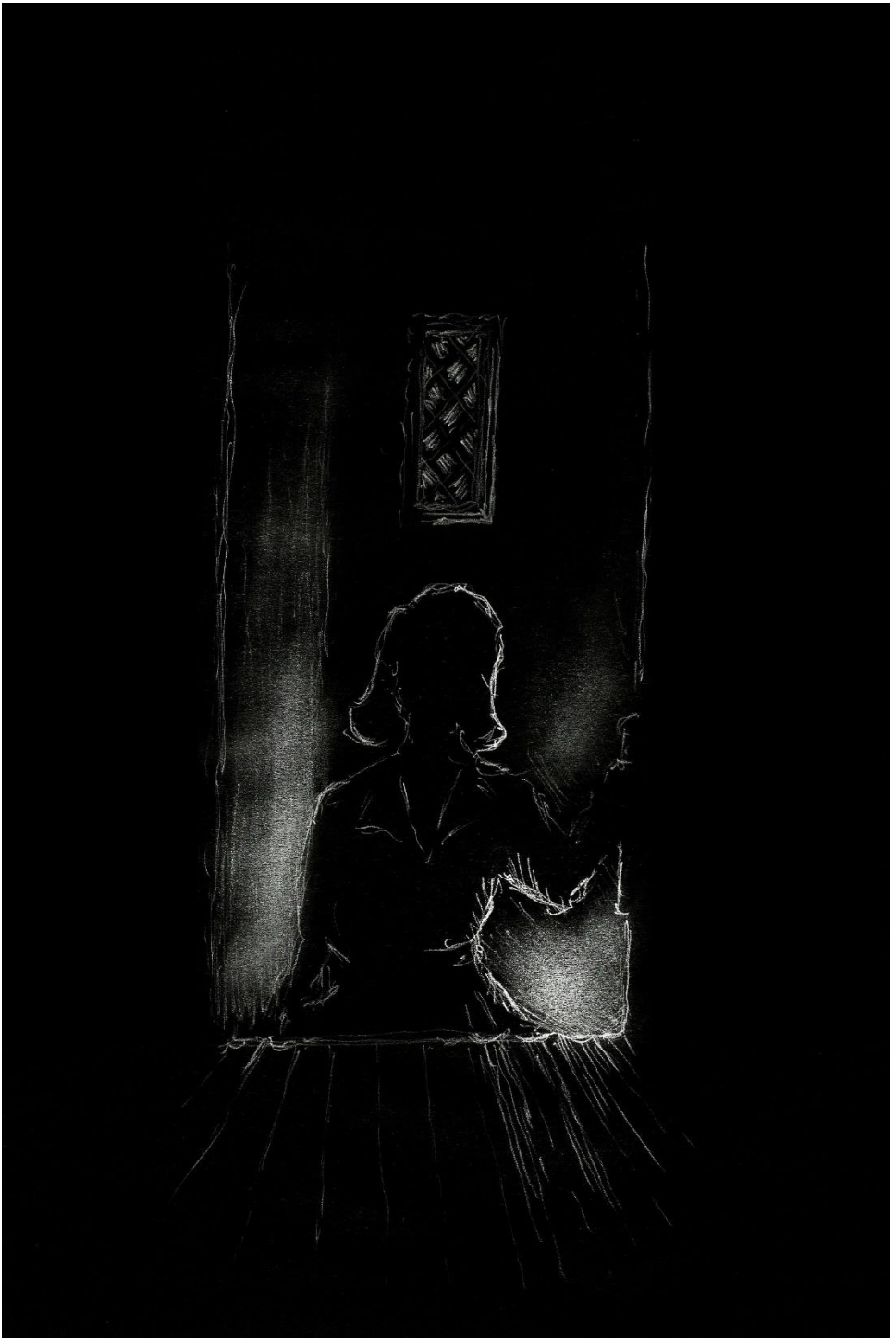
After taking another walk around the ground floor of the house, I made the best of a strange set of circumstances and poured myself more wine. The best I could make of my impression was that I had not perhaps been aware how much I had slipped back into thinking about the past, and being alone in Aunt Charlotte's house for the first time over Christmas, when I felt a degree of isolation and strong associations with happy childhood times, somehow my mind had tricked me into thinking I could hear something from this departed youth.

I tried the television again, but the range of programmes was depressing and thus I decided it was time for bed. I had made up my mind that I would return to London the following day. I felt uneasy in the house – it was too large and quiet for me, regardless of the odd experiences. I wanted to be in my apartment, and able to show myself that there was nothing wrong with me. It would be Boxing Day, the roads would be quiet and I needed to draft my paper for work.

In bed, I read a little and turned off the light. The house was quiet, resting in the silence. I heard the occasional voice from a passerby, visitors leaving adjacent properties. I was beginning to drift, rather like the previous night, when I was aware of a low hum of sound, almost below the level of hearing. I really did not think much about this, until I had the notion that the sound was that of adult voices, conversing. And then I recalled hearing exactly the same sound as a child as I lay in the same bed and in the very same room. I would hear Aunt Charlotte and my parents talk. They would have supper, and drink gently and sociably until well after midnight, without the need for television or any other form of entertainment. I had longed to be old enough to join them so that the exquisitely pleasurable day could be extended a little longer.

The more I was aware of this undulating, modulating hum, the more I was convinced that the sounds were the same and that they emanated from the drawing room downstairs. My bedroom door was closed, and I slowly stepped out of bed, drew my robe around me and opened the door, where the voices became a little more loud and distinct. And then I heard the unmistakable sound of Aunt Charlotte's gentle bubbly laugh. It was she. There could be absolutely no mistake, for it was part of the flow of conversation. As I listened more I thought I could also identify the voices of my father and mother. I did not move. I was back to being a young boy once more, and I do not think then that my brain could fully assess just what I could hear, or thought I could hear. I was focused entirely on the conversation, desperately trying to pick out every nuance of every word. I moved further onto the landing towards the top of the stairs. In the gloom, I could just make out the head and shoulders of a figure as it slowly came up the final steps of the staircase towards me. I was stock still, not sure that I could credit what I thought I was seeing. And then, shockingly, the figure spoke.

"She's always here; she hasn't gone away you know".



As the figure in silhouette moved towards me, I advanced a few steps and just held my palms out, feeling that somehow I had no option but to confront the presence, even though I felt very much afraid. As the body touched my hands, I pushed back firmly on the form and shouted fiercely something like “get away!”. There was a slight degree of resistance and then after a very short time this unaccountable entity swayed at the top of the stairs and then seemed to topple slowly backward, and I heard a series of thumps, that soon stopped. There were no other noises, no more voices. All was still and silent. I walked backwards to my bedroom, closed the door and shuffled back into my bed, in a mental ferment of complete uncertainty – my whole psychic existence under threat from just what I did not know. In hindsight I know I should have been braver, to have investigated further, but I was petrified by fear. I could face no more apparitions or listen to any more ghostly conversations.

I sat in bed, with the light on for the rest of the night. I was acutely alert to new sounds and noises, but all remained silent. There was nothing more to hear, and I knew that in order to survive this I had to leave and then sell the house. And maybe it would go away, whatever it was I was experiencing. I intended to seek some form of psychiatric or psychological help, to reassure myself that I was not insane or to try to explain what I thought was going on here. Otherwise, my mind seemed to be blank, and I just waited for the morning to come around. As the light began to seep slowly around the edges of the curtains and all remained quiet in the house, I rose from my bed, slowly opened the door, and looked upon the landing. There was nothing. I walked slowly to the top of the stairs, and looked down into the gloom of the hall. I could make out a dim shape and edged slowly down each stair, holding firmly onto the handrail, to the bottom where the form lay. In the poor light, I still could not determine what the shape was. While part of me needed to find out, another element slowed my steps and drew me back upstairs, so that I would not have to confront whatever it was. But I slowly approached the bottom of the staircase and from out of the shadows of the hall, a pale, oval shape was discernible. Although a light switch for the stairs was close at hand, I veered away from throwing too much light on what was there. As I shuffled from the final tread of the last step and stepped tentatively onto the floor, I slowly bent over the shape. With a bewildering sense of shock, I saw what my subconscious was already aware of - it was a body, lying on its back and it was a face that I knew – for it was part of the prone and still form of Janet Smith. In the shadows, her face was deathly white and some intuition told me that this was her corpse.

I stepped around it for I was utterly unable to touch it, instinctively knowing that it would be cold and waxy, and went to the downstairs rooms, where I drew back the curtains. I wanted to shed the natural light of a sunny Boxing Day morning on this scene. I sat in the kitchen and pondered for an unknown time what I should do next. Eventually, I rose and went to the telephone off the kitchen and requested the ambulance and police services, feeling oddly divorced from the horror that lay around me and contaminated the house.



I returned to the kitchen, feeling dull and empty of emotions. Two uniformed police officers were the first to arrive, and I brought them into the house via the side entrance so that they would not be immediately confronted by the body lying in the hall. I explained that I only came upon the body of Janet Smith when I went downstairs in the morning to make my breakfast and had no idea at all what she had been doing in my property, though she had shared once shared the house with Aunt Charlotte. The two officers spoke amongst themselves and asked me to return to the kitchen, no doubt to preserve what might, from their perspective, be a crime scene. A young female paramedic arrived, and was quickly able to confirm to the police that Janet Smith was dead, and spoke to them, I presume about arrangements for the collection of the body. But before this could be done, the older police officer told me that he would need to request forensic support and photography to collect evidence. The three of us sat around the kitchen table and I repeated the circumstances of finding the body. I said nothing at all about the sound of voices which drew me from my bedroom, nor the presence of what I then knew to have been Janet Smith coming up the stairs towards me and the unavoidable fact that I pushed her to her death. But I did not feel like a cruel, cold-blooded killer. I tried to reassure myself that I could not have known who or what it was that was coming up the stairs in the dark at Christmas night. There was also the series of unfathomable sounds and events in the house - all of which had primed me to such a high degree of psychological anxiety that I could not be fully sure what I was doing.

The body was removed, and when the police had left and I was finally alone again in the house, I immediately prepared to depart. I packed the few items I needed, gingerly stepping around the area in the hall where Janet Smith's body had been overnight. The senior police officer said that he wanted to interview me at Luttingsford station the following morning, where I would be required to make a full statement. I quickly left the house, having locked up with a sense of relief and drove back to London to the overwhelming sanity of my apartment in the ever-busy and thriving capital. Even though I felt safe from whatever was inhabiting Raymond House, I could think of nothing but the events of the last two or three days. In whatever way I looked at the matter, I could make no sense of it. I hold no religious beliefs and scoff at the prospect of an afterlife or the continuation of the soul or the mind after death. Nevertheless, I did seriously wonder if I had witnessed some supernatural event in my Aunt's house; either that, or I was going insane. And neither of these options was palatable.

The following morning, I made the return journey to Leicestershire, and gave a formal account of the events of Christmas night in Raymond House. The police bureaucracy can be a frustratingly slow process in drafting a statement that had to be checked and amended. Having done this, I was relieved to be free to leave.

The subsequent police investigation concluded that Janet Smith must have kept a set of keys when she left Raymond House and had let herself in via the back door - the keys were still in her coat pocket and all the ones I had were present.

For some reason she had come up the stairs in the dark, had probably slipped and broke her neck in her fall, resulting in her immediate death. The case revealed that she had become increasingly eccentric figure in Peatlingswell and her behaviour irrational. No one knows why Janet Smith decided to come into the house on Christmas night – the police believe it was the action of a disturbed woman. I really don't know why she did this or why she believed that my Aunt Charlotte's presence was still in her house. Maybe she was just mad, but given what I know I heard and saw there, perhaps she did understand more than any of us.

I did not feel much guilt at the time that I had not made clear my role in the death. But Janet Smith lived alone, was mentally unstable and she should not have been in the house anyway. I suppose that if I had been fully open with the police, then my actions would have been eventually justified. I was facing an unknown intruder in my property at night, but there would almost certainly have been a trial, which I could not face.

There's little much else to say. I put Aunt Charlotte's house on the market, keeping just some of her paintings and books, but I never again stayed in the house at night. Living back in London, affairs slowly returned to a degree of normality. While I could not explain or understand what I thought had happened to me when I was there, there were no fresh phenomena to make me question again my own sanity. I returned to work in the New Year, and tried to continue with my life and career as best I could. The sale of the house made me much more financially comfortable, but however much money I received, I now always feel uncomfortable at Christmas, and I will do whatever it takes to avoid this dreaded time of the year.

## ∴ EXTENDED DUTY

— *Lesal Wayne*

It was an original '56 Chevy, with an L98 Chevy small block that Miller took from a used-up Corvette. I could get more mechanical, talking about stroke length, piston rods, compression ratios and all that, but I've learned enough in the last few years to know that most people don't want to hear about it. Their eyes only begin to come unglazed a little when I describe the green-tea ice-cream and black two-tone paint, the chrome gleaming like jewel settings and the custom wire sports wheels. Miller's Chevy was no crude hot rod – it was a gentleman's silk glove of high performance motoring.

Pity that so few people in Musquachewan could appreciate it ... particularly not Dippity Sheriff LesBeaux. "Lesbo," as we called him, had a hate on for that car we were never able to explain. There were other hotted-up antiques begging for tickets in the township, but it seemed that none of them brightened up "Lesbo's" day like Miller's ... perhaps just because it was just because the Chevy was *not* the rowdy exhibition of teenage exuberance that the police mentality expected of it. This was not the hot rod driven by the young Marlon Brando or James Dean, with grease on their hands and even more in their hair. It was the hot-rod of David Niven ... and I believe that is what infuriated whatever remained of the youthful LesBeaux, now suffocating beneath multiple layers of late middle-age flab, that wished it had had the imagination to own a class act like Miller's.

All that is speculation, though. Here are the facts.

Miller was at the wheel; his girl Abbie was in the back seat so that we guys could talk over last night's game and the driver not have crane over a seat back to do it. They usually call me Raven, because I'm as blonde as a Boychuk ought to be. It was Miller, who was half-Cree on his mother's side, who was dark. That sort of irony is common when you live a three-hour's drive north of anywhere important in Canada. I don't think it made LesBeaux like us any better, either.

As usual, he was probably waiting for us behind a billboard on the one highway that led out of town, and the first we knew about it was the red light on LeBeaux's OPP prowl car, flashing in our rear-view mirror. The siren caught up with us a minute later, and there was "Lesbo," leaning over to crank down the passenger-side window of his car to shout at us to pull over. We pulled over.

And stayed in the car. We knew the drill, from regular practice. Miller rolled his window down to let in the unwanted late October chill. It would probably not be cold enough for snow to stick the ground for another two or three weeks, but jackets were already a must.

Miller is not usually good at being polite, but when dealing with Law he does his best.

"Yesssss, Officer? What have I done *this* time?"

"We could start with speeding. Doing 92 in an 85 kilometer zone."

“Are you certain of that? We don’t have radar in Musquachewan Township. We’ve been through that in court before, and it was your word against ours.”

“I was just going to let you off with a warning...”

In the back seat, Abbie could not quite stifle a *sotto voce* “Suuuuure you were!”

“But now I think you are driving under the influence of alcohol ... or drugs. Out of the car, *now!*”

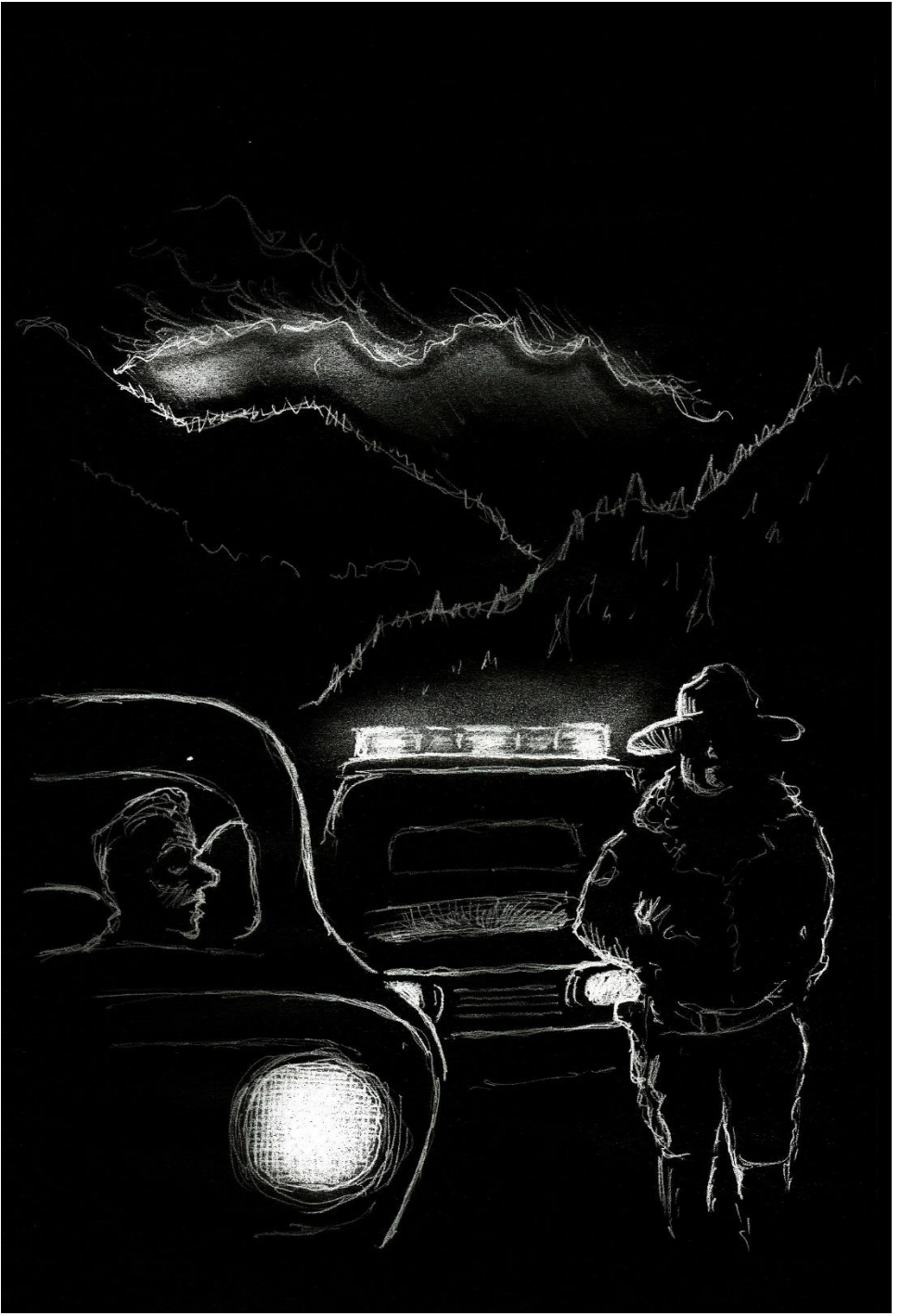
Dutifully, we left the warmth and comfort of the Chevy’s padded buckets and stood in a line in the autumn chill while the Ontario Provincial Police officer poked around in the front and back seats, grunting as he bent over to peer *under* the seats. He jabbed at the glove compartment catch and let its door fall open, then scooped the contents out without really looking. We knew he never expected to find drugs, and, if we had been drinking, the smell of it in the closed confines of the car – let alone the empty Molson’s cans – would have been enough to make a search pointless. “Lesbo” was simply making a nuisance of himself, and worse was to come when he “searched” the trunk. He opened the tool case. He opened the emergency bag, with the flashlight, can and bottle openers, hatchet, blanket, flares, matches and other things that are good to have around when the car skids into a ditch when it’s thirty below. He opened the sealed plastic water bottle to sniff it, and didn’t even bother to twist the cap back on, just set it down open in the trunk. Within ten seconds he had “accidentally” knocked it over and wet the entire trunk. Satisfied with the “search,” so far, Officer LeBeaux slammed the trunk-lid down hard enough to bounce the Chevy on its shocks.

Then, with a grin, he said, “It looks as though one of your rear traffic lights is broken. I’ll have to write you a ticket.” We watched as the baton on LeBeaux’s belt came up and swung, as though in slow motion. The crunch and tinkle of broken glass came a second later.

Just as the fat turd started writing out the ticket, Abbie looked up and her eyes went wide. She made a motion with her head to indicate we should take a look. There, behind LeBeaux’s back, his black-and-white patrol car was beginning to roll forward, slowly at first, but picking up speed. He had left it in neutral ... despite of the pronounced slope of the road where we were stopped! Within ten seconds, the Crown Victoria was slipping away at a brisk walk. At thirty seconds, it was escaping custody at an all-out run!

We knew how it felt.

Officer LeBeaux noticed something was indefinably wrong. Was it a subtle movement of the air? Or were we simply not acting quite the way we should while being ticketed? He noticed that we were all staring at a spot down the road, and looked ...



"JEESUZ CHRIST WHY DIDN'T YOU SAY SOMETH..." But "Lesbo" was already pelting down the road, and didn't waste his breath with the rest. The last we heard from the officer as he chased after his still-accelerating patrol car was, "DON'T YOU MOVE! I WANT YOU TO BE HERE ON THIS EXACT SAME SPOT WHEN I GET BACK OR, GODDAMN IT, I'LL KILL YOU!"

Well, *that* sucked. Here we were by the side of the road, miles from town, our water spilled and our emergency gear wet, and judging from the clear blue sky we were in for a cold night. Much as we felt no delight in seeing the Dippity Sheriff, the sooner he was back the better.

But he didn't come back before dark. He wasn't back by midnight. He didn't come back before we tried to turn the heater on, sometime around 2 a.m. ... but the engine wouldn't turn over. Too cold this early in the year? *Shit!* We dozed fitfully, on and off, in the back seat under the one damp blanket.

When the first light of dawn finally made it possible to discern the treeline, we heard the faint drone of a car in the distance. Swearing, we piled out and watched the headlights approaching from town. The lights were off and it was moving slowly, so it was several minutes before it was close enough to make out that it was LeBeaux's cruiser, all right. Then the cruiser was right next to us. There was just enough light to see "Lesbo" in the driver's seat, but he didn't seem to take any notice of us ... or any notice of anything. He drove slowly past, as though he was in a trance, and then was gone. What the fuck was *that* all about?

The sun rose reluctantly through the morning mist, revealing us shivering by the roadside under a damp blanket. We felt like total morons.

"Why didn't we just *give up* after an hour or two?" Abbie demanded.

"It would have cost more than a couple of hours to have to explain it all to the judge, later," said Miller, who was right, as usual. They take the law seriously in small towns ... the smaller the town, the *more* serious, in fact, until you get to Musquachewan Township, where it is practically *Opera Buffola*.

We were just crawling out of the Chevy again, to stretch and rub some life back into our frozen limbs, when a battered Ford 150 came rattling up the road and lurched to a stop. I recognized a farmer Philips or Phelps, who rolled down the window of his pickup and asked if we needed any help. Just then, Miller dug out his key and tried the ignition again. The small block coughed a couple of times, but then decided to come to life and purred like the pedigreed champion it was.

"Naw."

"Well, wut in the world were you doin' *here*, parked at the side of the road at the crack of dawn, miles from just about anywhere?"

"Aw, you know... that bastard LesBeaux stopped us again with that bogus 'speeding' routine of his."

The farmer nodded. "Lesbo" preyed on other drivers, too.

Miller added with a grin, "He had to leave suddenly. Unfortunately, he said 'stay put' or else."

"Don't you know wut happened to Officer LesBeaux, last night?"

Looking as innocent as we could, we indicated that we knew nothing. How could we, if we'd been stuck out *here* all night?

"Well, it was the funniest thing ... kinda. I wasn't there personal, but my eldest daughter was just gettin' the Tim Hortons ready fer the morning trade, when she looks up through the winders and sees a patrol car on Cowper's Hill Road, goin' way over the town's speed limit. Then she noticed that the beacon was lit, the driver's door was open, but there weren't nobody innit!"

I remembered then that the highway turned into Cowper's Hill Road when it dropped into town.

"Must of been half the town saw the car roll the rest of the way to a dead stop in front of the Timmie's, as though *it* came fer the donuts *itself*. Then, heads turned when someone pointed at LesBeaux, running hell bent fer leather about 200 yards behind. He comes to a slow stop, too, just in front of the Timmie's. But then he grabs at his chest, staggers a few feet and falls over. When the ambulance fellers got there, they said he was as dead as a tick on a banker's ass. It didn't seem so funny *then*, of course."

"Oh, shit!" I said.

Miller asked, "*When* did this happen?"

"Oh, yesterday 'round five-thirty or six I guess, about an hour before dark."

We thanked Farmer Philips or Phelps for the news and the offer of help, got in the Chevy and carefully drove to town at precisely the speed limit. We never mentioned the last time we saw Officer Lebeaux to anyone. They take the law too seriously in small towns, and someone might think *we* were responsible. Not that there weren't other clear, crisp October nights when there was a moon, and some unsuspecting driver *insisted* that he saw Musquachewan's Finest still patrolling the highway out of town. Perhaps he is still looking for us.

## ∴ DARK TARN OF AUBER

— *Don Swaim*

*Halfling hunted in, Halfling hunted out,  
All through the streets, about and about;  
When through the Edsel window I saw his head,  
I fired my cannon and shot him dead.*

WHO would have thought Zachariah, his blank eyes with the seeming of a demon that was dreaming, would be elected the first zombie mayor of Wichita, Kansas, Peerless Princess of the Plains, largest still functioning city in the U.S. of A.?

No woman other than a pregnant ghoul can give birth to an actual zombie, even with extreme hormone therapy. Not being a ghoul, Eldritch Djinn adopted one—as the mystic wind murmured in mothering melody. She called her anointed zombie child Zachariah. In those days, wayfaring zombies seldom carried ID and revealed nothing about themselves—something in their genes kept them modest—so it was nearly impossible to learn a zombie’s given name. Public zombie records were non-existent.

Despite her searing regret, Eldritch had to abandon her sweet, little zombie nipper due to a cynical occupational trade-off, resulting in incalculable maternal guilt.

It all began in 1964.

To allay the burden of investigating the background of the principals mentioned in this narrative, the following unverified dossier should suffice:

### MEMORANDUM

1) The assassination of Fidel Castro and the resulting hostilities led to the defoliation of much of the United States, which removed its capital to Wichita, Kansas.

2) Eldritch Djinn and I were assigned by our employer, unscrupulous ad agency boss Burt Bumstead, to assassinate Norman Mailer, deemed a security threat.

3) Engaging a taxi owned and operated by one Panjeeb Beejnap of St. Loo, Eldritch and I journeyed perilously through the devastation of the interior to Mailer’s base in Bruh-Klyn.

4) During our odyssey we were set upon by canal-boat pirates, contract killers, rebel gunslingers, deadly dwarfs, suicidal gun molls, and, in southern Illinois, zombies.

5) Eldridge captured in a net a boy zombie, about five, whom she decided to raise.



6) When it became untenable to keep the zombie child, Eldritch ordered Panjeeb Beejnap to return the boy to the Dank Tarn of Auber and free him.

7) After the planned Mailer assassination became compromised, Eldridge and I went our separate ways, each returning to Kansas via different routes.

Back in Wichita, Eldritch hailed a pedicab outside the salt mines, as we fondly called Batton, Bumstead, Durstine and Osborn. As soon as she sniffed the odor of curry and perspiration she knew the driver was Panjeeb Beejnap

"Missus, you are here," he said. "I had expected you long ago. I almost surrendered on you. Veddy, veddy sorry."

Panjeeb spoke like a reject from Calcutta, although he was born and raised in Yoakum, Texas, and held a degree in golf course management and astrophysics from Texas A&M.

"Panjeeb," Eldritch snarled, "why are you in the Emerald City and driving a pedicab?"

"It was expedient that I come here, missus. But then my beloved Edsel she expired on me, so I had to regress to pedals. I must earn doubloons for my naan and curry-butter in order to survive."

"What about Zachariah? I paid you a schiemiel's ransom to deliver him to the Dank Tarn of Auber in the Ghoul-haunted Woodland of Weir and open his cage."

"And it was a veddy good idea, indeed, missus, but, alas, the Buckeye Regulation Militia in full blue-suited regalia with proper insignia had vanquished the zombies in that entire sector, so it was unsafe. Only one thing I could do. I detoured through the untamed territory of Ken-Tucky, then into the deforestation of the Ozarks and other inhospitable places until I reached civilization. Missus, it took me three months, and for gasoline I had to resort to using my own urine."

Her inadvertent encounter with Panjeeb outside the salt mines quickened her pulse for she believed she was about to be reunited with her adopted zombie bambino.

"Tell me everything I need to know about Zachariah, camel-puss."

He smiled brightly. "You will be delighted to learn, missus, I motored him here to the Garden City of the West with absolutely no ill effects."

"I wanna see my widdle cherub. Like yesterday."

"Alas, missus, it is veddy, veddy awkward." A frown reshaped his face.

"Zachariah is with the Halflings, perhaps with Big Bone Kahuna himself."

"The Halflings of Oz? Why you—"

"Missus, missus, kindly lower your knuckles of copper and zinc and allow me to explain."

"It better be good, duck-fart."

"Halflings, as you know, have made great strides, and now there are laws against the indiscriminate killing of little people. However, the pitiable zombies are still—as we would say in Texas—buzzard bait. I decided I best keep Zachariah hidden in his cage until you returned from your worthy mission to Bruh-Klyn. He and I were residing in my esteemed Edsel on the shoulder of Route Fifteen near

the Firestone Tire and Prophylactic shop. We were content. I even hung my underwear to dry on a highway sign. My revered Edsel's radio still performed well so we would listen to Sousa marches and rock 'n' roll.

"Alas, missus, an unknown villain must have given us up. Suddenly, we were surrounded by screaming minikins, pounding on dear Edsel with cudgels and truncheons, breaking her windows. For some reason, they let me live, but they ran off with Zachariah in his cage. I do not know where he is, but no doubt in one of the vast Halfling camps in West Wichita."

It never took Eldritch long to grasp a situation, good or bad, her mind churning like a locomotive at full throttle.

"Okay, cootie-queen, I've heard enough. Get lost."

"You do not wish to be conveyed in my pedicab, missus?"

"After hearing that crap about your moth-eaten underwear? But I may need you again, so tell me where you park your sorry ass?"

"My sorry ass remains parked conveniently by the edge of Highway Fifteen and East Sixty-Third Street, missus. I am living in my precious Edsel. Car and I are as united as kin."

Having to ditch her little soulless walking corpse nearly broke El's heart, which until then I wasn't sure she had. Rudely dismissing my notion that zombies, like cats, were easily replaceable, Eldritch craved to kiss her tyke goodbye. But how do you kiss a zombie without getting bitten and turning into a flesh-eating freak yourself? Eldritch back on that cheerless day in Ohio was every bit as ashen and sober as the Dank Tarn of Auber in the Ghoul-haunted Woodland of Weir on Route 46, its leaves crisped and sere.

She phoned me on BBD&O's covert house line.

"Robert, big boy, remember me?"

"Eldritch?"

"Of course, fucktard. Who else has a voice like a bullfrog?"

"Where are you?"

"Two floors above you in HR. Meet me in exactly fifty-one minutes at the Sunflower Confectionary and Booze Cafe. I need something from you."

"You treated me bad, El, so why should I do anything for you now?"

"Because, bright eyes, you owe me. I was expected to nullify you as soon as we crossed the Ohio line but didn't."

"Nullify *me*?" I suddenly realized all I had seen was but a dream within a dream. "But we were comrades-in-arms. Why?"

"Classified info, barf-breath."

"It was Mr. Bumstead, right? His moronic Mailer assassination plot. Planned to leave no evidence behind."

"I have certain loyalties, so you'll get nothin' outta this broad. Be late, dipstick, and I'll kick your ass like I did when we were on the road. And bring all the agency files on the Halflings of Oz."

"But—"

"I happen to know you worked on the Halflings account until the Almira Gulch Riots led to the minikins' suppression and BBD&O lost all their business, which was lousy anyway 'cause every time they paid their bill they came up short, so to speak. Make sure the friggin' files are up to date."

To be clear, Eldritch and I never engaged in a romantic relationship. She and I boffed only once, maybe twice. Three at the most. I was not only espoused at the time to a woman named Florencia, but, more important, was obsessed with the spiritual Emily Dickenson, remedied only by months of painful therapy. *Wild nights—wild nights! Were I with thee...* In any event, Eldritch was partial to her own sex, and used me as a mere toy—until she got all goo-goo over the effeminate Mailer, a passing derangement on her part. To her credit she broke it off.

As we sat across from each other at the café table sipping our Ovaltangs, I saw that Eldritch with her hyacinth hair had hardly changed. She remained voluptuous like a queenly nymph from the land of fairies, an enchantress of the flowery field, still wearing black and periwinkle, Wellesley College ring on her pinky, breath the familiar scent of persimmons and garlic. Why she painted blue her bitten-to-the-quick fingernails I never understood.

She filled me in on Panjeeb Beejnap and the abduction of Zachariah by the Halflings, and I handed over our minikin account files, which she quickly thumbed through.

"There's gotta be a clue in here as to where and why they took him," she said. "The Halflings of Oz do nothin' without a reason."

"Maybe we should check the Kansas state adoption files."

"Don't be an asshole, asshole. Minikins ignore adoption records, just like they do census, environmental, zoning, tax, noise-abatement laws, and the draft. They live in their own small universe, so to speak. The cops are terrified to go into those humongous Halfling holding pens, where no one taller than three feet is safe. Say, maybe we could slip you inside in disguise. Get you an audience with Big Bone Kahuna himself and arrive at the bottom of all this."

"Um, I don't think that's a good idea. I mean, I'm five-eleven in my socks. I suspect I'd stand out."

"You'd walk in on your knees, pea-brain." She pulled a document from the file. "Hey, what's this? Something about that experimental Perfidy Pharmaceuticals drug used on the little people, BBNM-122."

"Old news, El. I read about it in the Wichita *Monthly Eagle*. The drug's worthless as far as the Halflings are concerned. At first, it showed promise, adding several inches to their height. But the results were temporary and the ones who took it shrunk to half their original size before they croaked. They're buried at the Lyman Frank Baum Memorial Cemetery on West MacArthur Road. After that, Perfidy Pharmaceuticals suspended the drug trials."

"Bullshit. Here's a receipt showing the drug's still being delivered to the Halflings, specifically to the Cowardly Lion Holding Camp at West Zoo Boulevard and Twenty-First. If they stopped using the drug, how's come they keep getting shipments?"

"Maybe they just never got around to canceling."

"And shelling out their precious shekels for nothing? It ain't small change, so to speak. Makes no friggin' sense."

"Then they probably found another use for it."

"Hmmm." Eldritch shut one eye and raised the painted eyebrow of the other quizzically, the way she always did when she was in deep thought. It was devilishly sexy. "You may be on to something, numb-nuts."

"Really?" I was flattered. Eldritch rarely praised me.

She snapped her nail-bitten fingers. "I know how to get you in. You're gonna make a special delivery directly to Big Bone Kahuna himself."

I almost choked on my Ovaltang.

"But he's the absolute top, numero uno Halfling in the Grasshopper State, not to mention being the little people's head honcho in the decontaminated zones. In awe, they refer to him as The Great Sardine. Few have even seen the guy, although they say he's been around for a more than a hundred years. Some claim he doesn't actually exist, that he's just a legend, a myth."

"Negative. He's real all right. See here, his name's printed on the receipt right next to his X."

"What are you gettin' me into, El?"

"Focus, fuck-knuckle. BBNM-122. Manufactured by Perfidy Pharmaceuticals, one of BBD&O's own ad accounts, which is why the receipt was in the Halflings files in the first place. I happen to know the drug enhances the A533 cell surfaces by activating the autocrine loop involving the receptor for the EGFRC epidermal growth factor."

"Everyone knows that."

"And you're gonna special deliver it to the Great Sardine in person. Get to the bottom of Zachariah's kidnapping."

"But where are we going to get the stuff?"

"We ain't, nimrod. You'll be carrying a package of vials only *labeled* BBNM-122. What The Great Sardine and his cohorts won't know is that the bottles will actually contain root beer extract—at least they won't realize it until after they get thirsty enough to crack open a bottle. Minikins are addicted to root beer, y'know, can't chug enough of the crap. One-hundred percent of all the root beer brewed in the disinfected zones is shipped to the Halfling holding camps."

"Can't stand the dreck myself."

"By the time they find out we slipped 'em fakes you'll have gotten your lily-livered ass outta there—if you're lucky. Now get your tail to S.S. Kresge's and buy a brown delivery uniform with the appropriate logos and duck-bill cap, and make it snappy. I'll take care of what's inside the box."

Eldritch was so sexy and seductive, I could never resist her crude, feminine wiles, and if I did she'd likely break one or more of my kneecaps. While the silken and uncertain rustling of her purple curtains thrilled me, I nevertheless was filled with fantastic terrors never felt before.

Thus, I faked my way into the powerfully fortified Cowardly Lion Holding Camp, where virtually no one got in and fewer left alive. I was strip searched and cavity checked by layers of little people security, suspicious, guns pointed at close range. At any moment I thought they might snap and leap on me, their teeth bared, and I'd wind up in a cooking pot. But the PERSONAL DELIVERY ONLY label on the package did the trick, although my escorts, two dozen regulars in spiffy, bright red uniforms, never let me out of their sight. In my own saggy, brown delivery outfit from Kresge's, I was self-conscious and skittish, but put up a bold front exactly the way Eldritch, who was no birdbrain, had instructed. At least they'd never know I was in advertising. Admen never wore brown.

While being led down the narrow, muddy streets lined with shabby, unpainted miniature houses, I felt the air growing denser, as if perfumed by an unseen censer. One building stood out. Well kept, freshly coated white, it was taller than the rest, an anomaly, as if a marginally bigger person resided there, maybe Big Bone Kahuna himself.

But it wasn't The Great Sardine's.

On the stoop of the oversized house shuffled sweet little Zachariah, a chain around his neck.

He had grown considerably since El and I first saw him near the Dank Tarn of Aubur in the Ghoul-haunted Woodland of Weir. Zachariah snarled and yanked his chain, yet there was something different about him. He was a tad more docile, and his eyes seemed more alert—for a zombie's. He didn't appear to recognize me. Maybe it was my brown uniform, two sizes too big, the only one Kresge's had in stock.

The guards led me on to Big Bone Kahuna's palace, slightly less blighted than the rest of the buildings, painted glossy pink and surrounded by a rose-entwined picket fence with a WELCOME doormat out front. I had to stoop going in, and sat contorted under the four-foot-high, pressed-tin ceiling. With the bogus package on my lap, I waited three hours in the tapestry-filled room for an audience with The Great Sardine, who was finally rolled in by his lackeys on a three-wheeled throne.

I feared he'd be severe and menacing, but he proved to be a rotund, gum-chewing gamin, tall for a Halfling, nearly three and a half feet. The presiding chief of the little people was a hereditary position, as I later learned, and that Big Bone Kahuna's father, grandfather, and great-grandfather were, in their time, also The Great Sardine, which was why uninformed minikins believed he was immortal. The rumors about the fearsome Big Bone Kahuna proved to be a myth. He was jovial, the kind of roly-poly kid I might have played checkers with back in grade school while everyone else used him for soccer practice. But I had to respect his worldly position and obey protocol. He'd have to ask me to play first.

Still on my knees, I bowed as I presented my delivery of bogus BBNM-122.

"Golly, jeeze, what a super surprise," Big Bone Kahuna said in a surprising basso voice. He smiled, showing gapped front teeth, unexpectedly cordial for a Halfling, a race renowned for its savagery and barbarity. He popped his gum.

"Your majesty, it's a modest donation from an admiring benefactor who wishes to remain anonymous, but who extends his sincere warm wishes and deepest respect."

Being in advertising, I could lie like a wet penny on a men's room floor.

"Gosh, tell whoever donated it we gratefully accept. And let him know that BBNM-122 is doggone effective." He took the chewed gum out of his mouth and stuck it under the seat of his throne, the way I did under my third-grade desk chair. I liked that.

"I shall, indeed, your majesty. However, I read in the *Eagle* the drug's had no success."

He chuckled. "Oh ho, what you read is one thing, mister delivery guy, and what's true is another. When it's used by zombies... Say, you wanna drink? Hey, fellas, bring our full-sized pal here a double diet root beer."

"Thanks, your majesty, but I'm watching my weight."

"Bring me mine, guys. I'm overdue for my root beer fix. Checkers? You wanna play checkers? You can move first."

"Alas, your majesty. I never learned. I always get the colors mixed up."

"Tic-tac-toe?"

"Same thing. Xs and Os confuse me. Um, about this BBNM-122 you mentioned..."

He squiggled like a gleeful eel. "As a matter of fact, we're about to launch a big advertising campaign to promote it."

Advertising? Campaign? My mouth gaped doltishly as those two magic words triggered a Pavlovian response in me. Alas, compromised by my disguise as a courier, I saw a potential ad account melt before my eyes like the Wicked Witch of the West doused with water. The only thing more important in advertising than an account was the next one.

Big Bone Kahuna said, "The drug seems to do away all those dumb zombie symptoms. Steps up growth, dulls their appetites for human flesh, and even allows 'em to babble more coherently. Just between you and me, we're actually raising a zombie kid who's getting BBNM-122 injections. It's lucky we got him. The poor little guy was existing in sordid conditions along a squalid highway close to a tire store—with dirty underwear hanging on a nearby road sign. Ain't easy acquiring a live zombie, ya know."

"I do know, your majesty," I said, thinking back to the day El snared Zachariah after the zombie horde swept down on us from Chicago. En route to Mailer's ultra-fortified villa in Bruh-Klyn, Eldritch and I had taxied through zombie-infested southern Illinois with Panjeeb at the wheel. As Eldritch gleefully shouted, "Whahooooo!" we wiped out living dead by the score with our Kalashnikov AK 47s, Chinese Norinco CQ-3us, Walther PPK blowback semiautomatics, and South African Vector CR-21s, not to mention Fougasse M202A1 Flash incendiaries.

Because the zombies were postmortem no harm was done.

Eldritch, typical of a woman with mothering instincts, fell for a diminutive boy zombie we snared in a net. He was cute as hell, so she, pulse quickening, claimed him as her own. The wrinkle was Zachariah had to be padlocked in a cage because he was a biter. While all zombies bit, Eldritch's little darling still had his baby teeth. The good thing was he didn't need to be fed and watered. The bad thing was his cage still had to be cleaned. With a zombie you never knew what the excreta was all about.

Big Bone Kahuna said, "The drug not only makes our little ghouel taller, but he's becoming more human-like by the minute. We minikins intend to provide BBNM-122 to zombies throughout the planet as a humanitarian gesture. It'll help us to regain our stature in the world, which is why we gotta reach the public through advertising and seek charitable contributions."

"Noble of you, your majesty. Seems the rest of the world just wants to make zombies second-class citizens—or to kill them. May I apologize on behalf of the entire human race for the way the full-statured, excluding myself, have abused you people—"

"You *people*?"

"—you folks since the Destruction. Sire, you display true magnanimity." I hoped I didn't sound like the condescending butthole I was.

"Say, are you a doctor or somethin'?" he said. "Magnanimity sounds like a rash."

"Uh, a word I saw in the *Reader's Digest*."

"Fact is, us little people are still cruelly discriminated against. Golly whiz, we can't buy or construct buildings of more than two-stories. We may marry only within our own size level. We're forbidden to dine at all-you-can eat buffets. We're not allowed to buy ladders or elevator shoes. It's outrageous. We need a staunch defender outside of our own small community, so to speak."

"I think I know where you're going with this, sire."

"We want at least one full-sized humanoid, preferably an articulate zombie, to champion not only *our* cause, but the cause of every lonely, suppressed zombie who's just tryin' to survive in this crazy, topsy-turvy world. We gotta make America colossal again. So the right zombie is what we need to lead our crusade. Halflings and zombies together!"

He pumped his fist.

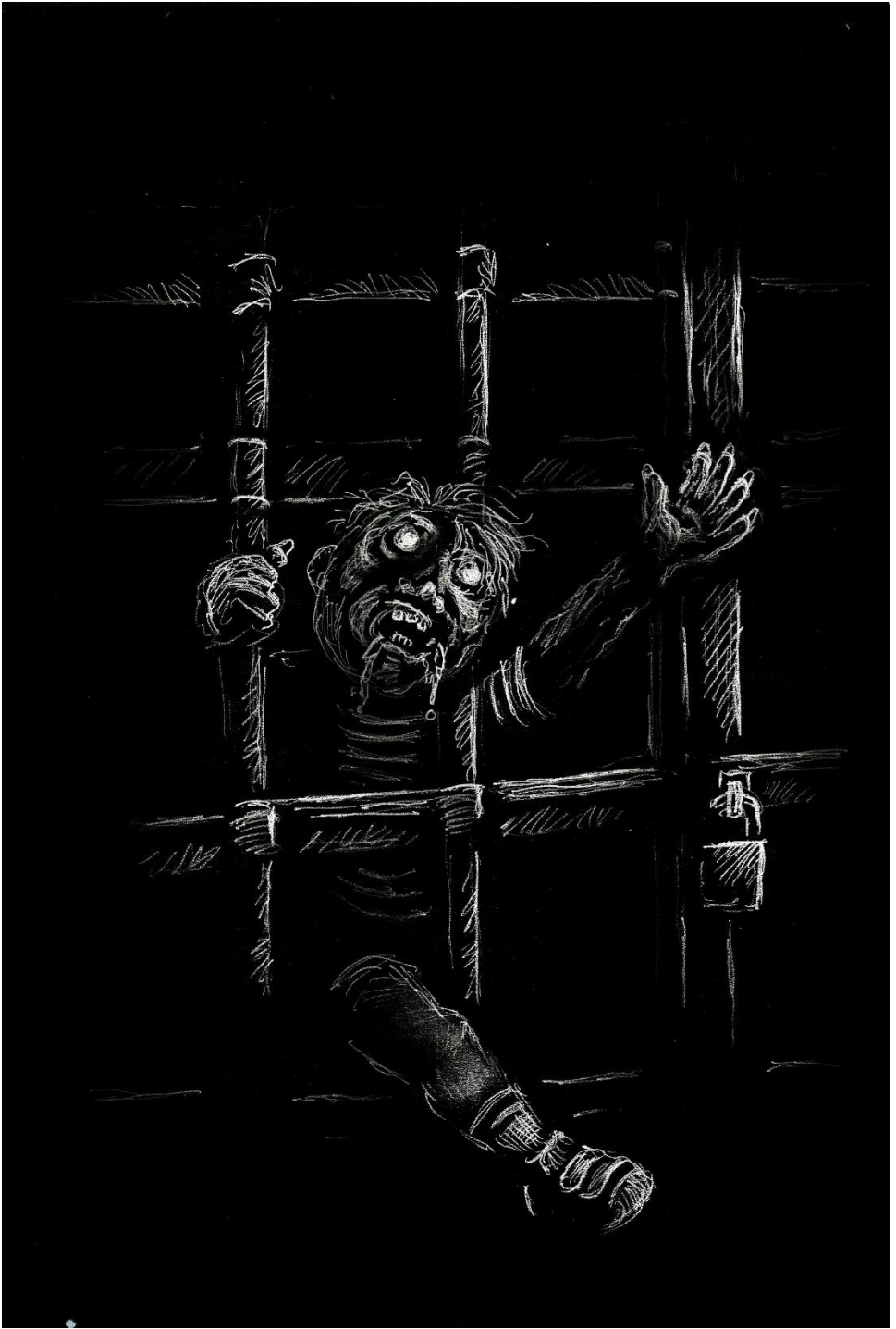
I added my fist pump to his, and blurted, "And Zachariah's the one!"

As soon as I said it I realized my dimwitted gaffe. No doubt the minikins who abducted Zachariah from Panjeeb's venerated Edsel didn't know the kid's name.

"We just call him Zombie Kid, mister delivery guy. You know his real name?"

"I, ah, simply meant to say that if BBNM-122 truly succeeds, you should *call* him Zachariah, which, in the Old Testament, means 'a vertebrate for all occasions.' Besides, it's awkward having an official spokesman identified only as Zombie Kid."

"Never thought of it that way. Hmmm, then Zachariah it is." The Great Sardine turned to his entourage. "Hey, fellas, where's my root beer? I'm gettin' the shakes."





Whew, narrow escape.

Bowing my head respectfully, I backed on my knees out of Big Bone Kahuna's holy presence.

"Sure you don't wanna play checkers?" he called after me.

"Next time, your majesty."

I was almost sorry my dummy delivery to him was actually root beer extract, although I didn't think effervescent swill injected into zombie flesh would matter that much to a zombie. Still, I vowed to make amends by providing to his majesty a fresh supply of legitimate BBNM-122, and it occurred to me just how to get it. Marco Shkreli was in charge of the advertising budget for Perfidy Pharmaceuticals, and, believe me, I spent many dismal hours getting the prick drunk and keeping him happy with our ad campaign. Shkreli was a scumbucket, even he proudly admitted it, but he owed me big time.

I was escorted back to the holding camp's electrified portal, grateful my guards were armed up to their small teeth, so to speak. Several minikins, fangs bared, lunged at me as I passed by, but were clubbed off or bayoneted. Clearly, no altitudinous human was safe in this place. Pizza carriers had long made the camp off limits after being used as toppings on the pies, which led me to hum the latest hit rock 'n' roll ditty played endlessly on the top-forty stations. Every acned teen in town was dancing the Watusi to it.

*The maid was in the garden,  
Hanging out her clothes,  
There came a little Halfling,  
And snapped off her nose.*

Safely back at the Sunflower Confectionary and Booze Cafe, I delivered a full report to Eldritch.

"What's screwed up is that Zachariah's under such tight guard nothing short of the Red Army can get to him, and the minikins will fight to the death before they'd let that happen. But what's good is the Halflings are injecting him with BBNM-122, which accelerates his growth and makes him look more human. And because Zachariah's babbling with better brainpower, they're grooming him to become their spokesman in the mainstream world."

I was rarely able to complete a paragraph that long in Eldritch's presence. Then I saw why, and it was an uncommon sight. She was breaking down in tears. Clearly, although Eldritch was grateful her zombie urchin was safe and being schooled and cared for, even by Halflings, nothing would repair the remorse she felt by compromising her maternal obligations for the sake of her gig at BBD&O. She had, of course, promiscuously curried the favor of Burt Bumstead, our pious, yet malevolent leader, whose capricious demands one ignored at his or her peril.

"Robert, you lint-licker, I could almost kiss you."

"Yeah?"

"In your dreams. But I'm not sure I want my widdle zombie guy ever to grow up. I wuv him just like when I first saw him back in Illinois. Hey, dirt-wad, remember how you, Panjeeb, and me would warble that boogie-woogie ballad over and over?"

Eldritch burst into lyric mode as tears smudged her mascara.

*The ghouls they all eat and chew,  
Gobbling down a human stew.  
Reanimation baby  
And I don't mean maybe.  
Don't make a zombie out of me.*

Her baritone was off-tune but infectious. I joined in the chorus.

*Reanimation baby  
And I don't mean maybe.  
Don't make a zombie out of me*

"It was tough goin' back then, El, but, sure, we managed to have some good times."

"Yeah, like outside of Chobham's Petrol Station in Pocahontas, Illinois, when we were ambushed by tens of thousands of ghouls. And after we laid 'em out there was Zachariah, wandering about all alone, looking for someone to bite. What a tweet, widdle darling."

"But, El, nobody stays the same. Most of us grow up, and if we're lucky we even age."

"But *not* zombies, barrel-ass. Think about it."

"Up until now you mean."

"Whad'ya sayin'?"

"I'm sayin' BBNM-122."

As a quickening spell passed over the Cyclone State like night dew carpeting summer grass, Zachariah grew up a thousand times quicker than a typical human stripling. All because of the wonder drug.

It was no surprise that BBD&O's sleazy competitor across town—Ogilvy, Mather, Greene, Wells, Rich, Doyle, Dane, and Bernbach—landed the Halfling ad account. Boss Burt Bumstead was mighty pissed we'd lost it, especially after OMGWRDD&B's campaign won a Clio. It was a sensation: a zombie moppet who was not only careening into adulthood with miraculous speed, but was jettisoning many of his zombie attributes, cherished as they were by traditionalists within the zombie community.

As he grew, the news rags and UHF channels flocked to the Zachariah story like a hajj of Muslims: in-depth profiles, a topless photo spread, TV interviews. *Playhouse Ninety* reenacted his life story with Sal Mineo as Zachariah.

A handsome, articulate young zombie was what liberals were looking for. It was his time, a historic first, a breakthrough for minority rights, a rags to riches story of an impoverished zombie mite chewing and eating his way to the top, beholden to no god, pope, politician, or moneyed interest. Zachariah became a sex symbol for teenaged girls of all heights and weights, and a role model for boys of a certain nature.

I learned via the grapevine that Big Bone Kahuna held no grudge after discovering the supposed consignment of BBNM-122 I delivered was actually root beer extract, and that he consumed the entire shipment himself.

Eldritch, however, was forced to follow the development of her adopted zombie son from afar with a mixture of pride and regret. It wasn't until after Zachariah's winning campaign for a Wichita City Assembly seat that she saw him again in the flesh—at his outdoor swearing in, although she was forced to remain behind police barricades. Eldritch wasn't sure Zachariah would have recognized her anyway, plus the timing wasn't right. She realized he had drawn a passionate light from the sun and stars, that his spirit was fit, and, she thought, one day, one day...

He had crusaded on a platform of equality for little people and ghouls alike, despite intense nativist rhetoric and hate, and in doing so he shed many, but not all, of his zombie characteristics. He now wore a three-piece suit, rarely drooled, and lurched only when in a hurry, his hair in a crew cut. Seldom did flesh fall from his body, and usually only in private.

Zachariah's two stellar years in the 310-member Wichita City Assembly prompted him to run for mayor. The bitter political struggle repeated itself, this time with the infamous Koch Triplets, conjoined billionaire industrialists, pumping billions of rupees into defeating him—as well as xenophobes threatening Second Amendment remedies unless he was deported to the Caliphate of Canada. Zachariah's adversaries, pitiless evangelicals in particular, recorded a vicious 45-RPM single intended to turn popular sentiment against him:

*Fee, fi, fo, fan,  
I smell the blood of a zombie man.  
Whether he be alive or dead,  
We will take his heart and head!*

But the hate-filled strain of his opponents was countered by Zachariah's own inspirational anthem, which resulted in an unexpected smash hit that climbed the charts and perched at the top:

*Time will pass and foes will fall  
Kids will throw their basketball ball  
America is burning  
Kansas is turning  
Don't be a farty*

*Let's all join the party*

The profundity of the lyrics became impossible to underestimate, and are still studied in academe. Ultimately, Zachariah's support among young activists, the elderly, gays, and little people turned into a victorious movement.

On his first full day as mayor, Zachariah put into effect ground-breaking reforms to rebuild Doo-Dah, another sobriquet for our beloved city, into a hemispheric capital of decency and humanitarianism. Halflings and zombies alike were afforded the right to vote, marry other life forms, even to check into motels and shop at supermarkets. And the statute to extract the teeth of all zombies over twenty-one was repealed. Overnight Zachariah became presidential timber and won the personal endorsement of John F. Kennedy, now retired and living agreeably with Jackie in Prairie View, Kansas.

Panjeeb Beejnap restored his hallowed Edsel to running order and became Zachariah's official uniformed chauffeur. Sentimentally, Zachariah came to think of Panjeeb as the father he never knew. But what he lacked was a mother. That issue was resolved when he and Eldritch were reunited on the crowded steps of Tin Woodman Memorial City Hall on the frabjous afternoon Zachariah delivered his most regarded speech, the address in which he uttered his timeless words, "Men have called me schizo, but the question is not yet settled."

It was the very day Eldritch heroically rescued him from assassination by a crazed nativist from Wabaunsee County who was packing an Anschutz Model 64 MP-R Multi-Purpose bolt-action assault rifle. Not only did she disarm the assassin but thrashed him into inertia. A joyful reconciliation ensued and Eldritch was able to kiss Zachariah for the first time without her nose being eaten. That night, surrounded by empurpled vapors, Panjeeb, Eldritch, and Zachariah, all cheerfully maudlin, gathered for a tender candlelight and Cold Duck reunion in the backseat of Panjeeb's revered Edsel on the shoulder of Route 15.

Meanwhile, The Great Sardine, celebrated as Zachariah's spiritual elder, became so moneyed he launched the Halflings of Oz Megachurch on the site of the old Wesley Memorial Hospital Fun Park. It was no small matter, so to speak. On opening day, lots were drawn for admission, the crowds were so immense, attracted by the free root beer. The Society of Retired Kansas State Minutemen was called in to control the swarm and direct traffic.

But a backlash brewed, fomented by violent inbred aboriginals—particularly in Elk, Bourbon, Hodgeman, and Pottawatomie counties. Extravagantly armed militias formed, which attracted retrogressive interlopers from other provinces, some as far away as Kamloops, British Columbia. Wack-job militias set up training camps on the barren outskirts of Wichita, and when their invasion of the city came it was brutal, although I won't address it here.

Dearest Emily D, despite my therapy I still think of thee—whilst failing in my efforts to expel thy ghostly spirits from the impossible chambers of my brain. Then I hear your ambrosial voice clearly whispering into my good ear. *Robert, dear, one need not be a chamber to be haunted, one not be a house. The brain has corridors*

*surpassing material place. And then your final warning to me. The prudent carries a revolver. He bolts the door.*

#### AUTHOR'S NOTE

In his mournful ballad “Ulalume,” Poe writes of “the dank tarn of Auber in the ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir.” The events preceding this homage to Poe can be found in the author’s alternate-universe ebook *Bright Sun Extinguished: Ode to Norman Mailer*.

## ∴ A VINTAGE FROM AVEROIGNE

— *James Machin*

It was a filthy November evening and Morris, a man of sanguine middle age, was keen to escape the dismal, thin rain. He fought his way along the crowded Fleet Street pavement, doing his best to avoid being splashed by the occasional passing omnibus. Finding the side road he had been seeking, he ducked down it and in the twilight nearly tripped over the cane and feet of a fellow pedestrian, who shouted bad-temperedly after him. He ignored the tirade and hurried toward the lit window of his destination, above which a sign was swinging erratically in the sharp gusts of wind: “Mr Béla Szabó, Wine Merchant.”

“Good heavens, Szabó, it really is filthy out there,” Morris complained as he pulled the door rattling shut behind him. A little man in an apron stood behind the carefully-polished wood of the counter, peering through gleaming pince-nez.

“Ah, Mr Morris, I am most happy to see you. Please come in, come in.” His accent was heavily noted with the rich sonority of his native Hungarian. Szabó dashed from behind the counter to help Morris off with his sodden coat.

“You need warming up. Perhaps an Amontillado? Ah, but no, such weather calls for a surer balm for the soul.” The shorter man carefully hung the taller man’s coat on a peg and plucked a bottle from the many, of bewildering variety and provenance, that occupied the shelves lining three of the walls from floor to ceiling. “Here, a small glass of Tokay.”

“Bless you, Szabó, you spoil me. But I certainly won’t refuse.” Morris held his glass to the light and looked admiringly at the delicately-hued, ethereal amber liquor within. “Let me see... this has to be five puttonyos, Szabó! Have you been rifling through the cellar of the Tsar himself?” The merchant smiled with modest pride as Morris sipped his drink. “Ah, sublime. Just sublime.”

“And how, Mr Morris, can I be of service this evening?”

“Oh, you know, the usual story. Mrs Hamilton’s complaining stocks are running low and I’m hoping you will be able to provide your usual excellent advice on how to replenish the larder, so to speak.”

“Yes, of course, sir. Would you like to try the new Eger vintages? Here, I have new cases of Bikavér Superior...” Morris demurred with a slight shake of his head.

“It will no doubt be typically excellent stuff, Szabó old chap, but I’ve been on the bull’s blood for a few weeks now and a change is as good as a rest, eh?” Szabó looked at the man with incomprehension. “What I mean is: what else have you got? I’m at your mercy.” The merchant, returning behind the counter, retrieved a ledger, flipped it open, and began running a finger down a list of recent acquisitions, proceeding to the next item with each shake of Morris’s head.

“Italian, maybe. Will the Englishman always be immune to the delights of a good Chianti? Yes, it seems. I have obtained some truly excellent Médoc just this

week... let me see: Pauillac? Margaux? St Julien? A really superb St Estèphe, much sought after! No? I have an Algerian red of the Sahel, here, an 1888 much in the style of an older Maçon, but a fraction of the price... ah, no. Let us return to the surer terroir of France then, let us see... ah... no perhaps not this one."

"Not what?" Morris interjected.

"The Côtes du Averoine. It is newly acquired and I haven't had an opportunity to sample it, so I could not in good conscience recommend it, Mr Morris."

"Averoine? Never heard of it. Let's have a look, old chap."

The merchant closed his ledger and disappeared into a back room, soon returning with a bottle, which he placed on the counter in front of Morris. Morris scooped it up and inspected the rectangular label. The engraving upon it was of a medieval castle, which Morris considered to be fairly typical of the French style, although this one appeared to be in a state of some disrepair. He read aloud the Gothic blackletter:

"Côtes du Averoine. Château des Fausses Flammes. 1889."

"Yes, that is the only reason I placed a bid for it at the auction, Mr Morris, despite not being familiar with the *appellation*. '89 was such a wonderful year."

"Indeed, old chap. We haven't had a vintage like it since. Maybe next year."

"God willing. Nevertheless, not many of my customers are as adventurous as you, Mr Morris, and I am not overly confident it will sell."

"I tell you what, Szabó my man, let me take this one on tick, and if it's not corked I'll have Mrs Hamilton make arrangements to take the rest of the case off your hands."

"Of course, Mr Morris, as you instruct." Szabó clicked his heels together, and feigned a bow in the suave, military fashion. Morris drank off the rest of his Tokay, making appropriate noises of appreciation. After exchanging well wishes with Szabó, he strode out into the night clutching his bottle of Côtes du Averoine.



Morris thanked Mrs Hamilton for the chops she had just placed in front of him and dismissed her for the evening. He hadn't decanted the wine as the label had intrigued him and he wanted to inspect it further.

"No," he thought, "I've not heard of Averoine, I'm sure of it. Peculiar." Morris's knowledge of France and the French language was inexact but sufficient, and enhanced by his more than sufficient knowledge of viniculture. "The name, Averoine, sounds southerly... the Languedoc perhaps?" He continued to ponder as he uncorked the bottle. He sniffed the cork and poured himself a modest glass, which he held to the light, rolling the dark purple liquid within. There was little translucence and the wine unctuously coated the sides of the glass. Indeed, it had a surprising opacity, which the oil lamp on the table barely penetrated. He brought the glass to his nostrils and gently inhaled.

"A revelation!" he said, surprising himself by exclaiming out loud. The bouquet was such that he felt overwhelmed: deep notes of over-ripe blackcurrant made him

think of heavily-laden vines languishing in the long afternoon of some Attic dream. Yet there was something further, something subtler, working behind the refulgent glory of the initial aromatic blast, which he couldn't quite place. "Why, this is glorious, and I haven't even taken a sip," he thought, as he hastened to rectify the situation. The rich, velvet-smooth flavour of the grape burst over his taste buds like a river breaking its banks. Indeed, all his senses seemed to be staggered, such was the intensity of the experience. He proceeded from this initial sip to a gulp, luxuriating in the further heightening of the experience.

"And yet," he thought, "and yet, what is that shadowy gustatory implication lurking just beyond the reach of my palate?" After that first glass, which left him fairly reeling, he thought that he could place it; perhaps because of his taste of that superb Tokay earlier that evening in Szabó's shop. Tokay was unique for the "noble rot", the fungus that proliferated over the late-season grapes and intensified the flavour of the wine. But this wine, this Côtes du Averois, also betrayed the same mycological enhancement. "Oh dear, oh dear," Morris thought, "but it's not a noble rot, no. There's something *corrupt* about it. Ha! That's it... an 'ignoble rot'!"

Morris was suddenly aware that the alcohol, as well as the sublimity of the wine, was now muddling his thoughts. He felt languid but content, and the noise of the traffic outside seemed to recede into an ambient tranquillity. As he poured himself another glass, he began to wonder if the foul weather had at last passed. Indeed, the air felt close, even humid; warmer than could be accounted for by the few coals that Mrs Hamilton had set in the grate earlier that evening. "It's like a furnace in here," he thought, as he loosened his collar and poured another glass.

Setting the bottle back on the table, he noticed something about the label that he hadn't registered before. There was more to the lithographic image of the ruinous castle than had met his eye in the wine shop. Yes, he now saw it: there were *figures* on the grounds of the castle, but so fine was the etching that he squinted in vain to discern any more than the fact that they were present. He took another liberal swig of the wine and walked over to a sideboard. He found his magnifying glass after a quick rummage through a drawer. Once seated, and with a somewhat unsteady hand, he resumed his inspection of the label. This time, with artificial aid, the figures sprang into coherent detail.

There were, he saw, four people gathered on the lawn in front of the castle walls. Two were men; eighteenth-century exquisites. They were seated, goblets in hand, and seemed involved in some raffish, garrulous discourse with each other. Also seated was a young, startlingly beautiful woman, confidently *dishabille*. She was looking up at the fourth figure standing next to them all, her mouth open in a full-throated, somehow cruel laugh. There was, Morris decided, something sinister about all three. He was reminded of the sort of bucolic scenes one finds on a Toile de Jouy, but rather than an innocent idyll, this assembly seemed replete with corruption and sin. The impression was only intensified by the unambiguously fiendish fourth figure, standing with his back to both his companions and the viewer. Also naked, this man had adopted a posture of adoration or worship, his arms raised ecstatically to the castle walls, his unseen face upturned to the sky. The



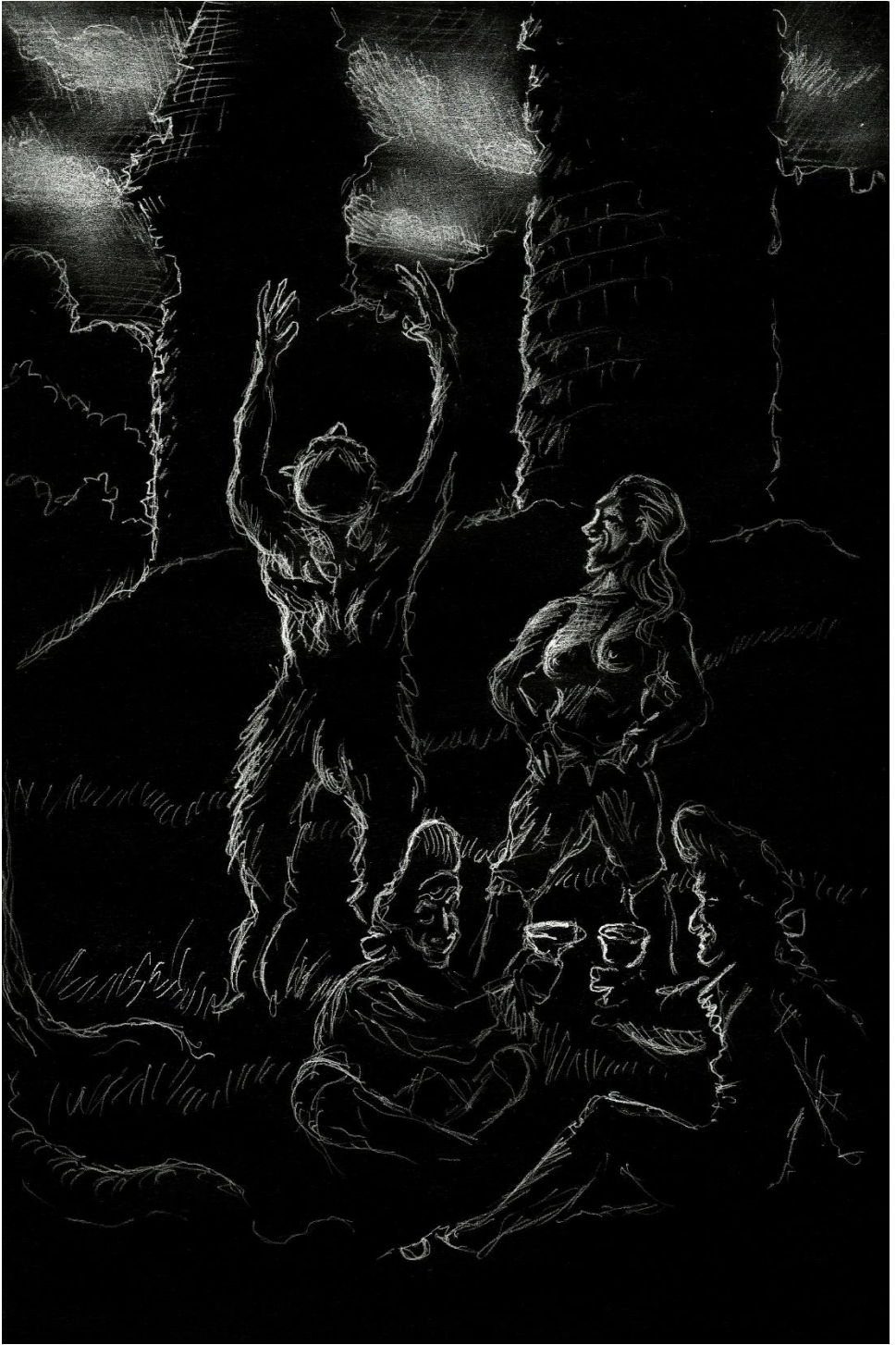
artist had taken pains to detail every ripple of his heavily-muscled, intimidatingly powerful back and shoulders. Morris was startled to see that this man did not have human legs, but rather the goatish legs of a satyr or faun. With a shudder, Morris abandoned his inspection long enough to refill his glass.

Resuming his perusal of the label, he then noticed something else, yet a further detail which until now had escaped him. There was a tree on the left of the scene, standing a little in front of the castle, and near which the group was picnicking (though Morris thought it doubtful that such a benign word was remotely appropriate for activity which seemed so surely yet unaccountably obscene). Peculiarly — for it seemed to Morris that the setting was a summer one — the branches of this tree were bare of leaves. There was something or, rather were some things, adorning its limbs, however, and Morris realised with increasing disgust and consternation that the tree had been decorated with what appeared to be human limbs, heads, and other body parts. He was reminded of some distressing images by Goya he had seen when a boy and which had given him nightmares, and also of an account of the practices of the Australian butcher bird, which he had more recently read about in the *Illustrated London News*. Morris was especially disgusted that the four gathered near the tree seemed to be paying it no heed whatsoever, and were involved only in their own sickening amusements. He threw down his magnifying glass in outrage at their wicked indifference. He realized his hands were trembling. He re-read the legend in Gothic blackletter beneath the image, which culminated in the statement: “MIS EN BOUTEILLE AU CHÂTEAU.” Morris felt queasy, and his insides seemed to dissolve as a feeling of intense dread gripped him. It was a terrible sensation, bleak and desperate; a black depressive nausea.

“Pull yourself together, old man, it’s just a picture. A grotesque picture no doubt, but still just a picture all the same.” But still, the thought nagged him, how could they be so unmoved by the horror at their shoulder? He poured more wine. The bottle was now less than a quarter full. He sipped and nearly cried out in surprise, for the wine no longer tasted of wine. He recognised the sharp ferruginous tang immediately: blood. In his shock he dropped the glass, and its contents spilled over the table cloth with the slow pace of a liquid far thicker than any wine. He looked at his hands. They were both covered in blood. The table before him was covered in a steadily expanding pool of thick, already congealing, blood. Morris reached for the bottle again but in his haste, panic, and — he now realized — drunkenness, he succeeded only in knocking it over. More blood flowed from the finish, spurting irregularly as though it were issuing from the final, desperate, spasmodic exertions of the heart of someone in their death agonies. Morris screamed.



He woke in his own bed, fully clothed, and with no memory of how he had found his way there the previous evening. The merciful haze of sleep was almost immediately swept away by the panicked recollection of the events precipitated by



the opening of the Côtes du Averoine. Morris held his hands frantically before his eyes, but he soon ascertained that no stain of blood was to be found upon them. Neither, as he lost no time in establishing, was there any incriminating evidence on the bedclothes. He rose unsteadily, noticing with regret that his brain was beset by the familiar dull ache of over indulgence, threw on his dressing gown, and almost tripped down the stairs in his haste to inspect the scene of the previous night's horrors.

"Mrs Hamilton!" he cried. Mrs Hamilton's appearance was immediate, befitting the uncharacteristic anxiety evident in Morris's voice.

"Mrs Hamilton... the wine... the spilt wine and the bottle... where?"

"Mr Morris, sir, why I'm sure I don't know... spilt wine?"

"The bottle... where is the bottle?"

"Why, I disposed of it this morning sir. Now you mention it, yes, I think there was a drop or two spilt on the tablecloth, but nothing to... I... I washed it as normal... I..." Mrs Hamilton's voice cracked, and Morris noticed, with no little inward exasperation, that her eyes were beginning to brim with tears.

"Mrs Hamilton, my good woman, I can assure you you've done nothing wrong. Now, look, if you could just bring me back the empty bottle from the kitchen."

"But Mr Morris, sir, it was collected this morning with the other rubbish." The utter anomalousness of Morris's behaviour, and the urgent manner of his inquisition, overwhelmed his housekeeper, accustomed as she was to the long, quiet years of a, until this moment, consistently serene cohabitation. She showed signs of a swoon, accompanying her sudden instability with deep sobs. Morris helped her to a seat and did his best to calm her down. He realized that there was no gain to be made by further interrogation, so he offered his profuse apologies and told her to think nothing more of the matter. He returned to his room, dressed quickly, and left the house.

Szabó's wine shop was closed. With his frantic hammering on the door, Morris had ascertained the fact that not only was it closed, but that the proprietor was clearly absent from the premises. Morris desisted from his siege after incurring a stern glare from a passing policeman. What was he to do? The notion of walking to Convent Garden occurred to him immediately, through no more than the desperately tenuous association of French wine and the French restaurant he had frequented at least twice a week in recent years. But perhaps after all this wasn't such a bad idea. Yes, he would consult M. Dupuis.

Morris found Dupuis at his usual station: the bar of the "Petit Montmartre", surveying with no small satisfaction the smooth running of his restaurant, the perennial glass of schnapps at his elbow. Dupuis was a gaunt creature with a sallow face, a physiognomy that belied both his profession and his garrulous geniality. He greeted Morris like a dear friend. Morris made no mention of his previous evening's outré, nightmarish experience, intentionally restricting his inquiry to its catalyst: "Dupuis, old chap, what do you know of wine from Averoine?"

“Averoigne? Hm. A Latin backwater. I am a good Northman, Mr Morris, practically a Viking! But no, I do not know the *department* and I do not know its wines.”

“Ah, that’s a pity. I’ve been recommended a case by my dealer and wanted to take advice on it, you see.”

Dupuis frowned intently. “Come with me.”

He ushered Morris across the polished herringbone floor of the restaurant, then at only the early stages of its typical lunchtime bustle, and through a saloon door into the kitchen. A small team of cooks were busying themselves at various stations, chopping vegetables, plucking fowl, and jointing meat. A plump fellow in chef whites was directing the activity, babbling a flurry of orders in opaque French from beneath his heavy, dark moustaches.

“Chef Garrigues, a moment please,” said Dupuis. Garrigues bounded across the kitchen floor with that peculiar grace some overweight people possess, and they found a quiet corner. “You see, M. Morris, Garrigues is as pure-bred a *Provençal* as you can meet,” Dupuis explained before reiterating Morris’s inquiry to the chef. Garrigues was grinning amiably until Dupuis uttered the word “Averoigne”. A peculiar and sudden transformation occurred in the demeanour of the chef. Where before he beamed, now he glowered. He surprised them both by spitting violently onto the sawdust at his feet.

“*Ce sont des sorcières. Cathars dégénérés.*” Garrigues fairly snarled the words. Dupuis was so taken aback at his chef’s aggression that he failed to notice the look of dread that fell across the face of the Englishman.

“But the wine, M. Garrigues, the wine?” The chef looked appalled and uttered not a word more, turning his back on them to resume his work.

Dupuis apologised for the third or fourth time to Morris at the door. “I don’t know what is wrong with him, Monsieur. These *Provençal* are ... *tu connais* ... superstitious.”



Morris was waiting at the door of the shop when Szabó arrived to open up. Although he couldn’t disguise the fact that he was in a state of peculiar anxiety, as in the restaurant he was circumspect about the details he conveyed when making his inquiry. Szabó was baffled at Morris’s evident distress and did all that was within his power to be of service to his loyal customer. Soon they were both at the counter, investigating the contents of the case from which Morris’s bottle had been extracted the previous day.

“Now, look Szabó, the label. Do you have a glass ... a magnifying glass?”

Szabó promptly produced said item and they both fell about inspecting the label.

“Now, tell me what you see.”

“Well, I see--- I see a chateaux. Or rather a castle, ruinous. And the text beneath.”

"In front of the chateaux? Look carefully, man. Carefully now!"

"A lawn, sloping, gently sloping."

"And on the lawn?"

"On the lawn? Why ... grass?"

Morris snatched the magnifying glass away from the confused Hungarian and, in a state of growing agitation, scrutinized the label and bottle in something of a frenzy, emitting the odd oath as he did so.

"You know, Szabó, I've always regarded myself as an Epicurean, a *bon viveur*. But never a dipsomaniac. I could have sworn..."

"Why, of course, Mr Morris." Szabó shrugged helplessly.

A few minutes later, Szabó was stood at the door, bidding Morris farewell.

"I am sorry I could not be of more help, Mr Morris."

But Morris gave no answer as he strode off into the crisp, autumnal afternoon.

That evening, Morris gave instructions to Mrs Hamilton to make arrangements for his departure the next morning for the continent. He told her that she should not expect him back for at least a month. He would be undertaking a tour of the French vineyards in the southern regions of that country. He asked that any urgent correspondence be forwarded to the *post restante* in Montpellier.



It was the Spring of the following year and Béla Szabó, on a balmy evening free at last from any lingering bite of winter, was doing some long-overdue housekeeping. While sorting through various bin-ends in the storage room of his shop, he came across the case of wine from Averoine. At first, he couldn't identify it as such, and it was only when he inspected a bottle that he was reminded of that peculiar incident many months earlier when one of his customers had asked him to inspect the label with a magnifying glass. Szabó wondered what had become of Mr Morris, idly speculating that he had lost his custom to a competitor. Since Morris's last visit to his shop, Szabó had made no subsequent effort to sell his remaining bottles from the case. He now worried he had been remiss.

"An 1889, even of such an obscure provenance, will surely go for a good price," he thought, in his native Hungarian. He resolved to familiarize himself with the wine in order to endorse it confidently to his customers. A few minutes and he was at the counter of his shop, glass in hand, his sensorium overwhelmed by the transcendent quality of the vintage from Averoine.

Szabó was transported, but a nebulous shadow of a doubt in the back of his mind quickly pushed itself to the fore. This doubt was rooted in his childhood; imbued in him from the wild mountains in which he was raised, and by the cautionary lore instilled in him by his ancestors from his first mewling in the fireside cradle, as the wind howled through the Börzsöny crags and his kinfolk whispered fearfully of the wild hunt, abroad on such nights. He sipped no more of the wine, instead tipping it away down the sink. He picked up the bottle, peering at the label over his pince-nez. He struggled to calm himself when he noticed something on the

lawn, but calm himself he did. With an only slightly trembling hand, he held the magnifying glass to the label. He shuddered at the sight of the four revellers on the lawn, abject in their sin. He further quailed when he saw the tree, and saw what decorated it. He nearly dropped the bottle when he recognized the features of one of the severed heads thrust so cruelly onto a splintered branch. Szabó now knew why Morris had never returned to his shop since that strange evening the previous autumn.

Szabó steadied himself and commenced the course of action that he had, almost subconsciously, instinctively, resolved upon. For Szabó knew that it was too late for Morris and that no good could possibly come from further involving himself in matters such as this. He emptied one bottle of *Averoigne* after another down the sink, pouring salt and *Eau-de-Javelle* down the plughole afterwards. He took the empty bottles in the wine case to the small private courtyard behind his shop and, using a hammer, smashed one bottle after another into myriad tiny fragments. He tore apart the case itself and swept the wrenched and sundered wood and broken glass into a pile, which he covered in turpentine and set aflame. After the fire had died, he collected the ashes and the ground-up, burnt glass and put it out in the trash. He returned to the courtyard and covered the patch of newly-blackened ground with salt, which he raked carefully into the earth.

Béla Szabó never again saw a vintage from *Averoigne* for sale, and for the remainder of his days did his best to think no more of it.

## ∴ HEARTS AND MINDS

— *Liam Webb*

ARNOLD Willis slowly opened his eyes, dreading what he would see. The small alarm clock on the nightstand read a merciless 5:58 a.m. The sterile hospital wall came into focus behind the clock, in sharp contrast to the brightly-colored balloons which floated at the edge of Arnold's vision.

"Four hours till doomsday," Arnold thought.

Turning, he sat up heavily in the uncomfortable hospital bed. Swinging his feet over the side, he winced as they touched the cold linoleum, and his hips complained as he put his weight on his legs. Crossing to the closet-sized bathroom at the far end of the room, he watched himself move forward in the thin mirror on the bathroom door. A fifty-eight year old man in white and blue striped pajamas came closer in the mirror. Overweight now, the image was once athletic, "but not obese yet," Arnold protectively thought with a mixture of pride and resentment. He noticed the beginnings of jowls on his face as he got closer, as well as the fact that his slightly receding hairline had retreated another quarter inch in the past few months. A small loss, but noticeable.

"Sucks to get old," he thought, entering the bathroom. He stared at the tired face in the small mirror over the bathroom sink. While he knew he couldn't sleep anymore, he wished he could, and so debated whether or not to go through his morning routine.

"May as well get ready. Goddamn stress. Lousy freelancing rates," he thought to himself as he sighed and turned on the water. After shaving and washing and drying his face, he looked at himself again, his eyes slowly resting on the top of his chest which was exposed through the opening at the pajama top.

"Say good-bye, old friend, to that hunky chest," he said. "By one o'clock it'll look like a cereal box top."

"Mr. Willis...? Are you okay?" asked a female voice outside the bathroom door.

Arnold opened the door slightly to reassure the nurse. She was a pleasant overweight black woman, even if her hair was always just a bit out of sorts.

"As okay as I will be until Dr. Cut-'em-up gets a hold of me for my bypass," Arnold told her with a half-hearted smile. "Why do you ask?"

The nurse was unnaturally serious. "Please stay calm, sir. There's been an unavoidable delay. Your double bypass cardiac surgery had to be rescheduled for tomorrow. There's been an outbreak of some sort of new flu strain, and we've had many new patients come in. I'm sorry, but they're in more danger than you at the moment."

At that, Arnold left the bathroom to speak with her, and in preparation to take an excuse to leave the hospital.

“Okay by me. I’ll go home and come back tomorrow. What time?”

“Actually, because the patients came in last night, you can’t leave the hospital. You may have been exposed to it overnight. But, if it makes you feel any better, none of last night’s staff can go home either.”

“It doesn’t, actually,” Arnold said dryly. “What else?” he added, noticing that she wasn’t done with what he now suspected was a spiel from the morning’s overuse with other patients.

“To keep from being infected,” the nurse said, “we need to keep your door closed and you can’t come out unless it is a true emergency. You have a call button if you need us. And we know this is a smaller room, but all the new patients means we’ll have to bring someone in here to share space — oh, don’t worry, the patient we’re bringing in, Mr. McNulty, has Alzheimer’s and not the new flu.”

“Terrific,” Arnold said, making his way back to the bed.



The good news is that the new guy, McNulty, rested peacefully since he was brought in. By 7:30 Arnold was watching the news for a while, as contentedly as he could be in his frustrating predicament, until his wife called. Arnold picked up his cell phone and spoke in low tones in deference to his new roommate.

“I know, honey, I still can’t believe it either. If they just did it, and got it over with, I’d be fine, it’s this waiting that’s the killer. ... Ah hon, I’m sorry, really I am, I didn’t mean “killer”. ... It’s okay, Mary, I’m going to be fine,” he said with more confidence than he felt. “It’s a simple procedure,” he hoped. “How are you, do you have this flu? It’s all over the news already. ... Oh, okay, good. You stay home today, don’t go out. I’m fine, there’s nothing happening here, and I don’t want you to catch this bug. ... Better yet, get into the storm shelter. ... Yes, I mean it, and take your pills with you. Promise me? ... Good. Okay, I love you. Bye.”

Hands folded behind his head, Arnold relaxed in bed, addressing Mr. McNulty in a whisper.

“Well, McNulty, old man, it’s just you and me for the duration. I’m glad you don’t talk much. Rest well.”

After dressing, reading half of a mediocre novel and watching a game show, around 12:30 Arnold was bored enough to simply pace around the room for something to do. He was hopeful physical movement would snap him out of his boredom. After an unsuccessful 25 minutes of this, a harried café worker came into the room, a tray in each hand. The food on the trays was so carelessly slopped on Arnold wondered for a moment if any of the cataract patients were kitchen volunteers. Still, unappetizing as it may have looked, Arnold was grateful for the food and for the break in tedium the lunch signaled. The café worker was an olive-skinned man, possibly Sicilian; he was in his 30s and stood only about five feet tall but was powerfully built. He had a close-cropped haircut which reminded Arnold of state troopers, but most of Arnold’s concerned attention was attracted to



the white mask over the man's nose and mouth, especially as the man looked tired enough to possibly be sick.

"Okay, here ya go!" the man said.

"About time! What's happening out there, man? I've called and called on the bell, and no one's answering. I was about to go out and find someone."

"Oh no, you can't do that!" the café man said. "Didn't anyone tell you? The flu has spread in the hospital, only essential people like me can go room to room. You leave here, man, you'll be quarantined with the sick ones! And, brother, you don't want that. Besides," the man added, "we're so short-handed we're asking all relatively healthy patients like yourself to help the sicker ones. So if you could please feed your roommate, we would really appreciate it, and I'm sure he would," the man said, pointing to the insensate Mr. McNulty. Annoyed, but knowing it was his moral duty, Arnold took up a spoon, and shook McNulty's shoulder gently to wake him. Thankfully, Mr. McNulty was as placid when awake as he was asleep.

"Stay in here. Really, it's hell out there," the café man said as he prepared to leave. "This ain't no flu, it's a plague. But don't worry, we haven't forgotten about you. Just stay calm, Mr. Willis, don't strain your heart."

After feeding Mr. McNulty and himself, Arnold turned on the television to, as his grandfather said, see what's all the hub bub, bub. Normally, the insipid talking heads on the news gave him a sense of ease, because nothing that important could be filled with the self-importance that most newscasters carried themselves with conveyed to the news. Unnervingly, Arnold didn't detect a trace of it today.

"—disease spreading throughout eastern United States. People are warned to stay indoors. The CDC has declared an official pandemic, while —"

Arnold tried another channel.

"—toll is now in the thousands. The National Guard has been ordered to quarantine whole areas of infected. While no group has claimed responsibility, terrorism has not been excluded as the source —"

Arnold tried again.

"Ooh, I did shoot a pitty tat!" a cartoon bird said.

"Your deteshtable!" said a cartoon cat, mildly on fire.

"Well," Arnold said, "that's better." When the show ended a half hour later, Arnold sighed. "Now back to the unreality." Arnold clicked again.

"—president has accepted the Nobel Prize for Health, awarded for his blowing his nose in a tissue during his first five minutes in office. In his acceptance speech, he told the world this current outbreak is nothing to worry about, and that ATMs could be responsible for the lack of health to go around. Separately, the first animal infections of the new disease, now being called the 'Neo-Black Plague' have been reported this morning, showing it isn't just a human disease. When asked for comment the administration has no information and while has no clear response to this crisis, told us that they were sure things would be fine if we just hoped enough."

Feeling queasy, and sure it wasn't the earlier hospital food, Arnold clicked away. This time he got a local news channel, remarkable for the fact that it was broadcasting at 4 and not 5 and that the anchors, an Asian woman and White man didn't look very made up and showed signs of stress personally.

"We have received reports that flu victims are reviving after a state that looks like death," the Asian woman said. "People are warned to...to not call an ambulance if they believe a loved one has died, and merely wait up to four hours for a recovery. ... Hunter, can that be right?"

"Yes, Kimmie," the White announcer said, "that is correct. I checked it myself."

"To hell with this!" Arnold yelled, snapping off the television and throwing down the remote, startling Mr. McNulty. Grabbing his overnight bag from under the bed, Arnold changed into jeans and a flannel shirt and blessed his wife's overworrying heart when he saw she put his light jacket in the bag even though it was mid-June. He wrapped the jacket around his neck. It wasn't a hospital germ mask, but it would have to do. Looking over, he saw McNulty looking at him kindly.

"Okay, George, no one's come for hours or answering the bell. You stay here, hold down the fort. I'm going to find someone; I'll be back for you, pal." Affixing the jacket over his mouth and nose, Arnold opened the door, marched through, and closed the door firmly behind him, making sure it was locked to safeguard McNulty. Arnold's room was at the head of a T-intersection of the hospital hallways. As he stood there, Arnold could see down all three hallways for some distance. What he smelled and saw made his weary heart jump.

The smell was a pervading stench of rot and feces in the hallway. Unfortunately, this was not like rotten food nor milk, and not like a regular bathroom interlude. Rather, it was the stench of roadkill left in the sun, and of a similarly sunny horse stall uncleaned for a week mixed with soiled old folks home. There wasn't a lot of air movement in the halls, but when the air did move, Arnold almost wished it hadn't. Something was almost familiar about the decay, and it took a moment for Arnold's brain to remember what it was. It was the same smell, many more times powerful, that he smelled behind the camphor and formaldehyde at his uncle's funeral six months ago. His uncle, poor soul, was a bachelor and wasn't found for a full day after he passed away.

"Son of a bitch. 'Flu' my ass..." he thought, not daring yet to open his mouth. Ahead of him, to the left, and the right, the halls were filled with...patients, if you could call them that. Oh, a few were coughing, and fewer were lying deathly still, but the majority were alert and moving. They were trying to walk or crawl away, insensible to the fact that they were strapped or chained to cots, or even chained to radiator pipes and door handles. The worst were the ones chained to gurney legs because they made some progress, pathetic and circular though it may have been, because they might actually cause someone harm in the arc they were able to reach.

They were people of all shapes and sizes, but for all their differences were frighteningly similar. They were awake but none were fully alert. Their skins were an ashen pallor, most showing festering wounds in one or two places. Most were slack-jawed and there wasn't a shortage of drool on their clothes. Some, Arnold noted (and though he didn't need any more convincing, if he did this would be it), were missing limbs or had clawed their intestines out, but continued to ambulate as if they didn't even notice. But the worst of it all was their eyes. Every last one of them, without exception, had a thick white glaze over their irises and pupils. It looked as if they had full blinding cataracts, making sight impossible. However, Arnold knew that when they turned their heads toward him in passing, he most definitely was seen by these eyes. But that wasn't the end of the fear. Equally frightening, or possibly moreso, was the fact that Arnold could look back into these eyes and see that there wasn't anything behind them. If the poet was right and the eyes are the windows to the soul, these then were vacant houses indeed.

"...these are the undead!" Arnold thought. Sloughing against the doorframe, Arnold massaged his chest with one hand, irrationally trying to slow his rapid heartbeat with his hand, while breathing through his mouth, slowly.

"Calm down, old boy, calm down," he told his heart. "That's right," he cooed to his heart as it slowed.

"Okay, then. First things first," he murmured to himself. Looking down the hallway ahead of him, Arnold saw something he'd need.

Straightening up, Arnold moved down the hall directly ahead of him, as close to the plumb center of the hall as he could, and as evenly paced as possible to fool the noisome predators all around him. Some of the zombies noticed him and feebly tried to reach him, but most did not take notice. Reaching the mop and bucket he saw from his room doorway, Arnold grabbed the mop and pulled it away in a smooth motion. Luckily the mop was almost dry.

"This will do, for now," he thought. A few paces later a thin zombie with a thin red beard and widow's peak noticed Arnold and for no discernible reason lunged for Arnold.

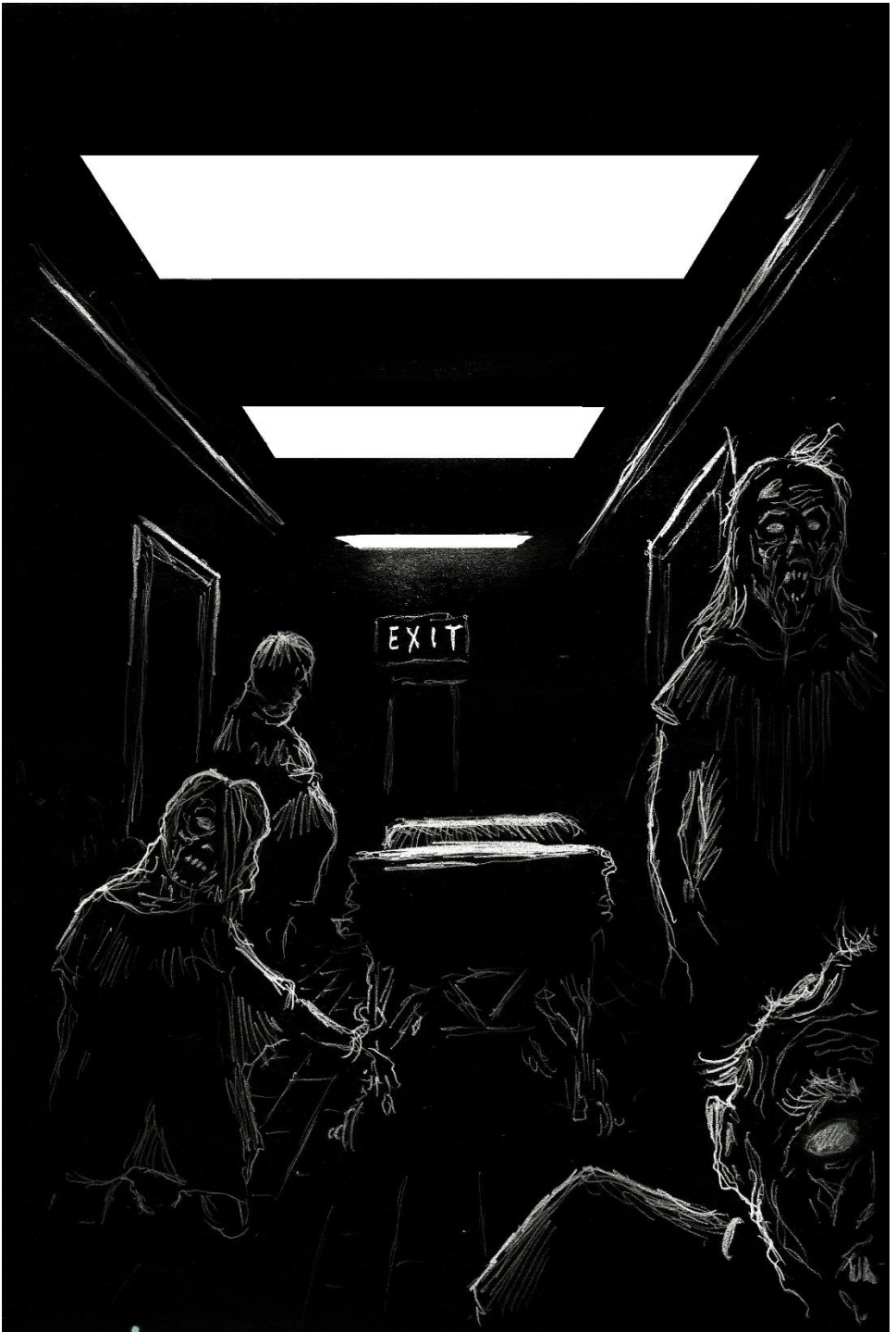
"Nnrrgrraa —!"

Moving swiftly, Arnold pulled the mop up and forward, using one arm as a fulcrum and the other to shove. The mop caught the zombie full in the nose and mouth, pushing him back.

"Ah, shut up, you," Arnold told it. Reflexively, Arnold thought to himself that he was glad reality hadn't hit him yet, and his mind then made a conscious effort to push reality away again, or else dissolve into a screaming mess who couldn't move.

After the first couple of tries it became relatively easy for Arnold to whack tied-up zombies out of his way as he made his way down the halls. After that, it almost became fun for Arnold. He began to talk to the zombies that he had to deal with, adding insult to injury.

"Nice job, how much did they cost?" he asked one female zombie with big blonde hair, body rotting everywhere except her perfect, shining plasticky breasts.



"I pity the fool who gets in my way," he told another one, a Black man who, with half his cranium gone, looked like he was sporting a Mohawk.

"And you shut up, and you, and you need to move it, and especially you, Meathead," he called to two groaning zombies as he mopped them aside, then to one missing legs and another who reminded him of a young Rob Reiner for some reason he couldn't put his finger on. Then again, neither could the zombie, seeing as it no longer had any fingers.

By the time Arnold came into his fourth hall, he was feeling confident and even smiling a little.

"Piece of....cake?" His last word trailed off, and with it, his confidence for, as he turned the corner into this new hall he saw two new zombies at the other end of the hall which were different than the others. They were different because they were unchained. The two zombies, both men, were once a security guard and nurse respectively, and one still clung to his taser and the other to surgical knives, even if their brains weren't aware of that anymore. What the zombies were aware of, however, was how hungry they were....and of Arnold.

Turning, Arnold ran for his life back down the hallway he just came from. One quickly stolen glance over his shoulder confirmed Arnold's worst fears: the two undead were definitely chasing him. One saving grace from God, Arnold noticed in that split-second look, was that the zombies were able to lope along if they tried, but seemed unable to fully run. "Must be the rigor mortis setting in," a corner of Arnold's brain noted to help keep his panic in check. The security guard was in front of the nurse, "but that only stood to reason as the guard must have been more used to running in life," noted this same cranial corner. Arnold now used the mop as a hockey stick, shoving the tied up zombies out of his way like putrid hockey pucks. His heart thundered against his chest.

Looking ahead, Arnold saw one of the tied up zombies had managed to free himself of his chain (and the waist and legs that went with it) and had put himself in the center of the hall, right in Arnold's way. Desperate, Arnold turned the mop around to use the top of the handle like a sword and, hands midway up the shaft, he "sliced downward" while hoping that the zombie's head was decayed enough to collapse under a hard, sharp blow. Arnold was rewarded not only by the skull caving in but sinking the mop handle almost down to the zombie's nose, making the former head look like a gory, miniature parting of the Red Sea, complete with staff of Moses. It was a moment before Arnold registered the heavy thud that told him his luckiest break, if not a true miracle, had indeed occurred behind him. As Arnold arced the mop handle downward in front of him, the mop head behind him came up, catching the zombie security guard in the knees. The speed with which the zombie was loping caused the mop head to push the guard back as it severed the zombie's legs at the knees. The legs went flying backward, and the zombie's trunk fell straight down then fell backward on impact with the ground and mop head, landing the zombie on his back, just out of reach of Arnold. Looking over his shoulder again, Arnold's heart squeezed hard once then released as he appreciated what just happened.

Grabbing the closest gurney that, except for the zombie strapped firmly onto the bed, was void of other zombies, he twirled it around to block the hallway and the still pursuing orderly and then dropped to pull the gun away from the floundering security guard.

"Ha!" Arnold exclaimed as he worked the gun free, taking care to pull the index finger out of the trigger guard once he stood up again, not bothering to free the mop pinned under the legless zombie guard. Noticing a door marked "exit" to his left, Arnold made for it. Before he could reach it, he saw another zombie, a tall strong-looking zombie in overalls crossing the hall ahead of him. Instantly he pushed into the nearest room to avoid detection. Slamming the door, he waited a minute or more, and, when he was sure the zombie didn't notice him and kept on going, breathed a sigh of relief.

"Hello," said a voice behind him.

Arnold's heart pounded through his ribs as he spun and nearly shot a man, a living human, who was sitting upright in a chair by the window in the room.

"Woah, woah, man!" the other man said, hands up like in an old Western, "don't shoot, I didn't do it!"

"Oh, God! You nearly scared the life out of me!" Arnold said.

"Yeah, guess so," the sitting man said. "But then again, from what I've seen out my window, these are crazy times."

"Y-Yeah," was all Arnold could say.

"I'm Mike," the sitting man said.

"Arnold."

"Pleased to meet you," Mike said. "How are things out there?"

"In-insane. Unbelievable. They —they're the undead. Zombies! All — just all over," Arnold replied, now shaking at the sound of what he was saying.

"Yeah," said Mike, quietly, "I figured."

"Well," Arnold said, swallowing hard, "now that I'm here, do you want to come along? With me I mean? I've only got the one gun, but it can protect the both of us."

"Afraid not, Arnold."

"What?" Arnold said incredulously. "Whyever not?"

"Apparently you're not too observant," Mike said, pointing to his wheelchair in the corner of the room.

"Oh....oh, God, I...I'm sorry, I don't know what to do..." Arnold began.

"Oh, there's not much *to* do," Mike said in a peaceful calm. "It's fairly obvious. I've thought it through these past few days. You can't take me with you. I weigh 170. I'm sure things are quite troubling enough for you. I'd likely just ensure your death as I would my own if we tried it."

"Then —then what —?" Arnold was confused.

"I had settled in to the idea of drinking enough water from the tap over there, if I could manage it," Mike said. "Little known but true fact: drinking too much water too fast can lead to death. But now, my friend, I have been brought

your intercession. You have no idea how happy I am to see you,” Mike said, staring at Arnold’s gun.

Arnold finally understood.

“No...no. It...it would be murder!”

“Not if you give the gun to me,” Mike said evenly. “Please.”

“But...but it would still be —“

“Give me the fucking gun!” Mike screamed. “I don’t want to die any slower than I have to, and certainly not by being eaten to death!!”

Shocked, Arnold walked over mechanically and tossed the gun into Mike’s lap.

“There,” Mike said, calmly again, “that wasn’t so hard. I assure you, you’re doing me a merciful service. Turn away and cover your ears, please.”

Arnold did as he was asked.

A moment later, ears ringing, Arnold picked up the gun again from where Mike had dropped it, trying not to look at the mess on the wall and window. Still dazed, Arnold checked the hallway carefully, and quietly left the room.



Making his way down the hall silently, Arnold went through the exit door he had seen earlier and came to a stairwell. His shock wearing off, he began running down the steps. He could tell his heart was slower now, but still faster than it should have been. He began to pray silently as he made the second landing down.

“Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven....”

On the fourth landing, Arnold chanced a door because, looking down the stairwell, he saw it terminated in dark concrete and not the exit he had hoped for. If he had to get through the first floor, he might as well try this one, he reasoned, because who knew which floor was more vacant than others? He couldn’t see any zombies through the door’s rectangular glass pane, and hoped that view was true. Immediately on walking into the fourth floor hall he wished he hadn’t. What he couldn’t see through the door were the three zombies crouched on the floor, feasting on an unlucky patient. The wet chomps, pulling noises and diffusion of blood made for a scene so horrifying, Arnold couldn’t turn from it. Covered in the black gore of their infernal banquet was a little Japanese girl, no more than seven; a thin White man, still wearing the remains of glasses on his iris-less face, and the heavy Black nurse who spoke to Arnold that morning. He was still praying aloud without knowing it, until he saw one of the zombies stop eating and wait...as if listening for something.

“—Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our....death....” Looking around quickly, Arnold noticed a door just a few steps ahead of him, on the left side of the hallway. Without thinking about it, he ran and ducked into the door, without even bothering to read the stenciled words on

the frosted glass, just as the zombies were beginning to turn their heads towards him.

“Safe!” his mind cried out to him as, in reaction, his heart began to jackhammer, knowing it now had a moment’s rest where his body could react to the insanity around him. Through the pain and the cold, Arnold kept sitting flush up against the inside of the door to keep quiet and to use his body as a door brace. He kept his eyes locked on the frosted glass portion of the door, gun at the ready, for any signs of zombie shadow. Once or twice he saw shadows pass, moving toward the stairway where the three zombies thought he was still in, and then again as they moved away and others shambled through. Each time he saw a shadow move by his heart leapt again, causing Arnold to bite his tongue and lips lest he grunt or cry out in pain. After a while there were no more shadows on the other side of the glass and his body finally began to relax. His breathing became more ragged, gasping in air, as he felt his heart finally calm down. First only a bit, then more...a bit more, a spike! in reaction to a sound, but then moving down, down..down....the.....adrenaline.....line.....into rest. Slumping now, Arnold felt safe enough for a moment to even close his eyes, to both feel his resting body more and clear his mind of the horrors of the day.

Thmp!....Thmp!

Thmp! Thmp! Bam! Wham!

Arnold snapped his eyes open in shock, his pulse skyrocketing again, as he realized those noises were coming not from the hall but from inside the darkened room! His eyes adjusted to the dusky room, he looked down the large room to see that after a few feet it was filled, on both left and right sides, with drawer after drawer of bodies. He didn’t question the cold before now. Arnold looked up at the frosted glass on the door and finally read the stenciled letters: EUGROM. Morgue.

“Oh...God...” Arnold whispered.

Throwing open the door, Arnold made a mad dash across the hall to the next nearest door he could find. In his terror, Arnold didn’t notice the floor was now empty of zombies, as he threw open the nearest door on the opposite side of the hall (not labeled with any words this time, Arnold noted) and slammed it behind him. Miraculously, this office door had a lock on it which could be locked from the inside, something Arnold took immediate advantage of. This time standing up against the door, heart hammering, Arnold alertly looked around this new room. He saw it was an empty administrative office, so small it was for just one doctor. There was a big desk on the far end of the room, a filing cabinet that stood in line with the door in the middle of the room, its side facing the door, and a coat tree diagonal the door with a few lab coats and a hat on its pegs. Having made sure there was nothing in this room to be afraid of, Arnold gaze rested on the full length mirror that was glued to the filing cabinet.

Arnold got a bit of a shock looking in the mirror, because for the first moment he didn’t recognize his own face. Haggard, strained and pale with fright,



Arnold took a moment to calm down again. In those moments, his eyes were fixed on the mirror.

His legs, which carried him miles running after college when living in his first real apartment, were shaking and seemed so thin.

"So slow. I—I'm just not fast anymore."

His stomach, hovering over his legs like a deflated balloon, once followed up straight. Where did all that weight come from?

"It's just—how did—how did I let myself get this way?" He tried to keep exercising once his career took off, but the more overtime he put in the less time he had. That time became nothing after his kids were born. He saw that every moment then was a nail in his coffin now.

His once-developed arms sloughed at the top before whittling down to forearms just better than padded sticks. Those arms that had lifted so much weight in high school and now felt the weight of a simple gun.

"Weak."

And again those jowls just now developing at his jaw taunted him again.

"Old. ....Oh, Mary, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

How had it gone so wrong? How did he let himself live so that he needed surgery at this age? How did age do this to him without his seeing it? Looking at the man who was running for his life, running slowly through the pulling tide of time and soft living, and remembering the man he had been was suddenly too much. Slumping against the door now for support instead of defense, Arnold knew he could blame no one but himself. His heartbeat slowed, and not from relaxation.

Arnold cleared his head suddenly and straightened up, heartbeat firm. No time for regret now. Now he had to get home to Mary; broken and old as he was, he still loved her, and that counted for something. Going over to the office window, he looked out and down. It was still a sunny day without a cloud in the sky, thankfully. He was only three floors up (the last floor in the stairwell must have been to the basement, he thought) overlooking a small parking lot. There was even a swathe of grass and a young tree almost directly below the window. But he didn't notice the tree at first, his attention taken instead by the dead man outstretched in the parking lot, disemboweled and clearly chewed on.

"Poor bastard...." Arnold thought. His thought of the victim were cut off suddenly when Arnold caught a glint of sunlight at the top of the body next to a small dark shape. Arnold's eyes were still good enough to make out the car keys in the dead man's hand. "Oh, please—! Thank you, Lord Jesus, and have mercy on that man's soul!" he thought, rapturously. Putting the gun in the back of his waistband and taking the lab coats from the coat tree, Arnold made an impromptu rope, secured one end to the desk, after pulling the desk to the window as quietly as he could. Making sure no one was around, Arnold shimmied down the rope, friction burning his hands and, strangely enough, halfway down the rope, flashing on the Adam West Batman show of his youth. At the end of the lab coat rope, Arnold had to drop about four feet to the ground. He held his breath in

preparation to let go; not so much in anticipation of the pain but to prevent him from making noise on landing and attracting any roaming undead.

With a muffled grunt, he landed on the grass. Pulling out the gun again, Arnold ran to the dead body and snatched up the car keys. He was seized with a moment of panic when he looked down the parking lot aisles to see it filled with cars until he remembered the car alarm remote on the keychain. Looking around swiftly, Arnold knew he had to risk it.

Bee-boo! Bee-boo! Whooo-oop! Whooo-oop! Eegh! Eegh! Egh! Egh!

The alarm sounded ridiculously loud in the quiet lot. The car was only a third of the way down the aisle which was lucky for Arnold for, sure enough, the alarm also alerted two zombies to his presence; one who came up from the grass on the far side of the cars to Arnold's right and the other between two cars on the far end of the parking lot. Arnold ran for the car, his finger hitting the alarm button again to stop the noise lest more zombies appear to add to the two now loping directly towards him and at the two o'clock position from the grass. Thankfully, the zombie in the grass, though closer to him, had trouble negotiating the parked cars. Once freed of the cars it was a mere ten feet away from Arnold. Thinking even he couldn't miss, Arnold aimed and fired, hitting the zombie right in the head. Recovering from the recoil and the sharp pain in his arms and shoulders, heart hammering, Arnold made it to the car and got in, slamming the door as the other zombie came into view in the car's rearview mirror. Painfully turning the key in the ignition, Arnold grabbed the shift and stabbed at the gas pedal, running over the second zombie in reverse. Hitting the car directly behind him stopped Arnold's reverse progress and, shifting once more (but not as painfully as the first time), Arnold drove for all he was worth.

Driving through town, Arnold saw that things were worse than he had first thought. Stores were broken into, there were precious few on the streets and the people he saw were all panicked if not running away. He didn't know if it was the sound of the car doing that, but he didn't think so. Most streets were devoid of cars thankfully though he'd watched enough movies to not even bother risking the highway or even the main roads like Route 926. Firmly sticking to town roads and side streets he made it home and only had to drive on the grass three or four times to get around abandoned cars. He turned on to his street slowly, to lower the noise and also to search the area well for any random zombies. Seeing a clear path all the way to his house, he accelerated quickly and made a fast turn into his drive and cut the engine. Finally being home sent his heart leaping into his throat with relief and love that he had made it, and fear that he had a house to come home to, but no longer a home. He sat listening a moment through the slightly opened windows, heard nothing, and cautiously got out.

He went up to the front door and tried the knob. Thankfully it was still locked. He saw the windows were boarded up and was about to open the door with his keys until he thought to check the back door as well. No use in making it all this way just to walk in and be taken down by zombies in his living room who came through the back door.

As quietly and quickly as he could, he circled his house and up the three deck steps. Crossing lightly lest there be a zombie under the deck (though even he thought he was being a bit paranoid now) he gently tried the back door. Also locked. Confidently opening the door, he stepped inside. Not wanting to call out to his wife above speaking voice in fear of attracting attention, Arnold walked through every room. The house was deserted. He stopped the cold feeling in his mind by reminding himself of his own directions to Mary to get into the storm shelter. Leaving the house after packing a briefcase, and taking care to lock the door, Arnold made it to the storm doors in the back yard unnoticed. He tried twice to open the doors unsuccessfully and then, looking around nervously and licking his suddenly dry lips, he knew he had to call out to her.

"Mary! Open up! It's me!"

A scabbling sound followed by clicks and a dragging of chains inside alerted Arnold to stand back so his wife (or whoever was in there) could open the doors. The doors flew open and Arnold's heart almost stopped in relief to see his wife standing inside.

"Oh, Arnie!" she said as she began to cry.

Arnold came in quickly and resecured the door. Then turning to his wife, he looked at her, just to see her again. Her small lensed glasses were crooked on her face and she had a mark near her ear. Her bun hairdo was disheveled but still loosely intact. She was his age but not overweight at all due to her (to him) superior genetic make-up. But at the moment she looked wan and on the edge of nervous exhaustion.

"Oh, I thought—I thought—" she began, crying again.

"There, there, everything's okay. I'm too stubborn to kill," he said, taking her in his arms. He knew then that no matter what happened outside, everything would be all right.

"You didn't have the surgery?" she said dazedly after calming down.

"No. Didn't have the time, all of the zombies were ushered in first as patients," he told her. "Good thing too, in retrospect. I mean, it would have been harder to run wheeling a couple IVs and all," he said with a tired smile.

"Did you meet anyone else? Is the tide turning?" she asked. Arnold stayed silent.

"But then...what if..." she said, almost crying again.

"Hey," he mildly rebuked, "no 'what if'. I really think that takes a back seat to what's going on out there. We have to think in terms of tomorrow, day by day, not in terms of a 'what if'. We have three months' food here, right?" She nodded. "But even if it does," he continued, "then it does. But even if so," he continued opening the briefcase and showing her all of the medication and poisons he could find in the house, "I've already gotten it taken care of."

The snow in the Willis' back yard was untouched. Covering the ground in a smooth blanket, it seemed to wash away the horror of the summer months in cool sterility and enveloping silence. Then, slowly, a rhythmic crunching was heard. As it drew closer, three zombies entered the back yard, foraging for food and scarring the snow with each shaky step. One zombie turned his head as he caught a scent. It sniffed once, twice.

"Uuurr... " it called, catching the scent of food, bloody saliva dripping from its shredded mouth. It slowly veered its shambling path to the right to get to the storm doors jutting out from the ground. The other two followed the first.

The first one began banging on the doors, shaking the snow off in the effort. Then the other two zombies joined in the assault, having also caught the scent until, after two hours' work, they had punched in the doors completely, and the left side door fell off the hinge with an icy crack and shriek of metal. The second zombie half-fell, half-climbed in followed by the others.

"Grraaa!"

Inside the storm cellar, a single bare bulb still burned. The monsters saw two figures lying in the bed at the rear of the shelter, arms wrapped around each other for warmth. The first zombie licked its teeth in anticipation, its lips having rotted away completely long ago. Pushing the second zombie out of the way, he moved forward to be the first to feast on the prize it had discovered. But, moving forward, its face fell, it's hollow, iris-less eyes showing the despair of hunger unsatiated. It sniffed again, for confirmation. The other two did the same, and similar expressions of disappointment crossed their hellish faces.

Arnold and Mary lie there on a pile of bedding, pillows lining the crease where the two cots they pushed together met. Wrapped in each other's arms, they were peaceful in death, not even rotted much due to the cold, empty ration tins and pill bottles strewn everywhere. But the monsters could now smell the poison that flooded the carcasses, something they couldn't smell before. With rage and what could be called sadness to the hungry beasts, they turned and shuffled away.

## ∴ TWISTED SOUL

— Liam Webb

May 26, 1904

To Whom It May Concern:

If you are reading this, you have found the journals and papers I have left here under the flagstones of the fireplace of this cottage. I have tried to make their presence under the turned stone as obvious as I could to someone looking at the fireplace for some time, presumably someone staying here, without making them overly obvious so some vagrant or mischievous child who passes by could disturb them. Please read the enclosed with openness and sincerity. Know that I do not smoke, drink, or otherwise engage in drugs of any kind. I am a veteran of the Spanish American War but never had shell shock, have any history of mental illness, nor is there any history in my family. I must tell you, a stranger who comes after me, these things with frankness or else you may not believe the truth of the situation. I must tell you who find this of the unbelievable events that have happened here, so that you may be better prepared: you will not need to reinvestigate the same information I had to, nor will you make the same mistakes I made. I sincerely pray you do not.

Rather than try to convince you directly, I have enclosed a transcribed copy of my journal, altered only when an explanatory note was needed for comprehension. I apologize for my lack of grace in form. Until this evening, I hadn't intended it to be read by anyone but a future self. Thank you.

—Jim Adler

May 19, 1904

I have finally made it to the cottage. The trip from school (*Trinity College Dublin*) was beautiful if uneventful. The ship was slow, but what was I to expect from a cattle steamer? (*The ship transfers cattle from the United Kingdom to Europe*). Still, it was no comparison to the ship I rode serving under Gen. Shafter in Cuba (*I volunteered for the V Corp in 1898 when still 17. I caught a bullet in the right shin at Las Guasimas which has left me with a slight limp and some pain in cold weather, but that is all. Never made it to San Juan Hill due to my injury nor did I get to meet Mr. Roosevelt, but all the same I'm glad the old man has done well for himself. My military pension helped pay my tuition soon after I left the service*). Landing in Saint-Nazaire, France, I took a coach and stayed a night in Nantes. Fun town. I must see Evette again when I return. A day's travel by train landed me in Strasbourg, on the German border. It was odd to hear people converse by asking

something in French and be answered in German, with both understanding it, but that is life on the border, I suppose. I met a genial man at the pub that night, Alphonse I believe his name was. He said he had not had a day's schooling since grammar school, but after talking with him, I believe was more learned than many professors I have met. I told him I was summering in the Black Forest before I "settled down" to the grind of med school and I was impressed that he asked me my opinion on only two of his ailments. Usually when people find out that I am a medical student, they give themselves license to chat the night away about their maladies, real or otherwise. Ah well.

He inquired why I, an American with pronounced Irish features, should vacation in Germany. With a bit of sudden guilt I told him that while I have always been very proud of my father's Irish heritage, I had rather neglected my maternal side and visiting with it may do me some good as well. He understood and, much to my relief, quickly changed the subject. We spent the rest of the evening debating the comparative merits of Roosevelt and how and if he is following McKinley's policies well enough.

The next morning I made the crossing into Germany. In this area, I felt it was not all that different from going from one state to the next in America, though I was given a friendly reminder of the difference in law by the border guard. Boarding another train in Kehl, Germany, I traveled to Achern and from there loaded my bags onto a coach for Hundsbach. My first impression of the Black Forest was all that I wanted it to be. Lush greenery shining under a sunny day did my heart good and rewarded my weariness of travel. There were not as many trees as I had expected, but of course this is the developed area of town, I reminded myself. And I must remember to thank my grandfather again for the cottage. Though we did come by it at an outrageously low price, I still appreciate his half of the funds for this trip as his graduation gift.

At the Hundsbach bed and breakfast, a small but cozy place, I asked the innkeeper, Olaf, if I could get driven out to the cottage.

"Depends," he said. "How far?"

"Seven miles south," I replied in my rough German.

"Fine," he said almost curtly, "I'll have my brother-in-law take you mid-morning."

I almost thought Olaf had forgotten about it due to his gruff demeanor in speaking with me, but sure enough, at 10:30 that morning a portly, unshaven man showed up with a small, shabby brougham.

"You are the American traveler?" the driver asked, wiping tobacco juice from the side of his mouth.

When I told him I was he unceremoniously hopped down from his seat and hefted my trunk to the top of the carriage in one sturdy motion. At first I thought he might harm my things, but surprisingly he placed it on the carriage roof with a gentleness not to be expected of one of his gait and general uncleanliness. I put my valise and food packages in the cab, got in myself, and off

we went. After about three miles where we saw less homes and increasingly more trees there was a fork in the road and he asked me which way to turn.

"Turn right," I told him, consulting my map. At that he made a grunt which was half a noise of derision and half a grunt of "suit yourself". After another mile I told him to make the next left. He stopped the carriage.

"You're staying in the Deutschendorf cottage?" the driver, whose name was Johann, asked, and he stared at me as if sizing me for something.

"Yes, that is it. You know the way, then?" I asked.

"Yes," and with that, he turned forward in his seat, flicked the reins and we were off again in silence. Johann said nothing more until we arrived at the cottage. The cottage was of modest size; two floors with what looked like two rooms per floor from the outside. The cottage was off a dirt road; not a problem today, but I am sure the place would be impassable in winter. The tree line (*to our left as we rode in*), which looked to start the forest in earnest, began fifty or so meters from the back of the place, and in front of it (*to our right as we rode in*) was a wide, gently sloping field that stretched almost a thousand meters in all three directions. Johann brought the brougham to a halt.

"We're here," Johann announced unnecessarily.

I got out of the carriage and walked up to the door. Thankfully the key, which was mailed to me by the letting agent, fit the door just fine. I noted with surprise that even if the key had not fit, it would not have been a problem; when I turned the key I felt the door was unlocked. I caught myself in my surprise, realizing that locked doors in such a remote area were probably not the most effective deterrent: if a thief had decided on entering there was no one to stop him, and by trekking out this far, a thief would almost deserve some reward for the hike. It was such a nice, tidy place. I was relieved; part of me thought there would be something wrong with the place considering the price of the rental. But it all looked water tight, snug as a bug. I turned to go back to the coach to help Johann with the trunk, but he was standing only a few paces behind me with the trunk in hand and I watched as he brought it to the doorstep.

"Here, let me help you get that around the door," I said, moving forward.

"No," Johann said, and he unceremoniously put the trunk down on the stoop, and turned to go.

"Surely, I can make you some coffee or tea? It's a long way back," I called after him.

"The sooner I get back the better," he called out after seating himself. "Good luck and God bless," he called as he whipped the horses up. I note that he said that because I thought it was so odd to say. With nothing else for it, I picked up the trunk and got it inside the door. Before bringing the trunk further, I decided to have a look around the house, so as to know where to properly place the trunk. The cottage had, to my surprise, not two but four rooms per floor, with a central hallway running down the length of the house. At the front of the cottage, on the left (*as you walked in, facing the interior from the door*), just beyond the door to the left side front room, was a staircase leading up. Now, I said I was

surprised to see extra rooms (*I noticed the next day from outside the cottage was fifty per cent bigger than I first thought it was in the waning twilight*), but I was truly shocked when I noticed that in the hallway, under the stairs, was yet another door. There was a root cellar to the cottage, and it was deeper than I would have at first expected. There were ten stairs leading down. Going down, I found the cellar had not been wired for light yet (*nor now do I think it will ever be*) and there was precious little light down there coming from the open door above me. There wasn't anything in the basement but some loose boards and a boiler in the far corner, squatting there like a huge toad wearing a crown of pipes. I was just about to go back up to get Ryan's torch (*my brother, Ryan, had earlier sent me a torch — they're called flashlights in America and I note I used the European expression at first; I've been here long enough, it seems — as a birthday gift. He works for the Edison company and is always into the newest gadgets whatever they may be*) when I froze. I heard a noise as if someone breathed in behind me, a scuffling by my feet and then a metallic screech as the door began to swing shut above me. Never have I moved as fast as I did this afternoon. Of the ten stairs, my feet may have touched three. I caught the door as it was about to latch shut, tumbled through the door, and slammed it behind me. Once I caught my breath in the fading daylight I realized what an idiot I must have been to react that way. Looking closer at the door, I saw the lock was hopelessly broken and realized that my imagination coupled with the gloom and possibly odd acoustics must have made me think there was something else in there with me as I heard my own breath rebound. The scuffling may have been made by a mouse or, more likely from the depth of tone, by a rat, but even a rat would not be much trouble in the long run. Still feeling ridiculous but not foolhardy, I decided to examine the other rooms.

The sitting room and living room occupied the front of the house, with the kitchen on the right and bath on the left at the rear on the ground floor. Upstairs were two bedrooms in the back of the house, and two rooms at the front. Except for furnishings the two upstairs front rooms could be extra bedrooms. One was done up as a study with a desk, small fireplace and bookcases sparsely populated with older books. The second room, the room to the left (*this time I meant the relative left while standing inside, facing the front of the house*) had no furnishings of any kind. I feel that this room would be the best place to store my trunk, once I can get it up the stairs. I am at the desk in the study now, writing this, having unpacked half of my things, mostly clothes and necessities. When the trunk is fully empty it will be easier to carry up the stairs. This should be a good summer, hiking and hunting in the Black Forest.

May 20, 1904

It is 5:30 in the morning. I am writing mostly to pass time until I can eat breakfast at a decent hour. I did not sleep well last night at all. The radiator in the



cottage was knocking about badly around two in the morning. I had turned it on only slightly to get the system going (*I didn't know how long the place sat empty before I came along and thought I felt a twinge in my leg anyway*) and to guard against unexpected temperature drops in this higher elevation. Still half-asleep, I fancied I had heard the sounds of animals, as if I were in the zoo. I could not make out what they were however, because the noise that awoke me was the incessant knocking of the heating pipes. After a moment when I roused to the point of realizing I was in bed and slowly waking, it almost sounded as if someone were banging on the pipes in bad rhythm. The full impact of this thought caught me a moment later and I sat bolt upright in bed the moment I realized, by chance or by some hellish influence, the knocking was in time, in Morse code in fact. It was actually two different codes, as if two people were trying to bang out two separate messages at the same time! It was so hard to concentrate to focus on one message over the other. The only words I could be sure I made out were "come", "run", and most chillingly, "kill". After that I would not go back to sleep even if I could.

I sat and listened for a long while (*or what felt like it*) after the banging stopped. I had almost convinced myself my drowsy brain had imagined it all when from nowhere I heard a horrendous animal screeching and growling, coming not only from outside but below me in the very house. Almost before those horrid sounds died out, the coded messages on the pipes began again. This time there was no doubt it was coded. Again it cut off abruptly, but this second cessation was not followed by the earlier silence but by an enraged wail. The sound was soft at first, so soft I thought my ears were ringing, but then it grew louder and louder as I lay there, fearing for my life. That it sounded as if the noise came from outside and not from within the house was my only salvation; had I thought otherwise I should have jumped out the bedroom window then and there.

As the wailing grew closer, as I shook (*that I shook at just this I now find almost quaint*) I screwed up my courage to raise my head slightly in order to see out the rear window. Just as I glimpsed the ground below the tree line at the far end of the property the wailing became much louder and there was a flash below me! I ducked my head fast, and the noise stopped. I remained there for the better part of a half hour, listening intently, all thought of sleep gone. Finally, a faint sense of security returned to me, and I got out of bed. I gingerly crossed the room, stopping for a minute or more whenever I should make even the slightest sound. At length I made it to the door. I put my hand to the knob and froze.

There was a distinct scrape, scrape, scraping noise from the floor below me, as well as a distinct light footstep. Rather than further frighten me, this had the opposite effect: believing I could take an intruder by surprise, I picked up my cricket bat and torch, flung the door open and, yelling at the top of my voice, leapt down the stairwell, landing with a resounding crash and swinging away. I hit nothing, and turned to continue my athletic assault through the rest of the house, when my shins collided with my trunk still in the front hall. This stopped me immediately, and at the same time turned the bat from a weapon to a cane. Recovering quickly, I forced myself to look into the all rooms on the first floor.

There was nothing there. I used the restroom and, satisfied I was mistaken about the whole thing, began to climb the stairs to go back to bed. As my foot touched the fourth stair I heard a guttural exhalation of air – a “hhrhh” sound, almost a snort – and saw the door to the cellar vibrate. I cannot say if it was rage or fear which made my injured legs move as fast as they did, but quicker than it takes to tell I had gone down and kicked the cellar door open, took one swing for my life, and flashed the light down the stairs in an attempt to blind my intruder. All rage fled in favor of fear when I saw the cellar empty. In shock, I ascended the stairs to my room, dressed, and have been in the front room since, door locked, bat by my side, waiting on the sun.

May 22, 1904

I must have been delusional the other day from fatigue. Certainly it was the travel and leftover nerves from finals and graduation which made me hallucinate all that rubbish (*if only this were true, but I believed it then*). This is a lovely cottage and wonderful area. The weather is almost perfect. I hiked the entire day yesterday, coming home only at dusk. Today I spent the morning in the cottage, finishing with my unpacking and reading some magazines, including some of *The Strand* I had collected but not read in my last months in school. And best of all, there was a Holmes story in the March and April issues, along with a bonus (*for me*) of a Wells story! Yes, I'm sure if my grandfather knew I was reading them he'd take his stick to me, but hell with it, this is my vacation. After lunch, I set out again. The fauna around here is a sight to see; in one day I came across a deer, an elk, and bagged two rabbits for dinner. And I slept like the dead last night.

May 23, 1904

Far be it from me to have “med student's disease” or late blooming shell shock as my nervous disorder is back; though I almost hope that is the case. If not, then God help me, I saw what I saw.

I was sitting in the living room last evening, watching the fire after a good meal of rabbit and decided to treat myself to some cheese. I had previously put what food I could in the cellar, since the icebox, while sturdy, had not been refilled with ice before my arrival. Taking a straw from the fireside, I lit a candle and took it with me. Since my adventure of the other day, I blocked the cellar door open with an iron I found in the house and kept by the door for the purpose. The cellar was packed earth and stone, and cooler than I had expected it to be. Even though I ran the boiler once or twice more during the late evenings, the cellar remained chill. At first I took this as a good sign, meaning all the heat went up through solid pipes and didn't escape down there. I made my way to the impromptu shelving unit I had cobbled together the other day from some loose boards and stone and

looked about for the cheese. It was hard to see as a draft from the open door made the candle gutter. It was too difficult to shield the candle and alternately move things when I took my hand away to search, so I had to just suffer with the poor light. The cheese was not where I remembered putting it and as I looked about I heard a soft scraping behind me. Normally mice do not bother me, but if this one had helped himself to my food, then I would have to take action. Just then I found the cheese, safe and unharmed. Turning to go, I heard fainter scraping on the floor to my right. Since the mouse (*as I had supposed*) had not harmed my food I decided to return the kindness and simply evict my little freeloader and turn him free outside that night instead of buying a trap later. Closing in on the sounds, I crept over, again shielding my candle, until I felt I was close enough, and, preparing to pounce, pulled my hand away in order to light the area and catch him. Instead I recoiled and jumped back, because in the light was not the mouse I had expected but a sour, human face, as black as the surrounding dirt, staring up at me from a limbless torso as it wiggled itself across the floor. As soon as my feet were solidly on the ground again I looked over to the floor to confront the person I saw, but, though the candle light was now strong, I saw no one. Sweeping the cellar with the light, and certain there was no one there and there could be no one there, I laughed at myself for my ridiculous fancies (*I was prone to laughter then as the sun hadn't yet fully set*) and went upstairs to enjoy my cheese.

After the cheese followed by some tea, I picked up my one of the magazines that I saved and read with gusto. I must have dozed off, because at the next moment, it was some time in the night and I heard that damnable wailing again. I was sure of it this time, and knowing I had some time yet due to its relative faintness, I ran and got my torch and bat and, thinking the sound came from the woods behind the house, went into the kitchen to wait it out. I had not long to wait. I had thought that it was coming from the rear of the house at first, but soon realized it was coming from the front. I had not gone more than two steps toward the front of the house when I saw the figure just inside my door coming at a run. It stopped, moving back and forth as if searching for something, and then it looked at me and bellowed a sound that chilled me to the bone. The sound hadn't faded away when it started running towards me. It looked like an older man, in his late 40s or early 50s, thin in the limbs but with a noticeable belly, balding on top with unkempt long hair at the sides of his head. It screamed from a blackened, cracked mouth under a long, disheveled handlebar mustache and a few days' stubble. He wore faded and torn black pants and a ripped and dirty red jacket. But his eyes were the most striking, as they were sunk so far into his head as nature could possibly allow. Confounded on what I should do next, so many possibilities were vying for attention in my mind, (*I wouldn't want to hurt him badly if he was insane; if he were not, should I try hailing him or fight him? Could he be in pain and need my help?*) I turned the torch on him, again in hopes of causing enough confusion in him to halt him, yet it did not stop him. As he came on in his rage, I dodged to the side and while doing so realized that the beam did not shine on him but instead

went through his body! Just as I had given myself up for lost and had begun to pray, the wailing apparition disappeared as it exited the house.

Numb at what I saw, I dropped the bat, and, clinging to the torch in disbelief, I shambled to the living room chair and dropped into it. I do not know how many times I turned the torch on and off at the fireplace, expecting the same miracle to happen again, this time with the light shining through the bricks, before I fell asleep.

As I slept I dreamt of a beautiful woman; slightly more than a girl, really. She was of equal height with me and slim, with dark hair and, from what I could see of her face behind her hair, porcelain features. We began speaking, of what I do not know, for I can't quite remember what she was saying. As I listened more intently I discovered I could hear a faint murmur, but of many voices. As I slowly awoke, though aware of my reclining position I was in that midway stage of consciousness where I could still hear the voices of what I supposed was my dream. Almost believing they were real, with half a thought I turned my head and shoulders to follow the sound. I looked upon the source, and, seeing, screamed.

What met my gaze as I turned in my chair was one of the most ghastly horrors I have ever witnessed; not for its alienness, but for its indisputable familiarity. At first all I saw were some shapes, as if some group of people a meter from me were milling about in the hallway going towards the kitchen. Still not fully awake, I initially gave a sleepy yet friendly "heey..." to the shapes instead of yelling at them or fighting them out of my cottage. But in response to my greeting, they turned to look at me, and I got my first clear vision of the ones nearest me. It was this first clear sight which caused me to scream: I have seen many cadavers on the table at school and was never bothered by it – even those poor souls who died violent deaths next to me in battle rarely gave me pause (*I mean here that I wasn't disturbed or nauseated by their physical condition. I mourned many friends their passing*) – I have just always had a strong stomach. But these – these twisted things, these horrors were all the more terrible for standing upright. They stood against all the laws of nature, they stood in defiance of the rationale of man. I fear to even recount it, but I must, or else think myself mad.

Of general shape they were human, or approximately so. Their coverings (*for I could not truly call them proper clothes*) were torn, mended, and torn again; yellowed, black encrusted bandages replaced clothes in some places or peeped out from under their tattered habiliments. Some had all their limbs, some not. But by enlarge it was their countenances that sickened my soul and froze my blood. I say "countenance" here for it is the best I can do as I cannot bring myself to use the common word "face".

One looked as if his face was made of wax, half of it melting and boiling in the sun. Another seemed to have a normal head at the edges, but the area from upper teeth to forehead was shining and thrust forward as if on a pole, with deep indentations on either side. The head of a third started normally at the bottom but as I raised my eyes came to an unnatural and premature end at the top, the

whole skull resembling a triangle. This one also had prominent teeth and nose, and a vacant stare in the eyes. A fourth looked quite alien: the face was swollen to such an extent the nose was obliterated into the large sphere the face had become, the eyes bulged to the sides like a toad's and the mouth was but a slit hanging at the very bottom. A fifth looked so emaciated it must surely have died of famine. But the most horrifying of all stood closest to me. Above the eyes his was a normal face, but below...below there was nothing but a pulpy emptiness. The nose stopped abruptly halfway down. There were just viscous, meaty, tattered strands where upper lip, teeth and bone plate should have been. Only a suggestion of a jaw was left on his left side, for the right held nothing at all. A large, gaping hole to the right showed more of the insides of what would have been his mouth and throat. In the midst of all of that nothingness, his tongue flapped like a fish dying on shore. His right eye was completely white. Turning my gaze from this instinctively, I looked down and then saw the other unfortunates writhing on the floor.

I was shocked at the violent, animal scream that ripped through my throat, for I have never felt more abject fear and mental pain than at that moment. This scream, though, had the previously desired effect of the torch, as they all quickly dispersed into the nothingness from whence they came. Whether or not I was awake before I do not know but I was fully awake then, and again could not, and in this case would not, find my way to sleep that night. Now that it is midmorning, I will take a trip into town to see if that will calm my nerves.

May 23, 1904 9pm

My trip into town today was pleasant and calmed me significantly. I was right in thinking that it would be a good idea to socialize to try to get over what happened last night. I borrowed a horse from my nearest neighbor, Stuart Kamke. "Nearest" is of course, a relative term; he lives two miles away. He is an interesting man in that he is one of the new breed of mechanic with many variations of horseless carriages about his stables in various states of construction. I offered to give him some marks for the use of the horse, but he refused, saying it was his pleasure to help a neighbor. Thanking him, I made my way to town.

The Hundsbach town center is picturesque. After sitting by a fountain for a while, my nerves calmed and I was better able to go about my business. My first stop was the bank and, hoping fun would be therapeutic, I got some extra marks for the afternoon as well as to restock my food supplies. Still nervous from my ordeal even though I walked in the bright sunshine, I stopped at a clock shoppe, the rhythmic sounds a comfort and I admired the woodcraft. There was a young man behind the counter who while he couldn't be that many years younger than me, seemed much younger all the same, who said that his father (*who owned the establishment*) would be back shortly. I was not around long enough to meet his father, but it is just as well as something still propelled me from one place to another for fear of being "caught" in any one place, but caught by what I didn't

know and don't wish to guess. I moved on and came across a newsstand next, but as expected there was little there I could read since their selection was predominantly written in German. They had a surprising dearth of French and English novels for an area with this much tourist trade, but at least I could get a paper. Thinking food might also calm me, I found a biergarten (*a German pub*). I had a very good sauerbraten plate with potato salad, and, still hungry and thinking maybe I was lacking in vitamins, I actually followed it up with a wurst sampler with a side of sauerkraut. It was delicious and well worth the tight feeling in my stomach soon after.

While there, to take my mind off the nerves that slowly crept back, I fell into conversation with the barman. He was nice, and seemed like what is known as "a regular guy". When I mentioned where I was staying, he too became a bit put off but kept chatting, likely from sympathy at my condition as I sometimes wear my struggles on my face where likely the battle against my nerves was then playing out. After pressing him for a bit, he finally told me that the locals do not like that cottage, and no one but tourists ever stayed there. There is a superstition about the cottage in town, and while I said nothing to him, from what I have seen I do not blame them. I was not brave enough (*or is it stupid enough?*) to tell him of what I thought I saw. But now, upon reflection, I do not know if I was more concerned with being thought crazy or being thought right, but maybe he suspected. At any event, I asked him to tell me why everyone was so sour on the cottage. He would not go into details, but told me to find out for myself at the town library. This proved a task easier said than done. As with many German small town libraries, the hours are inconsistent. However, I was in luck that it would be open around 2pm. I spent the intervening time in the park again, admiring the central fountain, and reading the paper I bought. At the prescribed hour, I made my way back to the library. It was an untidy place: they had more books than room, so in addition to the shelves, books were stacked at the ends of shelves, on top of shelves, and there were even one or two tottering stacks on the floor. With the sun's full rays coming into the cathedral windows of the library's front, highlighting the dust in the air, this enthusiastic if erratic filing system was at once daunting and oddly charming. The librarian, a middle-aged woman, sat at a desk to one side, and was the only other person there. The impromptu cardboard name plate on the desk said her name was Alexandra. Her surname was also listed, but was functionally eradicated by smudges and poor penmanship.

"Gutentag, fraulein," I hailed her with what I hoped was a disarming smile.

"Gutentag, herr," she replied amiably.

"Can you direct me to any local histories, or public records of the town and surrounding areas?" I asked, not as smoothly as I would have liked but not as slowly as I had feared.

"Oh, those would be in the fourth aisle. Come with me," she said, getting up and whisking around me.

She led me to the middle of the room and indicated the aisle.

"They would be along here, some there, and a few up there," she said, pointing at some books stacked on the top of the shelf, and a short pile crammed at the far end of the aisle, (*between it and the wall*) and finally at the highest shelf. "Of course, we try to keep on top of things, but look around a bit if you have to in this aisle; don't be surprised if you find some careless person put something back in the wrong spot."

I thanked her and read the titles on the shelf first. After examining the short pile and the shelf, I pulled a few likely books and found an overstuffed easy chair near a window. Surprisingly, the library was wired for light and it was a good system (*German engineering outstrips German sorting systems, it seems*) but I preferred the natural light from long habit. I found the usual Roman histories, town charters, short biographies on historically important people, a few books on a local tycoon by the name of Schwarze, but nothing that really met my needs for information. However, doing this research had a great palliative effect for my nerves, likely through the comfort of college habit. I went back to the stacks twice more before becoming a bit nonplussed. Finally, I decided to give my mind a break for a moment and picked up "Parteizeit: eine Unterhaltungszyklopädie" (*Translation: "Partytime: An Entertainment Encyclopedia"*). It was illustrated and even had some color plates. After looking at all the illustrations, I was flipping through to get a taste of how my German forebears had fun when my eye alighted on the name "Hundsbach".

There was once a thriving fair, carnival, and circus trade in this town, which explained to me how they transferred to tourism so smoothly. The book said that the fairs were famous and the town was on the "silk road" for circuses in Europe back then; for some reason Hundsbach was a natural cross-roads for many of the routes the circuses took around the Continent. Hoping that I may get lucky enough to see a real European circus while vacationing, I went over to Alexandra.

"Pardon me, fraulein, but does this town still host the circuses like this book says?"

"No. Not anymore," she said stoically.

"Aw, that's too bad. I was hoping to see one. Do they come by at all in the area?"

"No," she said curtly. "I'm sorry but I have to close up now for supper. Would you like to check that book out?"

"O-of course. When will you be open tomorrow?"

"Early afternoon," she replied as she hurried me out the door. Before I quite knew it, I was back on the street, book in hand. Thinking there was nothing for it, I got my groceries, packed up the horse, and rode back home. After depositing the groceries here, I rode the horse back to Mr. Kamke's house, thanked him again, and walked home.

After a supper of fried fish and peas, I went upstairs to the study. I wanted to read my magazines, but I could not concentrate enough on what I was reading. After reading the same paragraph for the third time, I put it down and looked over the bookshelves in the cottage. The usual classics were there, as well as a few

novels in French. Picking a likely looking adventure novel from the shelf, a scrap of paper fell out of it. It read: "To George, all my love, Claudia". I was grateful to have such a charming thing happen in this gloomy summer. I think I will read myself to sleep tonight.

OR

May 25, 1904

I've barely slept at all in two nights. I write for lack of something to do. Two nights ago, I began reading a novel I'd chosen from the study, and, noticing it was the first in a series, went back to the study to find if the others were in the house. If not, I was planning on going to the bookstore or library again if the current volume turned out to be good enough. The second book was there, this time with a new inscription "Happy Father's Day! Sarah, Johann, and George Jr." Chuckling at the random piece of family life I stumbled upon, I went to find further volumes. The third volume was also inscribed, but this time in a severe, business-like hand. In all capital letters, though they varied in size as they should, it read "THIS BOOK PROPERTY OF GEO. R. SCHWARZE". "Well, that solves that mystery," I thought to myself. Just as I realized I had seen that surname before and was trying to recall where, I began to hear a steady sound coming from below.

Thump-thump-kathump.

Thump-thump-kathump.

I didn't know if I was more scared of what could be there, more angry that it was there, or more sick of myself that these things kept happening. I couldn't think what to do; the memory of the horrors I'd seen the other evening kept the anger from prodding me to offensive action. But I needn't have worried, for as the sounds repeated and increased, I knew this thing was climbing the stairs to me!

I shut the door and put a chair behind it. I even managed to move the bookcase a few inches toward the door to block the hinges on the far side. The thing, if it minded my actions, didn't show it by increasing its pace. It patiently thumped up the stairs, each time coming closer and making my blood pound harder in my temples with each sound. Kneeling in the chair I'd used as a buttress, I put my eye to the keyhole. I didn't know if I was more afraid to see the thing or not see the thing. Finally, the thumping creature came into view. I was relieved at first to see the arms and head of a young girl. She couldn't have been more than fourteen or fifteen and while not handsome, also not ugly. I was about to stand up to unblock the door in case the girl needed aid, when the rest of her came up those stairs. I almost couldn't register what I saw, had to look again, and then had to hold down my repulsion and stifle my gag reflex, for this girl's torso was oriented



in opposition to her lower half. She moved about, making those thumping noises by walking on her palms and heels – her hands, head and torso were oriented downward as if ready for a push up, and her legs and feet were upward as in a crabwalk! Then the female thing did something to override my repulsion with fear. It looked at me (*for I'm sure it saw me even though only my eye looked out through a darkened keyhole*), cocked its head...and smiled. That smile, that nerve-jarring smile, revealed nothing but rows of pointed teeth, sharpened as if by a knife, pink spittle dripping from them. I pulled my eye away from the key hole, lest it try to eat my eye in some demoniac way, and then pressed my crucifix up against the keyhole to further block it. I sat there, desperately trying to control my shaking as I heard this girl-demon kathumping around the top floor, looking for me, making cracked, mewling noises as it searched for me. After what felt like hours, it apparently gave up, and hobbled its way back down the stairs again. I listened to the silence for a long time, until I began to hear the wailing man once more. Oddly, he was almost a comfort, though I can't say why. Maybe it is because it was familiar, maybe because I thought my psychosis (*if psychosis it was*) at least had the courtesy to run in a pattern and therefore signal to me that it was indeed a phantasy. But for all that I still could not stop shaking. The wailing got closer that night, of that I'm sure. What more I can be sure of, I cannot say.

I stayed up until the dawn, and then, through physical and nervous exhaustion, fell asleep (*or should I say, passed out*) on the bed when I finally made it into the bedroom as the sun came up and I was mostly sure those horrible visitors were gone.

I awoke at eleven in the morning, and wasted no time getting back to town for my fear was replaced by an angry anxiety to fight these things if I could, or if not, flee. I headed directly for the library, not even stopping for breakfast. I found it closed, but rather than wait, I inquired at the surrounding businesses, for the town isn't that large. I finally came across Edvard Schmidt, the oldest resident I had yet met in town. He was a shorter man and still in good shape for his years; he wore glasses, was clean shaven, severely balding, and smoked a pipe. Edvard was a reserved but kind gentleman, with a wistful look in his eyes. He told me that the woman at the library, Alexandra, was a friend to him and if I'd wait, he'd get the keys. I asked him if he wanted my company so I might press my case to Alexandra but he told me it would be better for me to sit and wait. He directed me back to the pub of the other day, where I ate some buttered bread and cheese, and waited. Edvard returned not twenty (*anxious*) minutes later with the key. Paying my tab as I walked out, last slice of bread in hand, we made our way to the library.

Edvard turned the key but before opening the door, turned to me and said "Show me your hands."

I did so, and he said "Go to the washroom immediately and wash them. These are public materials."

Taken aback by his order I almost questioned him but I knew I was in no position to argue with him. Obediently, I washed up and joined him in the front

room of the library. I immediately went to the aisle from the day before, but could find nothing at all of value. Frustrated, I cursed openly.

"What has gotten you so agitated, young man?" Edvard asked.

"You really want to know?" I asked. He nodded. "I'm seeing...I don't know...ghosts, visions, every night and if I don't do something to help myself, I'll go crazier than I am!"

"You're staying in the Deutschendorf cottage, I take it?" he asked calmly, absently refilling the pipe bowl but not lighting it.

"Yes!" I cried in desperation.

He looked at me a moment. "Then come with me downstairs. The archives are down there."

He turned slowly and opened a slim door that I hadn't noticed before that was diagonally behind the librarian's desk. He descended the stairs slowly, and it was driving me mad not to go faster and burst into the room to search.

"Alexandra is more of a custodian of the place than anything else," he called over his shoulder as he descended. "She does it to give me a break, plus it lets her get out of the house. I'm the curator and town archivist." He switched on a light, and after a few false starts the lights came on. The lights shone bright white, yet the light was stark, cold and almost antiseptic. But for all that, while they illumed the room well enough to see, there were so many cabinets, stacks of newspapers, and boxes with files in them that, combined with the low ceiling, made it feel as if the light couldn't penetrate to the walls however earnestly the bulbs strained to do so. I have never before been in a room that was gloomier with the lights on until that moment.

"These are filed by year." He put his hand on the cabinet nearest him. "This is '73, and they move forward by year. I expect what you want is over there, nine cabinets down. 1884."

I made my way down to the cabinet he indicated. It was too narrow for both of us to stand in front of the cabinet together, or even comfortably move around each other to switch places, so he stayed a few paces behind me. "Look in the middle drawer. June."

I did as he said. After finding the right section of files I flipped through some newspapers before I found what I knew I was looking for. There, staring in front of me was, in large black type: "**FEUER!**"

A fire! Edvard let me transcribe a copy. I translated as best I could in the time I had with approximations in brackets. It is as follows:

Feuer auf dem Mittelweg! (*Fire on the Midway!*)

At approximately 11 pm last night, a fire broke out at Schoen Bros. Wonder Circus. The fire destroyed the entire circus, as well as claimed [several] lives.

No one can say how the blaze started; reports say it began near one of the travelling [vans] of the circusfolk, most likely by a discarded cigar or other [implement]. But everyone saw the fire spread rapidly. While attendance was low

at that time of night, many of the performers are either missing or confirmed dead this morning.

Fire crews responded to the scene, but as the circus was seven miles from town center, there was not much the crews could do [except] keep the flames from spreading into the forest.

Among those lost in the fire were the circus' owner, Mr. Messerschmidt, the performer Tamara, and many animals. Some tourists are also still missing, but it is unconfirmed whether they are deceased.

Tragically, Tamara, star aerialist and bareback rider, is [among] the confirmed dead. She was interviewed by the Post before the show. Unfortunately, the notes from that interview were lost in the blaze, but the Post's time with her gave it the clear remembrance of the performer as a shining example of grace and beauty. She will be sorely missed by both her profession and our town.

"So that's it," I said, looking at Edvard.

"Yes. And some time later, Mr. Scharwze bought the property and built his home there. But he did not stay long. His youngest child, George Jr., developed a disease that grew with the boy and twisted his bones into bizarre shapes. Eventually, the poor boy died. It was then that Schwarze began seeing things, whether it was by madness of grief or something else we'll never know, because one night he and his family simply got in their carriage and left. They left most of their possessions behind as well. No one knows where they went, but many believe they left for America, to be as far away from the tragedy as they could be. Schwarze deeded the land and house over to his friend Dusendorf next, but Dusendorf's stay was shorter than the Schwarzes'. Under a year, I believe then he moved two towns away. Ever since then Dusendorf has been letting the cottage out to travelers like you so he can have the money to pay taxes on the property."

"And leaving us poor bastards to sleepless nights and horrors aplenty," I said.

"So it is true," Edvard said sadly after a silence. "I'd suspected it, what after the first few had such similar stories." I felt as if I was given a form of salvation when he said that; I knew then I wasn't going mad. He continued. "What have you seen?"

"I —...I don't know. Monsters...horrible – visions that can't be real. Crowding around, walking about, even screaming and running through the cottage!"

"Go to St. Ignatius' Church. Blessed water should help." Edvard said. "Speak to the Reverend."

Thanking him for his time and kindness, I left, now taking heart in this plan of escape. From the library I went directly to the church. It was a small church, built in Gothic style. Its gray stone walls were not as clean as they could be, and some lichen had grown at the top, but it was nothing compared to the smoke-stained inside. The air in the church was of heavily perfumed oils and smoke. Votive candles burned on both walls, and there was a third set burning solemnly behind a grating up at the altar. Since it wasn't a feast day that I knew of, I figured there must have been a dedication mass, which made the church's emptiness all the more puzzling. Not seeing anyone, and being afraid of refusal if I asked, I

walked up to the side of the altar, took the flask I always kept with me from my pocket, drank the last swallows of water from inside it, and plunged it into the baptismal font. Having filled it and replaced the cap, I strode down the aisle only to stop when I saw the priest framed in the light of the open door.

"What do you think you are doing?" the priest asked imperiously. He was in his mid-40s, had a widow's peak, and a hard look about his mouth contrasted with a look of tired patience about the eyes. I could tell at this moment his patience was sorely tested. He carried himself as if he was athletic in his youth, though his general softness showed that those days were long gone.

"I'm sorry, Father," I began. "But no one was here, I needed this, and it is simply water after all."

"That is holy water; you sacrilege to drink it!" He looked coldly at me.

"Oh no, Father, I wasn't going to drink it. I need it because I am staying at Dusendorf cottage. I hope it will help me."

"That is different, then," he said, relaxing slightly, then, "I apologize that I judged you so harshly at first," he said in kinder tones.

"Edvard, from the library, sent me here. Is there any other precaution that you know of that I can take?"

"Salt your house," he said.

"Salt?" I asked.

"Yes. Get salt and spread it around the house. Across doorways, passages, any entry or exit to any room. Salt is something which spirits cannot cross. Drink the blessed water when the time comes, for it may lessen the sounds you hear in your head."

"Is there anything else? Could you perform an exorcism on the cottage?" I asked hopefully.

"I'm sorry, but no. I cannot," he said, after a moment. Then he moved out of the doorframe and my way, as quickly as he could (*for he was lame in one foot, much more pronouncedly than I am*) as if he had just remembered where he was standing. As I left, he called after me.

"God be with you."

"And with you, Father. And thank you."

I wasted no time returning home after buying salt. I blessed every room using the holy water and, reading passages from the Bible I found in the upstairs study, put down a good line of salt at all the thresholds in the house, and even at some other places where I thought they were necessary, such as in a line from wall to wall at the midpoint of the hallway, as the hallway didn't have a doorway proper. Satisfied, I sat down to supper and reading in the kitchen, daring anything to disturb me this night. I was only mildly surprised then when the banging began on the pipes. It was different tonight; only one person (*or thing*) was tapping out a message, and it was more regulated than before. Finding a pen handy, I took down the message on the inside cover of my book.

P...l...e...a...s...e...g...o...n...o...w [stop] Y...o...u...w...i...l...d...i...e [stop]  
M...o...n...s...t...e...r...c...o...m...i...n...g [stop] R...u...n...a...w...a...y.

After that, the noise fell silent. After another moment, the wailing moan began again. This time however, holy water and salt decanter in hand, I was not afraid (*well, I was, but now I felt much more confident that I could now fight back*). Looking around my kingdom of salt, I thought I had outsmarted them, and then my heart sank and sat in my gut, for looking straight ahead, I saw I was so intent on not missing anything inside the house, I had forgotten to put salt on the threshold of the front door!

The wild, screaming ghost came in just as easily as he did before, a specter of rage and fear. I cringed and sought an escape route but then noticed that he had difficulty passing through the house (*likely an effect of the holy water*) and then he suddenly stopped midway through. My previously-forgotten line of salt in the hallway gave me a reprieve for the moment. He renewed his screams, louder than before, and while no actual words reached my ears as I had taken a sip of the holy water when I saw him, I could tell he was cursing me to whatever gods that held sway over him. Then, when his rage was spent, he just hung there as if aware of his surroundings for the first time, silent now but for a low moan.

"What are you doing here?" I asked it.

"Where is it?" it said in cold and hollow tones. "Help me find it!"

"Why do you haunt this house?" I asked it.

"Please! They are coming!" This last was said louder but there was no rage in his voice, simply fear and a great desperation to be out of the house. Then as if planned, sounds began to arise from the cellar, thumping and clattering sounds, and voices like that of the damned. As we stood there, the ghost and I, the cellar door burst open and a whole host of horrors crowded the door, an inky blackness accompanying them. They were checked in their motion by the salt I'd placed by their door, and, seeing the other, began to growl, hiss, and scream hateful things, things so terrible they even reached me though my holy water barrier

"Oh God, they're here!" the first ghost cried. "Where is it?! Where is it?!"

Taken by a rush of pity, I moved forward, giving the horrors of the cellar a wide berth and with my shoe scattered a hole in the line of salt in the hallway. The dead man then flew past and out the back of the house. As soon as he was gone the beautiful woman I had dreamed of the night before appeared in the kitchen. Looking at me and at the salt strewn around the floor, her precious face became a mask of sadness. In this her beauty and grace amplified my empathy for her and briefly as an impromptu audience of one, I could see how she was truly the star. She hung her head and slowly disappeared. When she disappeared the hellish din the monsters made was deafening. Taking more swallows of holy water and shaking some more salt by their door for good measure, I turned to go upstairs and said over my shoulder, "And stay there!" hoping to finally get a night's peace. But as soon as I was upstairs things changed. I had not expected the change; I thought they would be quiet or rage on for a while, but I was truly not expecting what they actually did. Never before or since have I heard such sounds of abject sadness and lament as I heard from those horrors the rest of the evening. The noise is just

fading away now that the sun rises and after so many hours of listening to it, I cannot but feel a sort of pity for the monsters, hateful as they are.

May 26, 1904

Today I set out for town, hoping to find Edvard again. I wanted to ask him what more he knew about the fire and what he may have heard about how those monsters came into being. Were they the souls of the evil, taken monstrous form? Were they devils? I had not been searching long when I came across not Edvard, but the priest I had met the other day at the church, as the holy man came limping out of the clock shop.

"How did it go?" the reverend asked me.

"I stopped one of them, but I let him go." I replied.

"Really?" the priest said. "Anything else?"

"Well, I saw another ghost last night, a woman that I previously thought I had only dreamt about." At this the priest's interest was visibly piqued.

"Did this female spirit do anything?" he asked.

"Well, no. She was trapped by the salt I laid down and, well, just looked sad."

"I see," he said.

"The first one was looking for something," I said. "He didn't say what, though."

"That's too bad," the priest said. "However," he continued, seeing my downcast face, "that shouldn't stop you from taking a look around anyway." At this I looked at him in confusion. "Well, think about it. Whatever this one wants must be old, correct?"

I nodded.

"And it must be on the grounds somewhere, or else he wouldn't be looking for it, right?"

Again I nodded.

"So, find something old, something odd, something out of place and see if that works," the older man said. Then, wistfully he added, "Maybe that will give them peace."

The idea hit me like a bolt of lightning. "Thank you so much, Father!" I said as I turned and set off at a jog. The priest said something after me, but at the risk of being rude I did not stop to acknowledge it but simply waved as I jogged away.

I spent the rest of the afternoon searching the cottage and surrounding grounds. I found nothing in the first or second floors of the cottage, but had expected that since the house was built after the tragedy. The search of the grounds in the back of the house was equally fruitless. In the field in front of the house, however, I did find a few things: a spur, the remains of a coat, some spikes and a rotten whip. I went back to the cottage, my discoveries in hand, and set them all in the hallway. I sat down for a rest in the comfortable chair in the sitting

room when I realized I had neglected to search on either side of the house. Dragging myself upright then for fear that I would grow more lethargic the more I rested, I searched both side yards. The right yielded nothing, but in the left side yard, the side nearest the road I made my best, and most hopeful, discovery of the day. As I turned back and forth in a general sweep, my foot caught on something mostly buried in the ground. I noticed it right away because it didn't feel like a rock for it was too angular. Upon inspection it was revealed to be a corner of something. With some work, I pried it up and found it was a dented and slightly melted box. Breaking the lock off with a nearby rock, I found it contained old marks, coin, two locket, a ring, and now-illegible papers. This, I knew, must be what the ghost was searching for.

I am going to transcribe my journal entries this afternoon, because I believe that tonight may be the end of this poor soul's torture. I very much want to leave a record for those who come after me, and when I leave I am taking my book with me to remember.

May 26, 1904 8:00 p.m.

I have finished transcribing my journal, finally. I didn't realize I wrote this much. I have also written a short note as introduction to the transcription, once I realized how fantastic this may all seem to a future occupant of this cottage. I have everything all set - the box, the salt, and all else I can think of. Now, I must simply wait. — One moment, I believe I hear someone coming up the path.

8:45 pm The "priest" just came by. I feel like quite the idiot. The man I met in the church and supposed was the priest isn't a priest at all but Gregor the church deacon, handyman, and clockmaker. The young man I met in the shop was his son. He explained that when we first met he was dressed in black because of the death of a friend earlier this month; I simply hadn't noticed he wasn't wearing a priestly collar. He tried to correct my impression about his being the reverend twice, but twice I didn't hear him. He felt "guilty" that I was misled and felt compelled to come out to set me straight. Poor old fellow. It really matters little to me, but I'm glad that he can now rest easy.

I invited him in for a rest and a cup of tea for him and a carrot for his horse, it being a late hour and I knew how far he had travelled. I showed him my preparations and the objects I found. I even invited him to stay to keep company for the "festivities" and then stay the rest of the evening. To my surprise, he accepted. Only a short while longer for us to wait until the usual action will commence.

9:30 pm The pipes have started up, once again. Not that there was any doubt in my mind really, but I left the heat off tonight just to see if they could tap out their messages when there wouldn't be any water draining in the pipes to help them along.

And now we hear my wailing friend.

He is again stopped in the hallway. He sees the box. I knew it.



The monsters below don't like this at all.

May 29, 1904

I am finishing this diary simply to complete it, and in a way, out of gratitude. I will also leave the papers as originally intended. I came out here to see Adler not only to let him know who I really was but also to see if what he said was true. I'm sorry for him that it was.

I arrived here that night, and like he said, we stopped and talked a while. He invited me in for tea and though I'd have preferred a good lager, I accepted. He told me his recent troubles and showed me the copy of his diary entries where he recorded the events, and told me of his plan for the copy he made.

"Do you see those items in the hall?" Adler said to me.

"Yes, of course," I replied, "I saw them when I came in."

"I'm quite sure one of them is what the ghost wants," he said.

"How can you be so sure?" I asked him.

"Well, truthfully, I can't," he told me, "but I just have, let's say, a good feeling about them. Especially the box," he said, getting up and beckoning me to follow him.

"Why the box?" I asked, glancing at it as I followed.

"It makes the most sense. It has sentimental things in it, or at least, rings and such that would seem sentimental," the young man said.

"Well, that's wunderbar," I told him, relieved. "I do hope you take care though, even if you're right. This isn't something that you should take lightly, or look forward to, as I believe you are."

He stopped as he entered the kitchen and turned to look at me. His expression was one of indulgent hope.

"I—I know. It's just that when I think how much this spirit must have suffered, and that I can give him release, I just can't help but be...expectant. But," he said, turning to his icebox, "first things first. I promised you some carrots for your horse. Take your time. I'm not going anywhere." He handed me the carrots and I made my way out to the hitching post in front of the cottage. Now I wish to God I had stayed in the house with him.

I was out front, currying Thor, my horse, when I saw a faint light halfway down the field. It made an erratic path up to the house, as if truly looking for something. As it drew nearer I could hear it wail and moan, and no other sound



has filled me with such dread as the one I heard then coming from this phantom. I stood stock still in fear. Thor reared and whinnied; though he could not see the ghost behind him, I'm sure he could feel it. The apparition passed me by, and as it did so I clung to Thor for comfort.

After a moment and I had my wits about me, it dawned on me that Adler was talking about this ghost and not the others. Cursing myself for a fool for the mistake, I rushed to the house, but the front door would not budge; it was slightly ajar, but some force kept it just as it was, and I was unable to move it. I ran to the back, opened the back door and rushed inside, but I was too late. Opening the door, I saw Adler handing the box to Messerschmidt, for that was surely the ghost in life. No one else could survive on this earth after death through pure spite and hatred alone like that devil could.

"Jim, stop!" I called to him, but it was too late. Messerschmidt had possession of his all-important cash box, the very thing he went back into the fire to get, ignoring me and the other performers. I tried to move forward beyond the kitchen, but there was an invisible force keeping me from entering. I thank God above now for that, or possibly Tamara, for keeping me away from the others as I watched on in terror.

As soon as Messerschmidt's ghost clutched the box, his eyes lit with a hellish light of glee. As he rubbed the box like a bloody newly-born child he crowed in satanic glee.

"Mine!" he shouted, "All mine!"

And with that he began to slowly fade from view. As soon as this began to happen, a strong force hit the cottage from below, jostling the floor upwards a moment with a sound like a muffled explosion. The basement door burst open, and up through the cracks in the floorboards all manner of horrors burst forth - people I had hoped never to see again.

These ghosts were terrible sights. One, a woman, had four legs instead of two; another, a man, truly looked like he was nothing but skin and bones; another had a horrible face of scales and bulbous calluses; another was of normal proportion from the waist up, but waist down she had the legs of a giant; yet another was simply out of proportion no matter how you looked at him. It was then I looked away; more came but I couldn't bear the sight. Some crawled, some walked, and one or two slithered. But it was not the physically twisted aspect that filled me with such terror; no, I knew them in life, and have stayed here in this town ever since they died in part to honor their memory, but it was the looks on every last one of their faces that made me turn away; looks of pure and utter hatred; hatred for Messerschmidt and now, as they watched Messerschmidt fade from view, hatred for Adler. They slowly encircled Adler, screaming and moaning, with a hollow, unnatural wind whipping all around the cottage.

"Get back, you terrors!" Adler yelled at them, holding a crucifix in front of him. "Your victim is gone!"

"No! Stop!" I yelled. But it was too late. Messerschmidt was out of their grasp. It grew colder in the cottage then, and darker. I backed away until I

stopped just outside the back door. The screaming and moaning drove me out; standing inside the noise was enough to make your ears bleed, but outside it was tolerable, indeed, a simple step made the sounds seem far away. An unearthly chill filled me that still causes me discomfort to remember these three days later. There was no stopping them now. Then, above it all, came the sound of weeping. In the kitchen, nearest me but in front of me and facing away, not seeing me, another ghost began to form. It was the spirit of Tamara; the star of our show and only woman I ever truly loved.

"You fool!" she cried. "We have waited long, so long for our vengeance on him! He made us perform, he made them like this, and he did this to us all!" she screamed, throwing her hair back and dropping her cape, to show the fire-scarred ruins of the upper right part of her face and half her body. I averted my eyes as fast as possible so as not to look at my poor wife in such a painful state. "I cannot help them now. I cannot hold them back now." Then she said gravely and so quiet I almost couldn't hear her, "And nor do I want to."

It was a moment before I realized I was not inconspicuous. Tamara turned and stood there before me, in all her injured glory. As hard as it was to look, it was harder not to, then. I took some involuntary steps towards her, stopped, and began to cry for her.

"Oh, Tamara...oh, my little star..." I wanted to say so many things, it all became a confused jumble. "Ivan is well. He still has your look. I didn't know. I thought changing circuses would be good for our billings...I..." I wanted to say more, but couldn't.

"Shh, Gregor, my funny man. It is okay. I know you tried," she said, nodding at my leg lame from burns. "You would be here with us if the patrons hadn't pulled you out against your will."

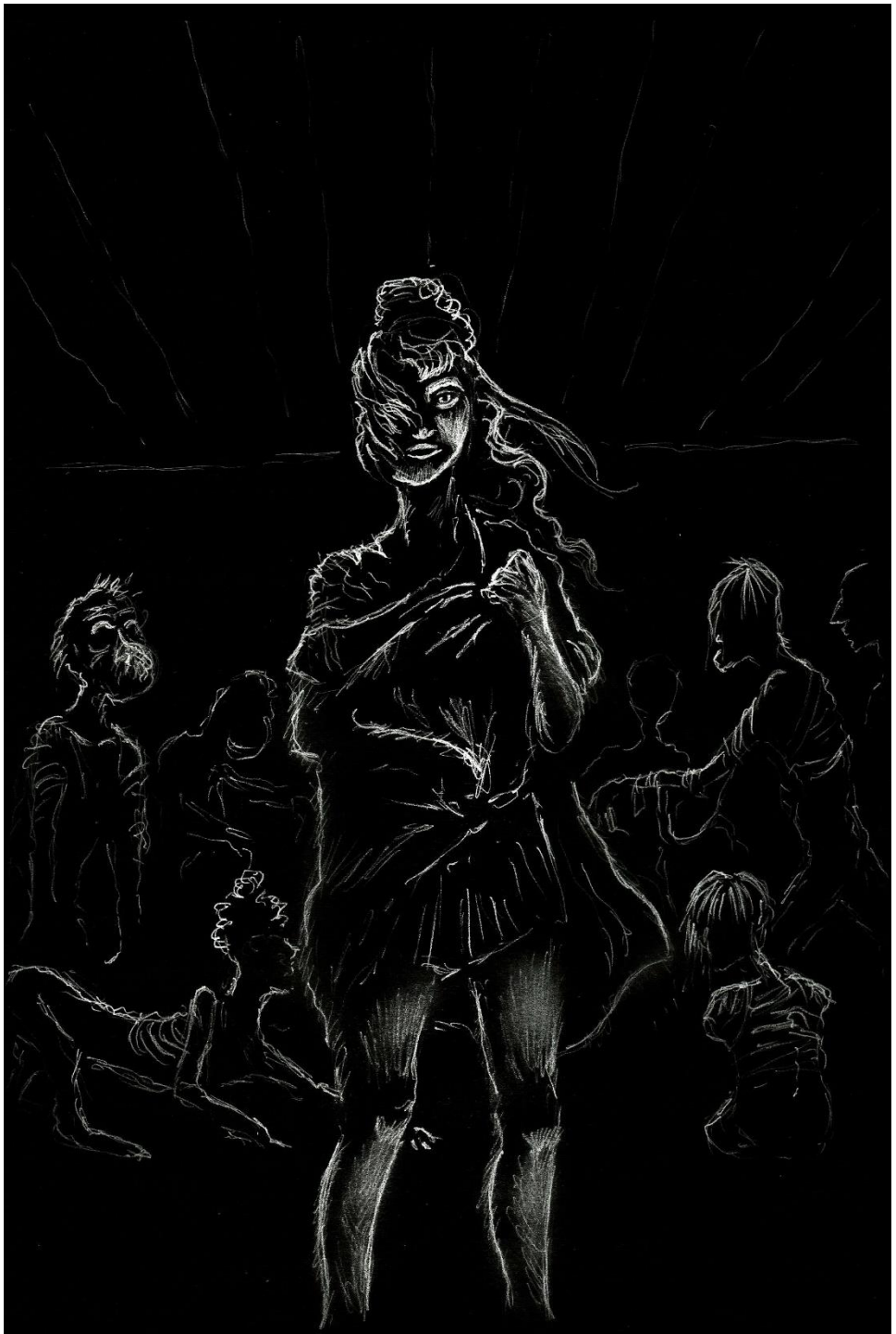
"But, I....I'm so sorry..." I said, my voice breaking.

"Don't be. I understand. They understand too," she said, nodding to the dark mass writhing about Adler. Then her true, unscarred face shown through for a just moment to say, "I love you still." On hearing that I could say no more, but was overcome with emotion, eyes locked on my beautiful angel. "Move back now, my love, out of the way. One day, I will see you again. We each have something to release us; you are my release, and I am perfectly content to wait for you." I obediently backed away from the spectral influence to the outside of the house, though I continued to look in. After my experience the rest followed as if in a dream. Even still it has a dream-like quality for me, else I couldn't bear to remember, let alone recount it.



It was then the screams, the unhallowed wind, indeed all noise stopped. More than quiet, it was the total absence of sound. The twisted girl galumphed up to him first.

"Circuses made big money off of oddities. The kind ones helped the unfortunates. But the ruthless ones like Messerschmidt never let nature or God



stop him until he got his sideshow!" Adler was lifted into the air as ethereal bars formed around him. "He put me in a vise until he did this!" Adler screamed as his spine was shifted fully around in the middle. "But that wasn't enough for him, oh no, he filed my teeth down, into spikes!" Adler's jaw was forced open, and from where I stood though his head was now facing the other way, I could see the white dust of teeth fall from his mouth.

As she faded back, the pinhead came forward and I looked away.

"He stole me from my parents and strapped boards to my head to do this to me!" Adler screamed again as I heard the sounds of wood clacking together and a popping sound like that of an overripe melon.

"I was sold to him, and he cut off my arms!" said a third voice, as I heard two wet thumps hit the floor. "The rings you saw in the box were mine!"

I raised my head then for a moment, to call out to my deceased friends to stop what they were doing to Adler, but the voice froze in my throat as I saw Adler's body righting and reattaching itself again, whole and hale, as soon as the third ghost receded and the fourth came forward.

"Sure, I was midget," screamed the shortest of the ghosts, "but he went out of his way to always make me feel small!" Adler's body then compacted and compacted as he let out a gurgled cry from the strain. I had expected his organs to fly out at any moment from the pressure, and again looked away from him yet this time kept my gaze on the cloud and people coming out of it so that I could pray silently for Adler, each of my friends as I saw them, and myself.

"He bought me from my starving parents, said he would take care of me!" said the ghost of many colors, whose shape kept changing – a ship, a skull, a few words – "But from then on" – now a black cat, now a tin man – "it was needles, needles, needles!" I told myself that what I saw in my peripheral vision – Adler stretched into a St. Peter's cross and stuck from every conceivable angle, a symphony of nightmarish colors pouring into his skin – I was not seeing.

"My face was blown off in a hunting accident leaving me no choice but to be stared at. Not until I died did I find out it was he who fired at me on purpose!" said a ghost whose tongue flapped about in nothingness. Something, I'm sure I know not what, then scattered about the room.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he begged them, "I didn't know!"

Hearing this, I chanced a look at the young man. Miraculously, Adler stood in the center of them all, again physically whole and in his original shape, but trembling and in pain.

"We tried to tell you!" the twisted girl said. "When the Morse code didn't work, I even made a special trip upstairs to help you. But you wouldn't even look at me or hear me! I smiled to show you I meant no harm! I called out to you no matter how painful these teeth make it to speak!"

"And then, when the fire broke out," said the man with the melting face, "the twisted monster left us in our menagerie. Didn't even bother! But he came back, looking for his precious cash box, that evil fucker!" Adler burst into flame.

"If he had tried to help, or even given Tamara the key, we would all be alive today! Instead, when she demanded the key, he knocked her aside and she struck her head on a beam. We had to watch her burn!" The sound of Adler's screams were cut out by roar of the flames, his cries going in and out, in and out. I clapped my hands to my ears, not because of Adler's screams, but because I could hear no more about what happened to my wife.

"And now, we've lost him!" cried one of the ghosts, and a mournful wail rose from them all as they all began to speak in unison.

"You have set him out of our reach, intruder," said many voices, "we were to do to him as he did to us! But now, we can't! Damn you, we can't! So we choose you to replace him! You to replace him! You to replace him!" This chanting continued on even after their forms had dissolved into one large mass of darkness. Adler screamed and tried to get away, but he could not. They began dragging him toward the cellar door. He yelled and shrieked, clutching at anything that would stop his moving toward the door, but they pulled him free or whatever it was broke off in his hands.

"You to replace him! You to replace him! You to replace him!" The chanting grew louder and louder, until it shook the whole house. It almost drowned out his screams for God, for mercy, for forgiveness which reached my ears as a pitiful cry beneath it all. Finally, hands ripped red with blood, Adler was pulled free of the cellar doorway and down. All the blackness and cold was sucked in then, and the door slammed after them all. The noise and all else stopped. Not even an echo resounded from that deafening, unearthly chant.

The spirit of my wife and I just looked at each other then, until she faded away to nothing.

Yours sorrowfully,  
Gregor, deacon, former clown and animal hostler

## ∴ THE BEAST WILL VISIT IN THE NIGHT

— M. Grant Kellersmezer

*“Ich warne dich: Achtung! Gib Acht!  
Der Unmensch besucht in der Nacht.”*

*“I’m warning you: Look sharp! Hold tight!  
The Beast will visit in the night”*

— GERMAN PROVERB —

“WHAT’S an ‘unmish’?”

Thomas pulled heavily on his cigarette as soon as the words left his mouth, tipping his head back and looking down his nose at Mark while the tobacco smoldered. Thick cables of smoke laced their way overhead, mingling with the steam of a late June evening. In the lawn in front of Mark’s porch ghostly fireflies gleamed in the vapor, blinking quietly like the eyes of diligent spies. Thomas snatched the cigarette away, and the bright, ember end went dark like another firefly. Blue smoke bloomed from his mouth and nose, obscuring his face. Overhead there was a percussive zither of grasshoppers while small frogs rumbled anonymously in the darkness below the porch. A single street light cast its fire-colored light into the humid air which refracted it in a hellish afterglow.

“*Unmensch*. It’s a German word that means beast – well, literally I guess it means inhuman or abhuman, but the general way that people use it in English is like beast or monster. I think *abhuman* is the best translation. It just has a general idea of being completely alien, totally anti-human. The antithesis of everything that’s good or redeemable about people.”

“Oh. I thought at first it was like the opposite of Amish. I mean, you did say it was an Amish term, right?”

“I said that when I spent that summer roofing houses with the Amish crews they told me about it. It’s not really Amish per se, but the Anabaptists around here believe in it. Or some of them do. It’s a Central European superstition, I think. They have versions of it in Switzerland and Italy and Germany and Austria. I read about it somewhere when I was doing research for a report in my anthropology class last year. It was supposed to be over a superstition or urban legend from our hometown, so I picked the *Unmensch*.”

“You’re kidding me? Why would a college class spend time talking about superstitions?”

Mark was leaning back in a folding chair looking out over his parents’ front yard. He rocked his head a little and took a sip of Long Island iced tea from a plastic cup.

“It’s culture.”

“It’s not fucking *culture*; it’s delusion.”

"I mean — I'm not saying it's real or anything — just that you can learn a lot about humans and what it means to be human from their superstitions and religions. It doesn't make it real, but —"

"I just think it's a damn waste of time to go to college to talk about the kind of shit that college was made to knock out of peoples' heads."

Thomas angrily flicked his cigarette into a bucket filled with sand and pulled a new one of his shirt pocket.

"I mean," he said while he fumbled with the lighter, "I'm only a year younger than you and I only took one semester at Ball State before I came back here and got the job at the mill, but I'd almost say that one semester did me more good than your four years."

Mark smirked drily and crossed his leg over his knee.

"I should have been careful about bringing it up around you. I'm just saying that — true or not — studying superstitions can shed light on the human condition. Not saying that everyone needs to get born again or have the Ten Commandments hanging on their walls. This isn't even a mainstream religious story. It's got pagan roots."

"Bullshit. The Amish wouldn't keep pagan superstitions around."

Mark's face hardened a little and he peered uncomfortably at the ground at the base of the streetlamp. He moved his hand casually (almost as if he hoped Thomas wouldn't notice) to block the bright light from the bulb. Something had seemed to stir behind the pole, low to the ground, but it was just a cat slowly moving towards something on the ground — something smaller and slower.

"These Amish do. The Amish in Adams County aren't like the ones on TV or in those drugstore books. Their strange people. They come from the Swiss mountains where there wasn't a lot of law and order during the Middle Ages. In this same class I read a book on the witch trials during the 17<sup>th</sup> century and it talked about how most of the worst trials were directed at these lonely, rural communities in the mountainous of Europe: the Alps, the Carpathians, the Pyrenees, the Scottish highlands. People took longer to take to orthodoxy Christianity there, and pagan beliefs blended with Catholicism and made these weird hybrids. Well the Amish who live in this area come from the Alps, not Bavaria, and they don't even speak the same language as other Amish. It's a Swiss folk kind of German that isn't even close to Pennsylvania Dutch — not by Amish standards, anyway. So yeah, the Amish around here have some strange notions."

Thomas's forehead was still stiff and his eyes glowered under his eyebrows.

"Whatever," he said after taking another long pull and letting the smoke dissolve into the steamy night air. "I don't want to get into this with you tonight. Not after you just got back from school."

Mark peered into his cup, tapped the bottom, set it down, and stood up, walking across the porch to a small cooler. He dug through the ice and pulled out two Long Island ice teas, handing one to Thomas and opening the other before sitting down.

"I know what your feelings are about me getting a degree in theology."

"An oxymoron if you've ever said one."

"I'm a curious person."

"But what's there to be curious about? It's like getting a degree in fairy tales."

"People study those too."

"But they don't think they're real, man."

"I don't know what I think is real, I just enjoy learning about what other people think."

"Well, you know I think it's a waste of time and brain cells, but there's no point in reminding you."

"No."

"No. So tell me about the Unmensch and get that bottle of Jack before we forget that its here."

Mark nodded and reached under his chair where the bottle sat, unopened. He poured them each a finger into plastic cups and they slowly swallowed the whiskey before returning to the Long Islands. It was getting close to eleven, and the heat of dead sun was radiating vicariously from the pavement, sidewalks, and house siding. A barely perceptible chill had begun in the soil, coming up between the grass blades, and manifesting in a bank of dim vapor that hung three inches above the ground.

"Well, like I was saying, the Amish who were roofing with me told me about it, and I looked it up in the library at school later and found out more. It's an unlucky thing to see, a kind of Black Shuck."

"What?"

"Uh, it's a British demon hound. A huge dog with blazing eyes that foretells your death when you see it. It's what inspired Conan Doyle to write *Hound of the Baskervilles*. The legend in the beginning of the book is real, it's just tweaked to work with the plot."

"Okay."

"Well, the Unmensch isn't the same as Black Shuck. It doesn't just appear to people randomly. It's supposed to start to follow them a long time before it shows up. And it's not an enormous hound; it's coyote. A small, black coyote with dead white eyes – sightless, white eyes that glow like two pearl buttons in candlelight. Well, the idea is that it attaches itself to people who it has a sympathy with."

"A sympathy?"

"Yeah... uh, people it sees itself in. People who are *unmenschlich* themselves. People who are somehow disconnected from the people – the community, the culture – around them. People – outcasts or rebels – who haven't or can't plug into the general stream of humanity."

"And it starts showing up to them?"

"Supposedly."

"Then what?"

"They die. Somehow it overtakes them. The idea is that it's inside them to begin with – or that they're inside it – and that it's not so much a haunting as a recognition. Sometimes they commit suicide or drink themselves to death or get



into fights with groups of violent men. In the Middle Ages a lot of times they would just wander off to the woods and never come back. Some of the more modern urban legends have them overdosing or driving off the road at night. Anyway, *that's* what I was thinking of when you asked me what was making me nervous on the walk back from the restaurant."

"Good lord. You have to be shitting me. You thought you saw a ghost dog?"

Mark smiled and stretched his bare feet towards the street and the streetlight.

"It's not a ghost – it's a devil – and it's not a dog – it's a coyote."

"Even stupider. On both accounts. Whatever man. You know we'll always be buds —"

"Have been for sixteen years."

"—But I just never thought that one of us would actually get out of this shitty town, actually go to college, and end up being somehow backwards and superstitious for it. I mean, I don't think college is the only place to get an education: look at me, I mean, I still live here, still drink here, still work here, and I'm still a critically thinking, libertarian, atheist. But you go off to a good, liberal state school in fucking New York, and you're the one who comes back talking about ghost dogs. I'll be damned if I get you, man. But... we'll always be buds."

Mark smiled to himself and nodded.

"I'm glad for that."

Mark had finished his iced tea and was pouring both of them two fingers of whiskey. That should probably be the last of it, because Thomas had to walk home and they could save the rest of the bottle for next weekend. He swilled his cup and took a slow sip, looking half-anxiously under the streetlight. But nothing was there. Probably he hadn't seen anything following them on the way back from the rib joint, but his mind had been active all night. It was close to the end for this friendship; he could feel it. He had felt it before. This was the dry rot that grew worse with every passing summer. It had taken one summer before he had stopped hearing from Tanner and Stephen and Ty, two summers before he had outgrown Luke and Carter, and now he felt the gulf widening between him and his oldest friend. There were three or four others from his hometown that he still saw, but not with Thomas – Thomas had never liked them – and it was just one more chink in the growing chasm between them. It was as if he felt that when Thomas inevitably walked off of his porch, down his sidewalk, and into the thick night air, he would be swallowed forever by space.

Thomas was about to light his fifth cigarette when he suddenly dropped the zippo with a loud start. The lighter clattered to the porch with a clang, the wick still flaming. Mark darted over and picked it up before a fire started, and looked up at his friend. His eyes went to his hands, where he expected to see a blister forming from a burn, but it was his face that seemed to communicate a more accurate story: his eyes were pinched in a kind of furious shock, and his teeth were set in resistant fear. Something behind Mark had startled him. Mark's own stomach now tightened. But it was such a silly thought. And why should he – just as fervent a

believer in science and reason as Thomas – be concerned by what his friend had seen looming over his shoulder?

“What was it? What did you see?”

“Fuck, man. Nothing. Whiskey in my head. Just some kid moving around in a weird way across the street, I guess. Some kind of sick kid.”

“Why?” Mark asked, his voice croaking. “Why ‘sick’? What do you mean?”

“Just the way he was moving. It had to be a *he*. Some sick, perverted kid. Shouldn’t be moving like that. Fucking weird, man.”

Now Mark was wondering if mixing the whiskey with the iced teas had put him in this jittery state of mind, but he didn’t want Thomas to see him startled by what was likely a strange play of the shadows from the streetlight. If Thomas realized how truly nervous this had made him, their friendship was almost certain to end then and there – the last strand of respect would snap and another old friend would walk away from him. But there was something about Thomas’s reaction that made him feel slightly less self-conscious: his eyes were still scouring the dark street running perpendicular to the one in front of them, and Mark wondered if his own fear might be forgiven – maybe even shared. But before he could ask Thomas anything else, his friend slung back his whiskey, successfully lit a new cigarette, and started for the sidewalk.

“Hey man, I gotta be getting back; it’s pretty late considering I got tomorrow, so I’m gonna split here if you don’t mind.”

“No problem, buddy. Uh, do you want to come over next Friday? I was thinking about burning those moving boxes in the fire pit and having a couple people over.”

Thomas stopped without turning around. The cigarette bobbed as he talked, sending blue mushrooms into the black air where they shone in the street light.

“Who’re you thinking?”

“I don’t know. I’ll tell you when I get an idea. Let me know if you think any of your work friends would like to come.”

Thomas stood quietly for a moment, then nodded and stuffed his hands in his pockets, making his way down the sidewalk, across the street, under the streetlamp, and then beyond it as he faded into the darkness, transmuting into a shadow. The fireflies had all since disappeared, and all Mark could see of Thomas was the ember end of his cigarette, like a single, red firefly, slowly fading down the street, blinking in regular spasms of dull light until it finally had gone too far by itself and was engulfed in nothingness.



Mark went to bed that night and awoke early in the morning, his pillow drenched in sweat, his sleep crowded with nightmares. The light coming through the window was ashy pink, and he decided against trying to go back to sleep. He showered, dressed, and spent the morning applying to research jobs and writing articles for the half a dozen blogs that he worked for. When the day warmed into

noon he went to work at the Alpine Rose – his town's sole coffee shop – and when noon faded to evening, he folded his apron and began what he feared would be another lonely walk home.

But it wasn't lonely. The summer air was pregnant with the perfume of flower beds, sparkling with bird calls, and even the purple afterglow of twilight seemed to have more in common with the faded warmth of day than the hastening gloom of night. He walked home lazily, passing a former teacher here, a high school acquaintance there, waving cheerily to each other and exchanging kind words. It was not the sort of evening that he had expected, almost as if a series of filters had been lifted from his eyes, revealing a world of warmth and connection where he had anticipated one of cold loneliness. He returned to his room, answered emails, read the news, listened to some music, and fell asleep.

It wasn't until four in the morning when he woke up. He knew immediately that he was not alone, and instinctively turned his head towards the far corner of his room – behind his right shoulder – where he saw the curled shape of a human being. It was bent over itself in a strange manner – freakish, unnecessary, awkwardly – almost as if it had been placed in a dehydrator and – sucked dry of moisture – curled into a hollow husk. Its black hair and beard framed the white skin of its face, but the hollows of its eyes stood out even more starkly: empty and dead. Then why did it move? What animated its weightless legs and bony arms? With weak, fragile motions, it started from the dusk and walked towards the window on the other side of Mark's bed. The white flesh now glowed in the moonlight – unwholesome and mottled, unpleasant to remember or describe. It seemed to be the shape of a small man who had grown even smaller through the natural loss of his body fluids – a dried raisin hovering over Mark's bed, stretching out his arms which cracked and creaked like old leather being stretched out of a familiar shape. While the murky sockets forbade any recognizable expression, the bearded face seemed to wrinkle into a pleading grin – emphasized by the reaching fingers (the skin around which had hardened and dried into a transparent crust). But before Mark could accept or reject the supplication (and he later shivered at the thought of what reaction either response would have warranted), the face twisted spasmodically as if suddenly possessed by a new wearer, and the tangle of limbs fell to the floor where the figure scuttled around on all fours, welping eagerly like a wild dog. Something fundamental seemed to change about the shape, and he watched with revulsion as it backed away from him with newfound flexibility. On the floor he could only see the white skin of the bearded face (now invigorated with a horrified expression), but could tell by its movements that it was backing away from him like an obedient dog, across the room, and out the door into the hallway. All he could see in the darkness, though, was the white mask of horror slowly – slowly – being dragged, sucked into the darkness of the hallway, receding as if falling irretrievably down the shaft of a bottomless well.

Mark would later not be able to remember if he fell back asleep, if he had ever woken up (was it a dream or a memory?) for it, or if he had stayed awake until dawn. He had the impression of this experience branded into his consciousness,

but had no memory of the proceeding four hours: only when he arrived at the Alpine Rose to open at eight did he seem to return to his own mind, and he wasn't sure if he should be horrified, confused, angry, or forewarned. What had happened was a mystery, but it seemed to mean something to the deep, hidden organ of his spirit, and he reacted to it not as if it were a nightmare or a narrow escape from a horror, but as if a friend had whispered in his ear a warning. His nerves were steady and alert; his vestigial animal soul prickled with paranoid sensitivity. And then the morning passed into noon, the noon passed into evening, and the night brought him a long and delicious sleep – uninterrupted and (so far as he knew) unaccompanied.

The days faded into the nights and the nights grew into days, and an entire week passed before Mark had a reason to remember his nocturnal visitor. He spent the mornings and afternoons working at the Alpine Rose, and spent the middays and evenings writing and applying for work. During his lunch break on Friday he heard back from a museum in Louisville that was interested in hiring him as a researcher and guide. The pay was not tremendously impressive, but it came with insurance and the possibility of advancement if he was willing to work hard and commit himself to their mission. It was a coup for an underemployed theology major living with his parents, and he quickly agreed to an interview the following Monday. He cheerily returned to work at three, and came home to Thomas on his porch at nine o'clock. The days were getting longer, and the sky was still a vivid mélange of plum, pink, and scarlet, with the heavy blues of night steadily coming in from the east like a gathering storm.

"It's good to see you, man!"

Thomas's face was somehow more pinched and gaunt than it had been at their last parting. He seemed anxious and out of place.

"Who all's coming?"

"To what?"

"Your fire."

"Oh damn. I completely forgot about that."

"You still down?"

"Well, I might actually need those moving boxes still, but my dad cut down some dead limbs from the silver maple out back, and we can use those."

"Moving boxes?"

"That's what I was going to burn before. But I think I might be getting a job in Louisville."

Thomas's eyes seemed to grow narrower.

"Being a priest?"

"The degree is in theology, but that doesn't make me ordained. No, as a researcher for a museum."

"Like the Creation Museum?"

"No, man. I'm not like that, you know. I might be more interested in the non-material part of the human experience, but that doesn't mean I think fossils are a trick or that evolution is a deep state conspiracy. No, it's like a history museum.

They liked my research background and I'm going to interview with them on Monday. I'll help them catalogue documents and transcribe letters if I get it."

Thomas seemed to be restraining a glare. He looked off into the eastern sky, then quickly turned to the ground.

"I'm not working at the mill no more."

"Why?"

"Lay-offs."

"Oh. Shit, man. Sorry."

"It's fine. I think Jenny can get me a job at the bar. They need work there. Everyone needs work around here."

"That is true."

"Yeah. Everyone's hiring, just not the mill or the factories out of town. I could go back to Subway, too."

"Or the Alpine Rose if I get the Louisville job – I'll tell Glenda that they should consider you before they post it."

Thomas looked up at him with a snake-like glare, like a sentry at the Alamo watching a casual visitor pack up and ride off to five week stay at a health resort in the Catskills.

"I'll be fine. We doing this fire?"

Mark nodded and went inside for a lighter and newspaper. The backyard faced the very outskirts of the town: a few houses' lights peered through the dusk, but behind them stretched a relatively unbroken field of corn girded in by rows of monstrous, shaggy trees in the distance. A shallow pit in the middle of the yard was ringed with large stones dug up by farmers and thrown in the ditches. Mark's dad had carefully turned them into a tidy ring, and over time their inside-facing portions had grown black with soot while the outside-facing halves still gleamed in shades of rose and umber.

Mark made a pile of newspaper balls in the bottom of the charred pit, leaned a dozen or so twigs and sticks in a teepee around the pile, and steadied five foot-long sections of the maple branch in a larger teepee around the whole. While Thomas watched quietly from a lawn chair, he lit the paper and watched the flickering tails of flame turn into a snapping fire. Mark reached beside him and picked up the week-old bottle of whiskey – still three-fourths full – and handed the bottle to his friend while he settled into the chair beside him. The two watched the flames solemnly, each keeping an eye to the darkness the prowled about them. High in the purple sky above them was Venus, lonely and isolated in the as-yet starless sky – drifting like a solitary firefly fading into colorless space.

"You could go back to school, you know?"

The question came out of the silence like an uninvited guest.

"I'm still paying off the debt from the semester I took."

"But that was two years ago."

"I didn't make a lot at the mill. I won't make more at the bar."

"You can get scholarships."

"And do what?"

“Study science. Study physics.”

“Listen, I like watching YouTube videos about science, but I’m terrible at math and I don’t like writing papers. No. It’s a hobby, not a career. I’ll be fine.”

“It’d be kind of fitting if you had your degree in physics and I had mine in metaphysics. You know I alw—”

“Have you ever thought that you like that stuff because you can afford to wonder about things that aren’t material? That’s all I have. Maybe when I have a job sitting on my ass all day I’ll get bored enough to wonder about the afterlife and the spirit world and ghost dogs, but until then I’m just worried about paying my rent and not getting my truck repoed. Maybe that’s why I’m the atheist and you’re wasting your time thinking about nonexistent universe outside this one. Besides which, maybe that’s the last thing I want to worry about.”

Mark shifted in his chair and looked over at his friend. That last comment croaked in his voice, and in the firelight he saw that his eyes were large and shining, like a deer who can hear the hounds afield.

“What do you mean? Hell?”

“Or something like it. Maybe not hell-the-place, but hell-the-experience.”

“Experience...”

“Yeah. Like maybe it’s not a thing you go to after you die if you’ve been bad. Maybe it’s a thing that lives in you and eats you up and sleeps in your bed and follows you to work. Maybe it’s not a punishment. Maybe it’s a condition.”

“What, like a sickness?”

“Like an infection.”

His eyes were no longer on the fire; they looked beyond the fire, and his voice came from the side of his mouth, now, as if his attention was divided between Mark and something on the other side of the fire, something moving back and forth – slowly and intentionally, like a lion guarding its meal.

Mark grabbed the whiskey and took a long gulp of it, hoping to relax his nerves and maybe bring the light of humor into his twilight mind. But it didn’t seem to help.

“What do you keep looking—”

And then suddenly he thought he saw it: small, oddly proportioned, hybrid, dwarfish, misshapen... But no. No, no. It was maybe a cat chasing prey. Maybe. No, it was nothing. Just the morphing shadows of the fire moving erratically in the breeze. He looked off to the side: there were no fireflies in the grass and no stars in the sky; the night was deep and black and it reigned unchecked.

“I wish you would maybe consider moving from here. Maybe go to Fort Wayne or Indy. Find something bigger and better to do with your time. I think—”

Thomas’s voice came out of the side of his mouth in a dull whisper.

“What did you say that Thing was called, again? That Amish legend?”

“The Unmensch?”

“Yeah, the *Unmensch*... What did you say that means – in English?”

Mark looked around them and was surprised at how dark it had gotten. The streetlamps at either end of the street seemed domed in brown glass, and the

lights of the neighbors houses all seemed to be off, snuffed. Something moved behind them, something small and light. The cat, he thought. Something with four legs, something low to the ground.

"It, uh, it literally means 'unhuman,' but you could call it 'beast' or 'monster' or 'creature.'"

"What did you say you preferred? You preferred something."

"I think I said 'abhuman' was a good translation. Or 'anti-human.'"

There didn't seem to be grasshoppers in the trees or frogs in the fields. The wooshing, snapping voice of the fire was the only company that Mark felt in his soul.

"It is part of the spirit, you think?"

"It's an urban legend."

"What do you think?"

"I think it's a superstition. Cultures come up with these narratives to explain a psychological state or a part of the human experience. They invent an idol or a god or Santa Claus to help illustrate a chapter in the human condition that they can't explain."

"What if they didn't invent them," said Thomas.

"What the fuck do you mean?"

"What if they've seen them? What if they dreamed about them? What if they are part spiritual and part material – a combination of the two worlds?"

The fire seemed to flare and grow whiter. Mark struggled to see anything outside of it: it was so bright and white and the darkness was so exclusive and opaque.

"You don't believe in a spiritual world."

"You do."

"I'm curious about it. I haven't ever experienced it. I'm just a student, not a damn shaman."

"What if the Unmensch is part of both worlds? What if it can live in them simultaneously? Not like a ghost or a burglar, but something in between."

"What? A burgling ghost?"

Mark had expected his words to knock sense into his friend, maybe even bring out a chuckle, like the stupidity of hearing Thomas reference his interest in 'ghost dogs' – diluting Black Shuck and the Unmensch to two stupid, silly words. But Thomas turned to him and his eyes fluttered with shock and fear.

"Yes. Yes. A burgling ghost. A thing that can break into your room and break into your head at the same time. Yes..."

His eyes bulged piteously from his white, gaunt face, and the rims of his eyelids gleamed red from what could have been sleepless nights, habitual crying, or a combination of the two. Mark suddenly recognized the great vulnerability of his friend and felt an electric fusing of his own spirit and body: the pain and isolation of his soul now converted into physical agony as his hands shook and tears started to seep from his eyes.

“What’s happening to you? How can I help? I want to help. Don’t shut me out, man. What can I do?”

But at that moment, the tallest log collapsed with a crash, and took the smaller logs with it in a sudden shower of orange beads. In the momentary darkness before the fire recovered its breath, Mark saw something dark and angular sitting on the other side of the fire – something that had been perfectly covered by the lapping wedge of flame before its collapse. In the brief seconds before the fire rose again, in the red glare of the embers, he saw a gaunt black dog sitting authoritatively on its skeletal haunches. The shaggy fur hung over its emaciated form in mossy tatters, and its lower jaw laid on its lean chest, as if held to the upper skull by only a few strips of muscle, giving the impression that the animal was either screaming or laughing; but its dead, white eyes – like two clouded pearls – gave no sign of its true emotion as they glowed wildly in the flash of the falling logs. In the span of a second it seemed to melt into the dark, without making a motion of its ragged head.

“God! That dog has to have rabies! Fuck, man, let’s go inside and get my dad’s rifle. Someone needs to shoot the face off of that dog.”

But Thomas didn’t respond to his friend’s shock. He seemed to have been staring through fire into those pearly eyes the entire time.

“It’s not a dog. Dogs don’t have tails like that or ears like that. It’s a coyote.”

“But it was black. Coyotes are greyish brown. There aren’t any such things as—”

He suddenly felt the full force of what he was about to say and stopped his words.

“It was a freak. A disgusting freak. Sometimes they breed with dogs. A black lab bred with a coyote. It should be crushed or put to death. It’s eyes—”

Mark stopped again. Thomas was staring into the distance, towards the streetlamp – beyond the streetlamp and into the shadows. His eyes were wide and unmoving, pleading even, as if he were conducting a mute negotiation with something across the street in the shadows.

“I’m sorry I ever brought up the Unmensch. You’re right. This is a material world and there is no sense in even discussing superstitions. Not even to joke about them. Why should we sit here and talk about whether purple dragons exist when there’s no proof of them. You were right. Let’s stick to science from now on. I’m glad that job is with a museum and not a seminary; a career in facts and reason will be good for me. I’ve been living in a purely speculative world and it’s rubbed off on you. I can see that I’ve had a bad impact on you this week and I’m sorry about that. Let’s go inside. I’ll get that rifle in case that – that dog comes here again, but let’s go inside and watch TV.”

Thomas’s unblinking eyes welled over, and he stood up unsteadily. The brown glow of the streetlamp did little to cut through the dense murk behind it. No light, Mark thought with a shiver, could illuminate its secrets.

Thomas didn’t seem to hear him, though, because he slowly rose from his lawn chair and took a wobbly step away from the fire.



“Hey, man! Where are you going?”

His eyes were fixed on the darkness on the other side of the streetlight, which suddenly seemed to take on the role of a border marker – a checkpoint between two worlds.

“I should go home. I’ve had too much to drink and I need to apply to jobs in the morning.”

“Don’t go.”

“I have to.”

Something furious and impatient was boiling inside of Mark. He resented Thomas’s weakness, his lack of spirit, lack of imagination, lack of will.

“Damn you, you don’t.

“I do.”

“You don’t have to do anything.”

“It’s not outside of me. It’s part of me. It is me. I see myself. It’s not an infection; it’s a cancer. It’s not an invasion; it’s a rebellion.”

“What the hell does any of that mean? Stop walking away, man.”

“The fire is almost dead.”

Mark turned and saw that the street light was indeed the only remaining source of light around them: the red, molten glow of the expiring embers were growing duller by the moment. The cornfields were now indistinguishable from the cloudy night sky. Dead, black space bloomed and yawned around them, impossible to measure or understand or cull. What the hell was making everything seem so dark?

“You can come inside with me and stay the night.”

“I don’t feel too good. I want to go home.”

“You’re not going home... You’re going to *That*.”

“I don’t know what you mean. I need to go. I need to. I can’t stay anymore. I can’t be here anymore.”

“Why can’t you just come inside for a few minutes? Have some ginger ale and crackers if you aren’t feeling so hot.”

Thomas’s unblinking eyes followed something’s movements in the distance: crossing back and forth, back and forth, then seeming to sit still – perhaps in the middle of the sidewalk that he was now standing on: the sidewalk that led across the street and into the distance.

“I don’t have anything left to do here. I should go home instead.”

Mark squinted into the opaque murk into which his friend seemed destined to be enfolded. Was something sitting there, waiting? Was it just the fire hydrant on the curb? Was this an excuse or was it a change in attitude – a shift from aimlessness to responsibility that he should support? It didn’t seem to matter, because Thomas didn’t wait for a response or a parting gesture: he floated off down the sidewalk, limping towards the intersection with a steady, measured pace – like a man being marched to the writ of his execution. He passed under the large, paternal trees that sheltered Mark’s family home, momentarily disappearing in their shadows, before emerging at intervals into the pools of gloomy light that

poured between their twisted boughs. Mark felt two impulses struggling within him: one, human and gentle, which longed to rush down the sidewalk and drag Thomas inside by the arm – to touch, keep, and protect his fading friend – and another, animal and self-interested, which breathed a sigh of relief at the departure of this plagued companion: it exulted in his retreat in the same way that Mark's ancestors had beaten their leprous companions away from their food and fire, thrown out the weak members of their camps, and chased away the maimed comrades whom they knew would only slow them down and attract predators. A part of this vestigial selfishness sighed in relief at Thomas's departure, but the human spirit in him watched with awe and regret as he passed under the streetlight on the corner and faded into the black space behind it like a necklace dropped into a still pond, where it could be watched sinking through increasing curtains of darkness until it was impossible to see and impossible to recover.

When Thomas had finally been swallowed into the dusk, nothing could be seen from where he had faded. Nothing except for two pinpricks of dull, white light – the dead, marbled glow of reflected moonlight, perhaps, or of two sickly fireflies hovering side by side. With a sudden, almost immediate turn however, the two lights were doused, leaving nothing but space: illimitable, featureless, and unknown.



Mark had intended to visit his friend the following morning, but was prevented by a high temperature. Maybe Thomas hadn't been making excuses: there seemed to have been a powerful contagion in the air that night, and Mark was bedridden all weekend, sleeping fitfully for two days before his fever broke and he felt well enough to stand and move around. But it was the day of his interview now, and he had a four hour drive to Louisville. He was able to move it forward from the morning to the afternoon, but there was no time to check on his friend other than to report his sickness and to check on Thomas's condition through a few brief texts. The interview was at two, and by the time it was over – after having gone predictably well – he was feeling healthy enough to explore what seemed to be his new city. By the time he arrived at his hotel room later that night, he found a missed call from the museum, offering him the job. He quickly became drunk with the excitement of the next stage in his life that he didn't notice Thomas's text asking him to call as soon as he could. When he did finally see it, he was in the middle of apartment hunting, and assumed that the need had probably passed (it being two days since the text had been sent), and after a week, his parents drove down with all his clothes and luggage in their van. He wouldn't return to his hometown until Christmas, and even then it was a short evening spent at home before the entire family decamped for his grandparents' farm in Ohio where they spent Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and Boxing Day. He drove back to Louisville from Dayton, and didn't see his parents' home again until Easter.

He was reminded of Thomas abruptly when his parents gloomily mentioned that he was a missing person; that he had apparently been evicted from his apartment sometime around Halloween because of a drug habit that proved impossible for the landlord to tolerate; that he had been arrested twice that autumn; that he had been released from jail sometime in January, and that he hadn't been heard of or seen since then. Thomas's mom had been dead for years, and his dad – an alcoholic veteran drawing social security – was barely more settled than his son, so what little search there was for him hadn't been particularly spirited: indeed, it was more of a general awareness that if someone should see him, they should tell him that he was being looked for. Other than that, no one was worrying too much about a 23 year old opioid addict who had chosen to step outside of the town's social parameters. It was as if he had walked beyond the city limits and had been erased from the collective consciousness of the people who had watched him grow up. It was as if he had broken some unspoken code and been banished from the memories of his neighbors and classmates. The shunning spirit of the Old Order Amish still lurked in the DNA of the town's Mennonites, and while they drove cars, wore shorts, and had internet connections, their souls were quick to shun and slow to forgive the weak members of their parish. The "search" continued in their words, but their hearts had long ago delivered him to his demons as a sacrifice for their community's greater good: eject the sinner, shun the outsider, watch the borders, and repel the invaders.



The winter that year was unusually cold and vicious, even for northern Indiana. Heavy frosts kept the ground flinty well into April, and the farmers grumbled about it to anyone who had the patience to listen. Finally, three weeks after Easter, the temperatures rose above forty degrees, and the spring sun thawed the icy soil, breathing life into the grey earth and hope into the farmers' tired hearts. It was about a week after the tractors took to the fields with their tillers that one Amish man – Ernest Eicher, who had paused his team of horses to move a heavy rock out of their way – noticed a revolting smell coming from the culvert under his driveway. The earth was drenched – black and heavy with rain – and the scorching sun drew the moisture into the air which was thick and pungent. Eicher's shirt clung to his skin and his red face streamed with perspiration as he urged the horses on, cutting through the dead earth like a surgeon at a postmortem. The stench hung in the steam, which seemed to magnify its range and pungency, and the howling whirr of flies hadn't escaped his notice. Removing his sweat-bleached hat, he reined in the horses and took a hesitant step towards the stench. Something was rustling in the shadows there: he stopped his breath with a jolt when a pair of black birds suddenly shot out of the darkness – wings smacking like crumbled paper – and disappeared into the twisted oak whose shadow blanketed the ditch from the sun. He followed their flight and felt his

brain reel: the tree was bristling with wings – black with ravens. They looked watchful, impatient, and hungry.

Eicher called his sons, Levi and Jacob, to tend to the horses and keep an eye on him as he descended into the ditch from where the odor was emanating. They barely kept an eye on the horses, all the time watching their father, while breathing out of their mouths. When Ernest returned, his face was grey and his beard dripped with traces of vomit. They sent his daughter, Rosemary, with the speedy two-wheeled cart, to town where she summoned the police and the ambulance.

The remains had been chillingly preserved by the winter weather, but the spring thaw had begun its work, and the jellied eyes had been quickly eaten out by peckish crows. What remained was the emaciated, bent corpse of a bearded man with deathly white skin – tight and membranous over the jutting bones. He didn't carry an ID, and while he sported a black beard, the Amish assured the police that none of their number had been missing. This and the presence of a mustache on his mummified lip assured the authorities that he was an Englisher. After a short interview, Ernest returned to tilling his field, but he didn't leave the scene of the discovery behind him: a week later word was spreading from one Swiss-German homestead to another that Ernest had seen something when he descended into the ditch and peered into the dusky culvert. He had, they said, seen a coyote crouching beside the corpse, peering into its hollow sockets. This, naturally, was no strange sight: a coyote could be expected, as a carrion scavenger, to take interest in a putrefied body. What was disturbing was its princely, authoritative attitude – thoughtful rather than eager, calm rather than ravenous – and its black pelt. It was a black, Ernest said, that made the shadow around it seem blazing with light, a black that consumed and refused to give back. He – the corpse – Ernest supposed, must have been under the power of the Unmensch. The body was never claimed, although some suspected it might be the body of the boy who had gone missing in January (but his father had died over Easter weekend, and there were no other relatives to take interest in his recovery). So the vagrant was buried in the Potter's Field of the Mennonite Cemetery under a small stone with three numbers on it (numbers I have forgotten).

Even though Mark never heard about the rumors that swirled around the Amish gatherings, or the burial of the vagrant, he still thought from time to time about the night that Thomas dissolved from sight – how he had walked into the murk and disappeared. He had been seen many times since then, of course – had his fingerprints and mugshot taken – but for Mark that was the last sight he had had of his friend before he followed whatever thing inside of him led him to whatever place he ended up. Where was he now? Panhandling in Fort Wayne; tending bar in Toldeo; going to a community college in Terre Haute; driving down a ribbon of highway in Nebraska; standing in a soup kitchen in Kalamazoo? Mark knew that only one fate could be real – all the others were imaginings, but one of them – maybe one that he hadn't thought of – was real, and could not be changed. He thought of the haggard phantom that pleaded to him in the moonlight; but

then he thought better of pondering this vision, and he tried to forget it. He shut it out of his mind, surrendering to work, to relationships, to alcohol, but to no avail: he would continue to see it (standing at the foot of his bed, quietly, patiently, or being dragged away into the murk, silently, submissively) in his nightmares for the rest of his own abbreviated and bedeviled life.

But Ernest Eicher didn't forget what he saw, and the Amish people prayed for the soul of the eyeless thing he had found in the culvert. Nor could he forget the shaggy, black beast that had been squatting in front of the rotting heap, gazing deeply into its gutted sockets. He hadn't seen its eyes ("*Gott sei gelobet und gebenedeiet*" he said here, with a tremble, before whispering "Gott in His mercy here protected His humble servant from seeing *de Awga der Unmensch*," with his own eyes clenched in prayer) but he was sure that they would have been dead and white, like two pearl buttons glinting in candlelight – like two dying fireflies fading into the colorless vacuum of space.

## ∴ HELL RUNAWAY

— Igor Smirnov

WITH the purple quartz upon my crown chakra, I caught the surrounding energies in a powerful swirl that made it flow along my body, diving deep into my spine and spreading through my spiritual vessels with great shiver. One by one, I woke up the other chakras, already stimulated, and molded my aura in a shining pillar of rainbow spirals. I could feel every *nadi* fraught with power when I breathed in the incense of the thurible and concentrated on the blue quartz, pending before the *Ajna*. Third eye opened then amid the cold silver on my forehead. The cycle was completed. Body, perispirit and soul, each one complying their purpose. I finally could start my job.

In front of me, among the cushions, the couple emanated a timid fear as they watched me move open hands in concentric circles. That was nice, people let out more ectoplasm when frightened – which helps to nourish the place and to strengthen whatever is on the other side, besides the little loss of critical sense. It was just a matter of not overacting and everything would go well, everyone satisfied.

“Repeat with me the name of the deceased,” I asked. “Seven times, please.”

Once more, I closed my flesh eyes and focussed on what came from beyond. The name on my lips sounded like a distant mantra, the incense scent also did not take long to disappear. All that remained were the goosebumps on my skin and the eyelids trying not to open. It was good to be back into the silent waters of the astral, the soft plasma of universal womb.

My mission was to find the dead one now and, as I imagined, he was not there. I haven't felt any presence with my clients; My projection just confirmed what I already supposed: It wouldn't be easy this time. Maybe there was a trail. Perhaps I'd have to seek him with pure instinct – otherwise, he would be too far away to get there. It was soon to say.

My main concern in these situations is keeping the trust of the clients, what always incite my sense of urgency. I could see their holding hands through the cloudy veil of dimensions; They were convinced, credulous, but it wouldn't last forever. I had to find out how close I was from the objective, and quickly.

Around me, my long-journey pal, an apartment full of hermetically positioned pendants all along the walls – now nearer and more claustrophobic than usual. Backgrounding, the old door of scandalous hinges to call me and, at the same time, to repel me – a weird feeling. What was that, coming from the corridor, after all?

Compelled by curiosity and newly acquired hope, I gathered the courage to glide to the front door and, with an abstractive attempt, open it to outworld. First, I saw nothing more than heavy clouds of unknown and unintelligible, a wide opened portal to the unexisting. Nevertheless, the sensation kept growing around me. That was new... Uncommon.

I risked a step out, forcing my mind against the ethereal mist,embodiment of my own limitations. It was then that anoutshiningscarlet light suddenly invaded me, followed by an intense burning ache. When I opened my eyes again, a stranger was standing on the hallway. Entering the room without any formality, he headed to the cushions and grabbed the arm of my male client.

“Come on, show’s over,” that’s what he said.

My mental disarray before the scene was such that any of my possible reactions was supressed and replaced by a simple perplex expression,swaged in my face. The pain of the abrupt return to material plane throbbed deep in my eyeballs, so hard I didn’t even remember the revolver inside the desk drawer.

“Hey! What the hell?! You can’t...” the man protested just before the mysterious invader twisted his arm with a scarily casual movement.

“The deceased said he loves you and doesn’t remember where he’s hidden the money. Now let’s go. Come back another day,” and, taking the woman by the wrist, led both out of the apartment.

“They did not pay...” The rumble of the closing door just stifled my words.

“Yeah, what a pity, Fred. I think I have more important business with you,” he said in his tone, meek and casual but impregnated with an insistent impatience.“I need you to find some motherfucker and help me drag him back to hell.”

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“Here it is,” I said, serving the coffee.“Sugar?”

“Fuck no.”

I ignored the newcomer’s language, limiting myself to sitting and watching him with a significant dose of apprehension. On the other side of the table, right in front of me, there was this intriguing figure: A not so tall not so old man dressed, without any care, with a creased topcoat over an exaggeratedly bulky fur. In his mouth, a pair of cheap and smelly cigarettes.Along his pale rubbery skin, a mazy bunch of dark veins emerged from his neck and spread through the head, completely naked – except for a fading beard on the chin. I could swear I sometimes saw back stains on the corners of his eyes, sunk in cadaverous dark circles. I felt like they slipped on a thick tar layerinside his orbits every time they aimed me. A sensation hard to describe, even harder to withstand.

“So... You’re from hell then?” I tried to dialogue. “Hell, like... The hell? Literally?”

I rubbed my hands between the thighs when, in a single swig, he emptied the cup, his cigarettes falling to the flour with indifference.

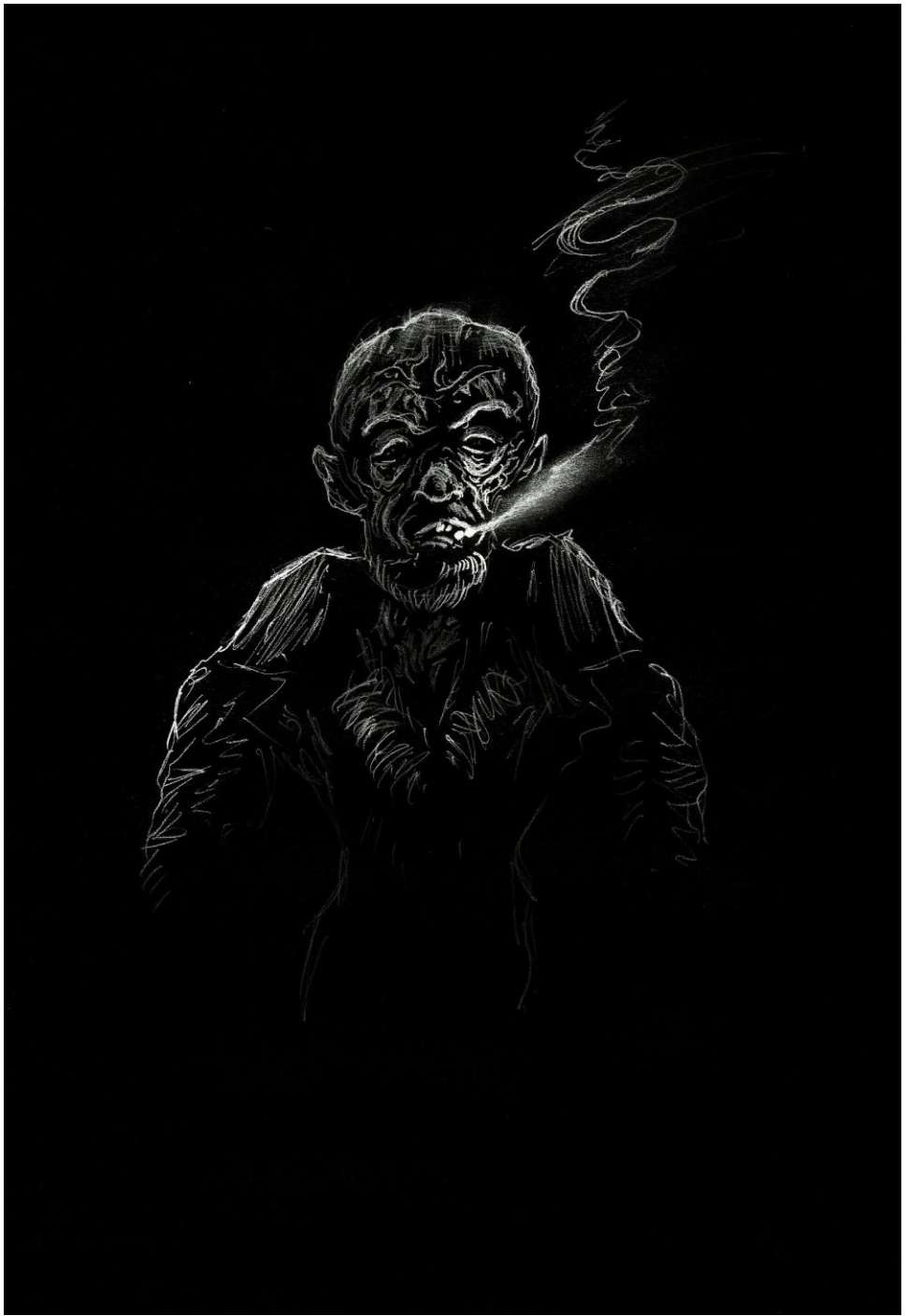
“It’s cold,” he complained, wiping the mouth with the topcoat sleeve.

“I almost burned myself making this crap! It’s not possible...”

“And yes, I’m from hell,” he interrupted.“Literally.”

I swallowed hard.

“I came to this end-of-the-world searching for some Ramires guy, a son of a bitch that ran away from the depths. And, well... I usually don’t need any kind of help to do my job but, here in this plane, I’m stuck within this useless piece of meat you





people gave me. That's why I came to see you," and, lighting another pair of cigarettes, he stared me with his abysmal eyes. "Did you understand or you need me to explain it again?"

The dreadful serenity with which he pronounced every word took away the strength from my legs. Not just that but also his flaming aura consuming the room until its last remaining energy. Years of work wasted. Being next to him was like to fall without moving.

"Sorry, I-I'm... I'm a good guy. I don't wanna go to hell for helping you. You seem to be a nice fellow but..."

"Oh, shut the fuck up. It's not like you die and there's one of those turncoats with your records saying: *Hmmmm, then you gave a hand to the old Barrabás... Looks like hell for you, boy. Sorry.*"

"And how you even know that?! Have you ever died?!"

Only after a brief moment of silence, I realised the daring of what I said. To raise the voice against a demon was certainly not my cleverest attitude; However, his reaction has simply a curious reflection.

"You know... You're smarter than your cousin told me."

"Cousin?! My cousin, André?! He's in hell?!"

"And how do you think I got here? Phone book?"

"But... But..."

"Well, nobody is that good after you take a closer look," he commented, sometime between those stinky breathings. "That's why hell is so crowded. You humans like these evil stuff things. You're wicked, even more than us."

"I-it... But I..." I stuttered.

Now somethings started to make sense.

"And then?" he cut off my thoughts. "You're gonna help me or not?"

I stared him uncertain.

"What if I refuse?"

"What if you refuse?" he repeated, reaching out for my abandoned thurible. "Perhaps I could stick this shit so deep in your ass that you'd pass the next two months farting smoke. What about that?"

"All right, all right! I do it! But could you please quit this bad language? This is my sanctuary of work and meditation."

"Fuck your meditation bullshit! I live in hell, boy! How the fuck you think we talk there?!" and, for the first time, I saw a reddish spark lighting those eyes.

"OK, I got it. Cool."

"No, not cool, Fred. Don't wanna things to be cool. I wanna do my damn job and go back home, the sooner the better. I'm not on vacations here," he growled, gradually returning to his normal voice. "I just want things to be exactly where they must be, you caught it? I'm not gonna scald you or something unless you ask for it."

"Oh... It... Yes, yes, I caught it... Its..." I tried to say "This scape from hell thing... I've never seen anything like that... Does it happen frequently? I need to know how it works."

"Why so curious? Any plans for afterlife?" He lifted an eyebrow.

"No, no! It's... I need some details... To do my job."

"I know, I know..." Another smelly breathe out. "You do your job, I do mine."

He then sneaked his deathlike finger to a topcoat pocket from where he took little circle sunglasses strangely suitable for his lightly rounded face. As he did it, I conjectured in silence about the man behind those lenses, the skin whose possessor now wore like clothing. It's possible that someday the man had owned a stout body, maybe a fat one, which had been somehow emptied out, just like a burst balloon.

Was there any life remaining there within? A glimmer of consciousness forced to watch everything in mute agony? The mere speculation made me sick.

"I won't be an asshole and tell you the ways to avoid Hades, boy, though... Hmmm..." he proceeded. "Think about hell as a big government department, a public repartition, the worst ever. This third world department has too many people to attend and too few employees for that. Of course the employees are competent and well trained, but still few. A third of all the angels may sound great for you humans, no? Remember that heaven has twice the staff for a ten, twenty times smaller population. No one fuckin' cares about that while walking through the world shitting everywhere around, about all the work we have... Like we enjoyed it..."

"You don't?"

"After the first century, even the most sadistic devil gets tired. That's why I requested my transfer to a more bureaucratic sector. The arthritis were killing me... Although, how I told you... With a small staff we accumulate functions. So here I am."

"I thought you demons had some sort of angelical health."

"Try spending three hundred years skinning heretics," he said in response. "Now... Enough chatting for today. Time to work."

"No, wait! Could you just tell me if I'm considered heretic or...?"

"Not my department, pal. The ordinances change from time to time, I gave up reading them after the 1666 fire."

I tried to murmur something affirmative without weeping.

"What about working now?" he inquired me. "Unfortunately, in this poor human form I can't help you to track Ramires, you're gonna have to do it by yourself, sorry. We start immediately."

"Hold on! This sort of thing is not that simple. To summon a spirit without any reference is like to call someone without a number. Give me first an area code, a phone book..."

"I fuckin' hate analogies. We banned it from hell six decades ago."

"All right, no more analogies..." I ensured. "I just need some information from the dead one. Could you help me with that?"

He then stood up and, making me wither more and more with each step, walked around the table in my direction. I backed off when he reached out for me, but, insisting, his fingers touched my *ajna*. It dumped a visceral amount of information into my brain, which broke through every gate of my sanity over a long instant of eternal seconds.

"Enough?" I heard his voice among sharp tones of buzzes.

For a while, I recovered myself – what, at first, I was not entirely sure I could do. However, as soon as the world stopped quaking under my feet, I had a solution in my mind.

I pondered carefully about it.

“You know... When my clients come to see me, they usually bring the spirit with them. It’s like the own deceased induced them to the idea, a mute and invisible supplication... An efficient one,” I explained. “Although, sometimes I need to go for the spirits, and it can be more or less complicated... If there’s a trail, it’s good... If they’re still at home or somewhere familiar, it’s good too. I can guide them here mostly... The problem is when their essences are hard bonded to some place. Heaven and hell, for example, are inaccessible to me. I just work with the lost ones, those who can’t go away.”

“Right, and what’s the condition of our friend, Ramires?”

“Well... It looks like an outside work to me.”

A demonic eyebrow lifted behind the sunglasses.

“Only after another cup of coffee.”

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“I have a question for you, human.”

I gave him a look as we walked through the penumbra of the desert street.

“If you are such a good medium, why do you need all that stupid stuff?” he asked me.

“You mean the adornments? The charms?”

“Yeah, the stupid stuff.”

I sighed. I was starting to get used to his heavy extradimensional presence, what do not mean I liked it.

“It’s hard to explain... It’s how... People who come to my office want to believe in what I do. Deep in their heart, they really want it to be true... After all, no one likes to be fooled, right? But, before that, they need me to convince them – a proof that they’re not giving their money to a trickster or something,” I tried my best to clarify. “Of course I could simply close my eyes and do what I do, but people don’t really expect for that. It would seem false, you know? Like if I was laughing at their naiveté.”

The devilman agreed with a gesture.

“The truth is that they need some theatrics to trust,” I proceeded. “A crystal necklace, a mysterious symbol, the half-light... Every element makes the difference. Even I feel more confident that way.”

“Hm... You sons of Eden truly are odder than I imagined,” he said. “Even in hell you’re so weird. Non-stop screaming. I mean: You developed this mechanism for calling attention, asking for help or whatever. Other animals do it too. And, although knowing nobody is gonna rescue you, you stupid assholes scream out anyway. It’s curious.”

I swallowed hard for the hundredth time that night. With some courage mustered, I took the next step.

"I have a question too," I risked. "You had your answer, now I may have mine, right?"

"You don't make the rules here," he retorted without taking away the watch from the suburban street.

"I supposed you demons enjoy deals."

"Wrong. This one is the external sales department," he laughed. "But OK, do your damn question. You got my attention now."

"Thanks, I... I mean... This body you're using... Is there someone alive there inside? You possessed it or..."

The infernal being gave me a smile, the yellow teeth protruding from dark retracted gums, and then stopped to open his coats.

"Trust me, boy... You don't really wanna know."

Amid the fur, his pallid chest showed a complex set of profound darkish scars from where throbbing veins spread along the skin. Ribs seemed opened, mangled with a frightful wound, which cut him from the navel up to the throat.

I almost threw up.

"But, yes, there's something of life in this casing," he admitted. "And it'll continue like that till I finish my job."

"It means..."

"It means that, if you try anything stupid, I'll carry your skinny ass back to hell with me."

And, that being said, he grabbed me by the shirt and pulled me nearer. Among the breath of cigarettes and coffee, a sulphuric smell filled the air when his eyes blazed once more. Rising from his ajar mouth, the smoke was no more tobacco, but a fervent steam that distorted his diabolical face. One of the lenses cracked and a weak bright came from the deep of his throat. My hand went for the gun in an instinctive movement. It was still hidden under the jacket.

"Did I make myself..." he said when the sound of the shot devoured his voice.

He dropped me to the asphalt, confused, searching for the perforation. That surprised me either. I hadn't shot and that was all I knew. So who did it?

"What the fuck?!" he growled, staring the houses ahead.

Along the sidewalks there was nothing to be seen other than a distant figure that, toneless, wandered through the scenery. It was the first time I noticed it, and I could probably tell the same for my partner. We immediately knew it was the sort of strangeness we were looking for. We followed it.

"You're seeing the same as me?" I wanted to be sure.

"Don't know. What **you** are seeing?"

"A ghost probably."

"Then yes. Looks like one of those motherfuckers."

We followed it for a couple of minutes more until it changed its way, entering the gardens of an abandoned house. We watched as it crossed the short brick wall through a little iron door and walked among the high grass to the entrance of the

building. An astral moaning of the hinges, silence and then explosion. The shot lightened the broken windows with a bang, so high I judged it should not belong to any weapon from this century.

"At least we found our host," commented the devil. "And there he comes again."

Looking back, we saw the distant unfortunate being redoing its way to the house.

"He's reliving the death moment," I concluded.

"Reliving is certainly not the best word."

"Only God can tell how he suffered. Should have been a great trauma."

"Yeah, of course," the demon agreed with neglect and pushed me to the gardens.

"Just don't talk about the Big Guy again. We don't wanna call unnecessary attention."

"What? God?"

"What the fuck I just told you?!"

"All right, sorry."

We stopped at the entrance of the ruins. The high walls rose two floors above us and many yards along the propriety, surrounded by naked brick buildings and local stores. Amid that neighbourhood, the house exhaled an air of singularity, as if it was time-frozen, imprisoned in an unchangeable state. Its energy was intoxicating, hallucinogen, in a very bad way.

"I told Nietzsche once that, if The Guy is dead, all you people are orphans then," he commented. "It explains a lot."

"Oh, this sounds so mean in so many ways... Wait! Nietzsche is in hell?!"

"Not exactly," and then stepped ahead.

With an abrupt movement although, I grabbed him by the arm in a last attempt of ridding myself of this situation that, so suddenly, invaded my life.

"Wait! I... I have a proposal for you."

He stared me.

"I don't know what I mean, pal; I'm on business here, so..."

"No, listen to me!" I insisted. "You shouldn't waste this opportunity. You're in earth, beyond the reach of any superior. Why don't you just go away and get rid of this eternal enslaving?! You're free to do whatever you wish."

In response, he laughed aloud.

"Yeah, I totally dream about living on this freezing piece of shit," he muttered, ironic. "Now **you** listen to me, kid. I'm sorry to say, but you're not the first one to come up with such a stupid idea. From the very beginning, people try to avoid hell – people who prefer to live hidden in these mutilated corpses the worshippers give us. So let me tell you something and, for hell, remember it till the last day of your miserable existence: No one fucks Satan. The guy fuck asses since before the creation. Cheat him is not that clever, you know? I'm not gonna tell you the details cause I'm a nice guy, OK? Now enter this shit!"

And pushed me door in.

Inside the house, the atmosphere seemed to change to a more oppressor and suffocating substance, something that strangled the time and stole the air from my chest. Each hair of my skin bristled to hear the mourn that echoed along the halls

as if hundreds of voices cried in unison, cloistered in the walls. There was no God in that place.

I walked hesitating to the entrance of the rooms. On the right, in an empty chamber after the stairs, a black ooze moved, consumed by darkness. It climbed the walls running upward like a twisted-gravitation slime. I could see white eyes opening to me, too much to count.

"Relax." The pale hand on my shoulder scared me even more. "The most dangerous thing here is right next to you. None of that can hurt you, unless I want it to."

"A-and... And I... Can trust you?"

"Of course not! Don't be a fool," he joked, guiding me upstairs. "But you haven't any choice, have you?"

"I... I think I haven't..."

As I moved up terrified, ethereal footprints marked the powder on the steps by my side. They walked with me until they suddenly stopped. Almost at the end of the stairway, I could hear the thumps of flesh hitting the steps, shattering the handrail on its rolling way back to the hall. With a brief nervous peek, I confirmed what was already on my mind: There was no handrail.

"What is this place?"

"Some kind of ghost receptacle, a refuge for the lost souls," he told me. "They are somehow attracted to these dimensional chasms and get trapped by the power of the crevice."

"Like those places where the animals kill themselves?"

"Yeah, like those places where the animals kill themselves."

I stepped on cold water whilst crossing the dark. Although my pupils tried to adapt to the environment, the weak light on my backs was useless, sinking me into blindness. For a while, my feed became the only reference of the world. Just when my partner used the lighter for his cigarettes, I could see what was ahead.

It's curious that my flesh eyes could paint what I just felt as spectres in my mind. Though I doubted any of my senses, there she was when I looked, sitting on the floor in front of me – and that I'm really sure about. Black wet hair falling over white shoulders like cataracts, long bony arms hugging the scratched knees. The light turned off before I could see more.

My fear was great, but my reaction, stunned. I glacial gust of sharp knives invaded my body. In my whole career, I can tell no other moment more terrible and creepy than this one.

"She's one of ours," grumbled the devil, relighting.

The lighter flame shone weird and unnatural in his hand, a sight quite difficult to describe.

"Hard to say when she escaped... Maybe an old one, hm?"

Backing off, I beheld the frail haunt oblivious to our presence, her fingers going for the mouth, nailing the inner bottom lip and, in a slow pull, ripping out the skin from gums to neck. Dark dripping blood on the torn cheeks, the osseous chin grimy

with rotten flesh. The eyes kept static while her loose and pendant teeth lacerated the newly extracted skin.

The sound stillechoes in my memories.

“Holy Christ.”

“We don’t wanna bother this Guy too.”

“You’re gonna take her with us?” I asked, apprehensive.

“No... Someone else’s problem,” and turned off the light.

I held his topcoat and turned back to the stairs. I was tired of surprises, that one just pissed me even more: The staircase was now upward again.

“Are we... In the basement?” it came out like a whisper.

“The house is cheating us. I’ll need your skills to get Ramires away.”

“I’m trying! I’m trying! It’s not easy!” I wailed, fighting against the terror that devoured me inside out.

“Try harder.” Another push upstairs.

I barely recovered from my last fright when, halfway, the moan of the steps under my feet became a wood-breaking crack. This new horror I now faced swallowed me into complete blackness, dragging me to the cold swampy fluid of a narrow well. Nothing more than my own hysterical respiration to hear, nothing more than imagination to see.

Under me, the slimy mud moved bubbling with my desperate tries of climbing back. Whispers behind me, distant screams suffocated by the hollow, lost, unreachable. Maddening terror. My claustrophobic prison soon turned against me, holding my heels with its mazing viscous fingers. I cried and kicked trying to propel myself above the water that already reached my chest, but in vain. What finally took me out of that torment was a steady hand that grabbed my jacket and pulled through the barbed wood.

“What the fuck happened?!” He dropped me to the ground.

I rolled around in shock, paying no attention to the new change of scenery. We were now in a wide room with no doors or windows, fact that I just noticed after throwing up the doughy mixture of leeches and tar that filled my stomach.

I wept, disconsolate.

“For goodness sake, take me out of here!” I begged. “I can stand no more...”

“Oh, please, stop the shit! We’re almost there.”

“I don’t even know how much time we spent here!”

“Five minutes, five hours... What matters?! Time here do not work right,” and, putting me up again, he looked me in the eyes. “Hold the fuck on! We’re in this shit together, remember?”

I agreed with a head movement. It was like his voice woke up the last fragments of will and rage inside me. Or maybe the time passed too quickly for my self-conflicting feelings. It was hard to tell.

Compelled by invisible and incomprehensible forces, I kept standing and wandered around the place. I cleaned the blood of my hands during those several hours of walk along the ebony room. The devil was always by my side.

It's strange to realize that the memories of those days constantly vanish or are adulterated in my violated brains, going away and coming back with illogical frequency. I could swear an eternity and a half passed until we found the trembling form among the shadows, a decrepit man covered in bloody pustules and wounds. His skin, degenerated by a horrible disease, detached from the body as he attacked it in compulsive scratching. I remember him clearly. It was like we found a stable point in the middle of a nightmare hurricane, terra firma amid a profane storm.

"You hide pretty well, Ramires... The heart of the crevice, hm?" The fiend smiled. "It's a pity that sooner or later I'd find you."

"Please..." the ghost entreated. "Please, I did not want to..."

"Enough talking. I hope you enjoyed your vacations."

"No!" he yelled when clutched by the neck and held against the wall.

Was there really a wall? I believe so.

I remember my partner taking from his clothes a little metal bottle poorly carved with ideograms, from which he removed the stopper with the teeth.

I ask myself how his material hands could detain the intangible being – perhaps I don't really want to know. What I recall is the satanic runes shining under his fingers while Ramires struggled in incorporeal spasms, deforming his features, casting his screams through time and space.

"Please, no! No! Please!" he cried out. "I know what I did, I know! But I don't deserve that! Please, no! Mercy! **Mercy!**"

What was left of his eyes gazed at me. His voice escaped from the lips as a supplication.

"Help me..."

His words were not human spoken but directly connected to my core, translating feelings and wills intelligible only in non-verbal ways. For an instant, I lost control of my actions. And, even without knowing what to do, I did it. It felt like releasing a long-repressed instinct inside me. Just sometime after I searched justification for my own unthoughtful acts. Maybe I simply wanted to be free of all that. Maybe it was pure empathy. I'll never be totally sure.

"Oh, really?" the devil asked, noticing the gun in my hands. "Are you gonna take up cudgels for him now that we're almost finished? You fuckin' know what he did?"

"Of course I do! You threaded it in my head!" I shouted at him.

In some kind of trance, I relived the intruder memories that overran my senses and amalgamated with my own. I could feel the fire on my backs, consuming my flesh with diabolical crackles.

"Hear me, boy. We're done here. It's just a matter of taking this son of a bitch back to hell. So don't fuck with me!" He enraged as never before, his eyes blazing in pure flames. "Besides, you're gonna need me to get out of this shit."

My hands shook trying to hold tight the revolver. Around me, as I broke out in a cold sweat, the demonic voice distorted to an increasingly bass tone.

"I have him..." that was all I could say before the shot.



The creature then, though injured in the chest, attacked and knocked me down. When I realised, he was over me, his unnatural weight keeping me down exposed to his fists, which raised to a mortal hit.

"You made a big mistake, son," the beast said. "See you in hell."

I closed my eyes and shot again. When I opened them, I saw the ectoplasmic figure holding my aggressor back. It reminded me the fear that so long exhausted me, its spiritual effects, and, for the first time ever, I thanked God for being a coward.

"Better than trusting you," and emptied the cylinder on the walking corpse.

Just with the thud of the falling body on my side, I allowed me to relax. I dropped the gun trembling and took a long breath. It was finished.

"Thank you," I heard inside my skull.

"Thank you, too," I answered in my contemplation of the ceiling above.

Flesh and soul were a great single nerve exposed, a root of pain growing through the planes, shouting a single question: *What have I done?*

"Did he tell you his name?" the phantasmagorical cloud inquired.

"He... Mentioned a name..." I remembered. "But I don't think he would be stupid enough to tell his own..."

"You must hide... Protect yourself... He has eternity to chase you."

"Are **you** really worried about me?" I was finally able to laugh after all that torture. "Take us out of this place, please... As soon as the sun rises, I'll enter every church and temple I find... From today on, I live a holy life."

I gave him a smile, the kind of smile only those who have dived deep in the eyes of death are able to give.

"And to hell with those motherfuckers!"

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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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.

