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Yellow-Booke.

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

Hallowe'en Edition.

Edited By

M. GRANT KELLERMAYER





Oldstyle Tales Press

SUPERNATURAL, WEIRD, & HORROR FICTION

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INTRODUCTION

— *M. Grant Kellermeyer*

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

M. Grant Kellermeyer

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA, FALL 2016

✠ AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES ✠

Mark Nixon

Mark Nixon is a horror writer who dwells by a graveyard in County Durham, England. His passion lies in traditional horror, the strong belief that less is more, and that all horror stories should be a paradoxical mix of terror and delight.

Founder and Editor of shadowsatthedoor.com, Mark enjoys sharing the ghastly, the ghoulish and the macabre with the world. If a reader double checks the lock on their door before bed, he considers it a job well done. An published anthology 'Shadows at the Door' is due for a November 2016 release, following a successful Kickstarter campaign.

Influences include, but are not limited to M.R. James, Washington Irving, H.G. Wells, Stephen King, Susan Hill, Neil Gaiman and Charles Dickens.

K.C. Hunter

The writer and creator of the dark fantasy series Paris and the children's series Dorian Delmontez™. KC Hunter has been a storyteller since he was twelve-years-old, and through various media during his life, been telling them ever since. He won a National Young Writers Award in 1994 and had several poems published in his teen years. He later delved into music, live performance and interactive media development, but still continued to write through the early 2000s.

In 2008, he developed the concept of merging his skills at web design, multimedia development and writing into a new form of storytelling media: Electronic Media Entertainment. His goal is to expand the universe of a story from being confined to one medium (a book, a game, a graphic novel) into a multi-layered universe that encompasses a variety of media types. He currently lives in Owings Mills, Maryland and is a member of various clubs in the Baltimore Metropolitan area.

Inspirational writers: Clive Barker, Stephen King, China Mieville, H.P. Lovecraft

Trevor Hill

Trev Hill studied theatre, linguistics and anthropology in Scotland and Northern Ireland, undertaking fieldwork in the Balkans and Poland (where he now lives). After writing a number of academic papers and articles for professional teaching publications, Trev began to write ghostly plays for his Polish youth theatre group and later turned to writing short stories, several influenced by his anthropological fieldwork. His work has appeared on a number of websites, including Deadman's Tome and Drunk Monkeys and the

horror magazine Sanitorium. Away from his ghostly scribblings, Trev sings folk songs and performs traditional Punch and Judy puppetry.

His favorite writers are M.R. James, Stephen King, James Herbert, Le Fanu, and Dickens.

M. D. Campbell

M.D. Campbell received a Bachelor of Arts in Technical Theatre from Western Michigan University and a Master of Fine Arts in the same from Northern Illinois University. His interest in horror fiction began in his youth with Stephen King and then worked backward to include H.P. Lovecraft, Ray Bradbury, Robert W. Chambers, and Philip K. Dick among others. This has contributed into making writing a hobby and creative outlet for him. He currently resides in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Matthew Gorman

Matthew Gorman is an author of speculative fiction residing in Seattle, Washington, who has enjoyed (or perhaps suffered from) a life-long obsession with all things horror and sci-fi related, penning his very first horror story for his sixth-grade English class at the age of twelve. He has dabbled in the occult and supernatural for all his life, seeing ghosts from an early age, but preferring now to only write about such matters in the fictional sense, for you see, he is very much a resolute coward when it comes to confronting the otherworldly in his day-to-day existence. Ha ha ha. Seriously though.

Matthew is a huge fan of classic horror in the vein of Edgar Allen Poe (he once memorized every single stanza of "The Raven" just because he enjoyed it so much), H.P. Lovecraft, and Robert Chambers, as well as a steadfast acolyte of such modern horror luminaries as Clive Barker and Stephen King.

Taral Wayne

A native of Toronto, Canada, the author has been a professional comic artist and magazine illustrator, and has 11 Hugo nominations for illustrating amateur publications in science fiction fandom. Now that he is on the doorstep of retirement, Taral is hopeful of beginning of yet another career – writer. It is not altogether that dramatic a change for him, as he has been writing humour, personal reminiscences and critical material for the fan press for the last 40-or-so years, publishing much of it himself. In fact, he has recently completed the final, 50th issue of his personal journal, Broken Toys. But now that Taral is growing a little long in the tooth, he wishes to try his hand at something different, and in the last couple of years begun writing stories. Most have been drawn from Taral's own experience, hobbies, and whimsies, but of late there has been a dawning interest in professional publication. His first accepted story was in the previous Yellow Booke. Sure, retirement is a little late to be starting, but it's never too late, is it?

Douglas Kemp

Douglas Kemp took early retirement from the civil service in England in 2013 and lives in Northamptonshire, with his wife Cathy. He read widely and enjoys 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.

Charles Wilkinson

Charles Wilkinson's publications include *The Pain Tree and Other Stories* (London Magazine Editions, 2000). His stories have appeared in *Best Short Stories 1990* (Heinemann), *Best English Short Stories 2* (W.W. Norton, USA), *Best British Short Stories 2015* (Salt) and in anthologies and magazines such as *Supernatural Tales*, *Horror Without Victims* (Megazanthus Press), *Rustblind and Silverbright* (Eibonvale Press), *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction*, *Phantom Drift* (USA), *Bourbon Penn* (USA), *Shadows & Tall Trees* (Canada), *Nightscript* (USA), *The Yellow Booke* (USA) and *Best Weird Fiction 2015* (Undertow Books, Canada). His collection of strange tales and weird fiction, *A Twist in the Tale*, is forthcoming from Egeaus Press.

Lee Todd Lacks

Lee Todd Lacks is a mixed-media artist and music therapist, who seeks to blur the distinctions between rants, chants, anecdotes, and anthems. His experience of living with significant vision and hearing deficits tends to inform his writing and artwork, which has appeared in *Bop Dead City*, *Tincture Journal*, *Liquid Imagination*, *Yellow Mama*, *EXPOUND*, *Crack The Spine*, and elsewhere. His poem, "Durgin-Park," won the Bop Dead City Beginnings Contest in July of 2015. In October of 2015, his spoken-word poem, "Holocaust Memorial," won the Blue Monday Review Storytime Challenge.

My favorite authors of horror and weird fiction include Edgar Allan Poe, William S. Burroughs, and William Gibson.

Patricia Evans

Patricia Evans writes under the name of Francine Lepore because that name is so much darker than her white bread real name. She has a degree in English and one in law, and practiced in matrimonial law, where she came across many situations more bloodchilling than even the worst horror story.

She lives in Vancouver, Canada, with her spouse and deliberately does not participate in any of the cheery physical activities, such as hiking, kayaking, or jogging which are common there, preferring to hide in her study, or in out of the way coffee shops where she can think.

She is a fan of horror and sci-fi movies and books. Her favourite writers are Stephen King, Barbara Vine and Mo Hayden.

Glenn Don Mc Dorman

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

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

David Levell

I'm a writer from Sydney, Australia, with an interest in the strange and the gothic, particularly in historical settings. My non-fiction book 'Tour To Hell' is the true history of convicts who escaped into the Australian outback to seek other countries or mythical European-style societies that might shelter them. An iceberg's tip of favourite and influential writers would include Melville, Poe, Machen, the Brontes, and RL Stevenson. Mountains, deserts and the sea also inspire me. I've a scattering of short stories in various publications, and work principally as a freelance journalist for magazines and newspapers. I write songs and play mandolin in the Sydney-based band Mysterious Universe.

Glenn James

Glenn James is a Dark Fantasy writer and artist who is carving a place for himself with his finely wrought shadowed tales. He has an ancient Celtic inheritance from both sides of his family, and has been described as having "A true talent for Darkness." An accomplished radio writer and performer, his dark prose has appeared in print in the "Ripples" and "Horror Express" anthologies, "Second City Scares", "The Eerie Digest" and the Dark Hall Press "Ghost Anthology" in the United States. He is Co-Founder and originator of the genre open mic night "42" in Britain, alongside his wife Angela James, a performance platform designed for authors of Gothic, Horror, Fantasy, and Sci-Fi works. Creator of the vampire Skaler, Glenn is working on the first Skaler novel, and a collection of his short

stories. Born originally in Birmingham, he lives in Staffordshire Angela, and their two daughters Charlotte and Elizabeth.

With regard to favourite authors, the list is as follows: M. R. James, Robert Louis Stevenson, Bram Stoker, H. P. Lovecraft, Algernon Blackwood, Edith Nesbit, Angela Carter, Robert Bloch, H. G. Wells, Arthur Conan Doyle, Terry Pratchett and the Brothers Grimm.

Matthew Banks

Matthew E Banks is a graduate of University of Plymouth with a degree in English and Creative Writing. He lives in deepest, darkest Cornwall with {10} his wife Samantha, who is an English Literature postgraduate. Matthew's main field of interest is the supernatural in all its manifestations having published numerous ghost stories, horror film history and research on Bela Lugosi. His fiction is influenced by M.R. James, Stephen King, H. R. Wakefield, and J.R.R. Tolkien: "It may seem strange, but my inspiration for my ghost stories, other than M.R. James, the father of the modern ghost story, is J.R.R. Tolkien - in as much as I want to create a world/place where the dead do walk. Cornwall with its unworldliness and remoteness is the source for this 'world' that I have created within the confines of my short stories." He also likes Dr Who, haunted houses and Vampires and regularly contributes to We Belong Dead Magazine, Reflections Magazine and The Spectral Times.

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

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

MEMENTO MORI.
— *Common gravestone epitaph*



The Yellow-Booke.

THE CORRUPTION OF HAWKSWOOD

— *Mark Nixon*

IF one were to drive southbound from the historic city of Durham, following the winding roads through the old pit villages, you would eventually come to a quiet road, shadowed by the presence of trees. Before long the road will widen to half-reveal a turning on the right, often missed if travelling too quickly. Nestled between the densely-packed trees stands a grand iron gate; this is the entrance to Hawkswood Country Park.

Within, a small lake lies silently between sloping hills. On the east embankment, the water splinters into stretching ponds embedded in a surrounding nature trail – the main attraction for visiting families. Yet today, the usual sound of children is absent, heavy clouds obscuring the true passage of time. A Sunday here is rarely so still, and somewhere, a lone dog barks and the sound rolls over the hills.

The peaks overlooking the park are largely vacant, the grass is long overdue a trim and sways in the sporadic breeze. A solitary figure saunters up from the lake path, a long trail of sunken footprints behind him. His hands rest in the pockets of his unfastened coat, a thick jumper shielding him from the cold of the sharp autumnal air. He keeps his head bowed, and walks without purpose.

Save for the occasional rambler, he is alone in his corner of the park. The solitude is welcome, and the silence even more so. His breathing grows heavy as he reaches the crest of the hill, and he stops a moment to take in the scene. On better days, the serene view has offered a pleasant moment of escape. Today, he sees a veil of grey, threatening to entirely envelop the surrounding landscape. He exhales loudly, and deliberately; maybe the walk isn't going to do the trick today. Behind him, the trees dance as a strong gust rattles them to life, their dying leaves tearing loose and darting across the terrain.

He half-turns, and catches sight of the woodland behind him. Despite the pale light of the afternoon, the trees are swathed in darkness, anything beyond the first few feet remaining a mystery to those on its outskirts. Strange, he thinks, how he has never paid them any mind before today. As he gazes into the woods, a flash of brown streaks past his peripheral vision. The movement catches him off guard, and he stumbles backwards, barely remaining on his feet. He chuckles awkwardly, more for the benefit of anyone who may have seen him than for himself. Glancing down at his feet, he is confronted by his assailant: a doe-eyed, panting dog. It settles itself, and sits dutifully. A handsome English Cocker Spaniel, its coat is rich and shiny; the kind of dog you might see on a tin of upmarket dog food.

He likes it instantly.

“Sorry about that!” Calls a well-spoken voice.

Over the brow of the hill appears a heavy set gentleman adorned with a flat-cap, struggling to conquer the last few steps.

“It’s okay,” he replies. Deciding to steal some affection, he squats and rubs a hand lightly on the dog’s head.

“Hello you.”

The dog pushes her head into his hand, and closes her eyes. He beams, and sensing her master’s approach, straightens up.

“She loves a new face,” the ruddy-faced man smiles. Motioning to his dog, he removes his cap and wipes a hand across his forehead. “I swear if we had a break-in, she’d open the bloody door.”

He turns to his pet.

“Felicity! Leave the man alone. Come on girl.” He pulls his hat back on, securing it with a quick tug across his brow.

Felicity remains still; she knows better than to try and climb a stranger’s leg. Nonetheless, she wants to play, the thundering of her tail against the ground betraying her obedient exterior. The younger man offers her a knowing smile. She seems to smile back.

“Really, it’s okay,” he protests, secretly keen to keep her company for a little longer.

“Nonsense,” comes the reply. Reaching into his pocket, Felicity’s owner presents a small ball.

“Felicity!”

Her head pricks up instantly, and she springs effortlessly to all fours, her eyes fixed on the ball. She follows it as he waves it to-and-fro, before launching it with a grunt. Bolting after her prize as it soars through the air, it becomes apparent the man has overshot his target, as it crashes through the reaching branches of the trees.

“Bugger.”

A foot from the edge of the woods, she stops sharply, her paws digging into the ground ahead of her in a desperate bid to halt her momentum.

Hesitantly surveying the forest, she paces, gazing pleadingly back at her master with a high pitched whine. Her master laughs.

“Go on you, stupid girl!” He turns to his temporary companion and shrugs his shoulders, before calling back to his dog. “If you don’t get it, you’ve lost it.”

Felicity walks slowly back, whimpering all the way, her head hanging low.

“What am I going to do with you, girl?”

She offers him her best begging look.

“Well I’m not getting it, you’ll never do anything for yourself then.”

He motions his head back down the hill.

“Come on then! Say bye!”

The two men exchange smiles, nod as men often do when there isn’t much to say, and part ways. As Felicity and her master disappear from sight, he again becomes aware of the stark silence of the park, empty and imposing in its vastness.

Maybe he should get a dog.

Something tickles his nose, his hand instinctively leaps to his face to brush it away. The same feeling hits his cheek, spattering cold, wet freckles of liquid across

his skin. He shrinks inside his coat against the ensuing downpour. Nothing too heavy was forecast for today; he decides to outwait the weather. He continues his walk, along the boundaries of the woodland. The rain settles atop his hair, droplets rolling toward his scalp like water on blades of grass.

Soon the rain falls heavier, its fat beads tumbling down his forehead into his eyes. He blinks it away, irritated; the weather shows no sign of improvement, and he would prefer not to slowly get soaked. He considers taking shelter under the twisted canopy of branches, and as the rainwater begins to creep down the neck of his jumper, the decision is made.

Gradually, sodden grass gives way to bald, bubbling mud, and warped, knotted roots erupt from the ground as the forest thickens. The trees around him multiply, the open space of the hill shrivelling in the distance, until the woods have swallowed him completely.

The roar of rain over the brittle autumn leaves validates his choice, and he dusts what droplets make it through the thicket above from his shoulders. With nowhere to go, and time to kill, he decides to tread on down this less trodden path.

He tramps on, the crackling of twigs beneath him, the patter of the rain creating a pleasing blanket of white noise. Despite the soft ambient sounds around him, it is clear he is utterly alone.

Beginning to make notes of his path, he lays a trail of mental breadcrumbs should he need to retrace his steps. Dull light permeates through the earthy branches, casting a shimmering light across the almost entirely intact desire lines ahead. The breeze barely penetrates the density of the trees, the decaying leaves lying motionless on the ground. A prickle begins to form at the base of his skull. What is it they call it?

The eye of the storm.

He presses on, cold fingers of unease coiling in his stomach. A sensation swells under his skin; a feeling that he should not be here.

Unaware of the shower dying off, he quickens his pace, his intentions of a gentle amble in the woods giving way to a desire for the plain open space of the hill. The foliage around him becomes thinner, paler; a much younger set of trees. Their branches are limp, and spindly, their older neighbours clearly having monopolised what scarce light is available. It takes little deductive reasoning to fathom that this area had once been cleared, if not many years since.

A shape catches his eye, off to his left. Daggers of disquiet jolt in his stomach. His attention is turned to an area off the clearing, and nearing closer he sees that cloying branches and ivy have climbed and enveloped something solid. Beneath them, barely decipherable are large blocks of stone, forming a dilapidated wall. As he circles around for a better view, it becomes clear these crumbling stockades are all that remains of a building. Its roof and half of its walls are long gone, looted or ingested by the mud. After some scrutiny, he recognises the basic shape of a small church.

On the far side wall, an empty doorframe stands. Its door has long since splintered and rotted away, but the tattered frame still cleaves, barely, to the surrounding stone. He runs his finger over the fractured wood. Long, yawning scratches are hewn into the frame, struck from multiple angles. Nothing that the indifferent destruction of nature could cause, but something quite deliberate. Something human. Their ferocity screams of desperation; a want to get beyond the door. No, he thinks, squinting into the lacerations, not a want – a need.

Passing under the frame, he idly scans the interior of the ruins. What could have had wanted to get in so badly? Toppled into the dirt, he spots the vine-encrusted remnants of the church's worn stone altar. Sheltered beneath its remaining leg, something metallic catches his eye. Reaching forward, he yanks away strands of ivy, revealing the rusted buckle of a small chest. His face fills with amazement, and for a moment, he forgets the foreboding of the ruins.

Remarkably, it remains fully intact, wedged into a concave of the altar. Lodged in the buckle is a small lock, clearly made with care and pride.

He places a hand upon the chest. The wood is worn but smooth, like a pebble on a beach. Whether by the safety of its stone marquee, or by some unnatural means, it has avoided rot and decay. Whatever is inside has been well protected. He is overcome with curiosity; he must see what is inside. Pulling, he tries to dislodge the chest. It remains firmly entrenched, mocking his feeble attempts. Cramming his feet against the altar, he tries again.

The leaves suddenly shudder behind him, as if disturbed by the scurry of feet. A splutter of alarm spews from his throat, primal and involuntary.

He whirls around and sees nothing but the dead leaves, still unmolested on the ground. His blood pounds in his ears.

“Hello?”

He receives no reply, though he is he not entirely sure he was not heard. As he scans the trees around him, he cannot shake the sensation of eyes upon him. He slowly turns back to the chest and hauls the ivy back together to cover it. A new sense of purpose upon him, he decides to return with something to crack it. With a last look over his shoulder, he leaves his prize behind.

He recalls his route well, and with the occasional backward glance, he soon spots an opening in the trees. As slips out of the reach of woods, he is greeted by the welcome sight of the lake below him. Ahead, a young family strolls carelessly along the gravelled path, and he is somewhat relieved to see another soul.

The normality of it all bolsters him, and with the benefit of hindsight, and the presence of others, he chuckles to himself at the silliness of his dread.

Despite the distance between them, he feels the pull of the chest from within its resting place in the ruins. As if it was calling to him. He would be back.

He had to have it, no matter what.

*

The murk of the night is descending swiftly as he finds himself on the road to Hawkswood Park for the second time that day. A fog hangs coolly in the air, the rush of passing cars sending its wispy fingers swirling across the country roads. A

bag of basic tools sits beside him on his passenger seat, and he heads to a pub to await the complete cover of darkness.

The Grey Horse sits a short walk from its nearest village; short enough to attract locals and long enough to sober them up again on their return to their wives. Past the farmlands that border Hawkswood Park, and down a narrow road, it is the last building you will see for miles on end.

Sunken deeply into a large leather armchair by an open fire, he is far and away the youngest patron within its walls, making him quite the novelty for gaping locals. Absently sipping at his tea, he retraces his route through the park in his mind. The carpet softening the approaching footsteps, does not hear the landlord, as he tosses a log into the hearth.

"You alright mate?" the man laughs, as his young customer's tea cup clatters in his frightened hands.

He looks up at the publican, admiring the way his thinning red hair glows in the light of the fire.

"Fine, thanks," he answers at last.

The landlord smiles, and turns back to the bar.

"Actually, if you don't mind me asking," the patron pipes up, "have you been here long? The business I mean."

"Yeah," he replies. "Been running this place, oh, close to thirty years now."

"You must have been to Hawkswood plenty in that time then."

The landlord eyes him closely, and sighs.

"You're one of those journalists, aren't you?"

"...Pardon?"

"You're writing about Hawkswood; we usually get one of your sort poking about on a slow news week."

The landlord looks his guest up and down, his somewhat youthful appearance, and urban garb seemingly enough to confirm his suspicions.

"Why, is there a story to tell?" He asks cautiously, not bothering to protest.

"Nothing that hasn't been raked up, and dragged through the mud enough already."

His brow furrows. Raked up? A casual turn of phrase, or was he meaning something literal?

The landlord returns to the bar, and abandoning his half-drunk tea, his inquisitive guest follows after him.

"I'm not a journalist, honest. I just visit the park a lot. Healthy curiosity, that's all."

The landlord turns around, taking a stray dimpled pint glass and placing it to the side.

"Well, you look the sort."

"So, what's the story with Hawkswood then?"

"Just stupid gossip," the landlord shrugs, flippantly. He seems a stout man, not prone to flimsy superstition, and yet he appears troubled by the subject matter.

“Can I get you anything else?” he asks, with a tone more threatening than curious.

The guest takes the hint.

“No, thank you,” he replies, resignedly buttoning up his coat.

“Goodnight.”

He throws open the pub doors, and the cold air bristles on his face, the setting of the sun having ushered away the last of the day’s warmth. It’s time to return to Hawkswood.

The subtle rumble of the distant motorway carries over the fields, as he climbs into his car. And yet, there’s something else glowering in ether, some other low, throbbing sound.

Something from within the chest.

*

The night is biting cold; he sniffs hard as his nose begins to stream in the cold air. He knows he will suffer for this late-night escapade in the morning. His tools wedged in his pockets, a heavy-duty torch up his sleeve, he gazes through the bars of a secondary gate at the back of the park.

“I guess I’m really doing this,” he mutters.

With a cautionary glance behind him, he slips his foot between the iron rods and hauls himself up, delicately hoisting his legs over the top. Tossing his chisel and hammer to the soft ground, he leaps after them with a loud thud.

As he makes his way through the vacant park, he pricks his ears for signs of life. Nothing but the occasional whistle of wind, and the calls of unseen birds. He makes good speed along the public path, passing groups of picnic tables, somewhat melancholy-looking under the cold blue light of the moon.

Finally reaching the expanse of hills looming over the lake, he is satisfied he has remained unseen, and flicks on his torch, its beam dissipating up the hillside. The mist swirls absently within its shaft of yellow light, serving only to exacerbate the way the hazy night has drained the landscape of its colour.

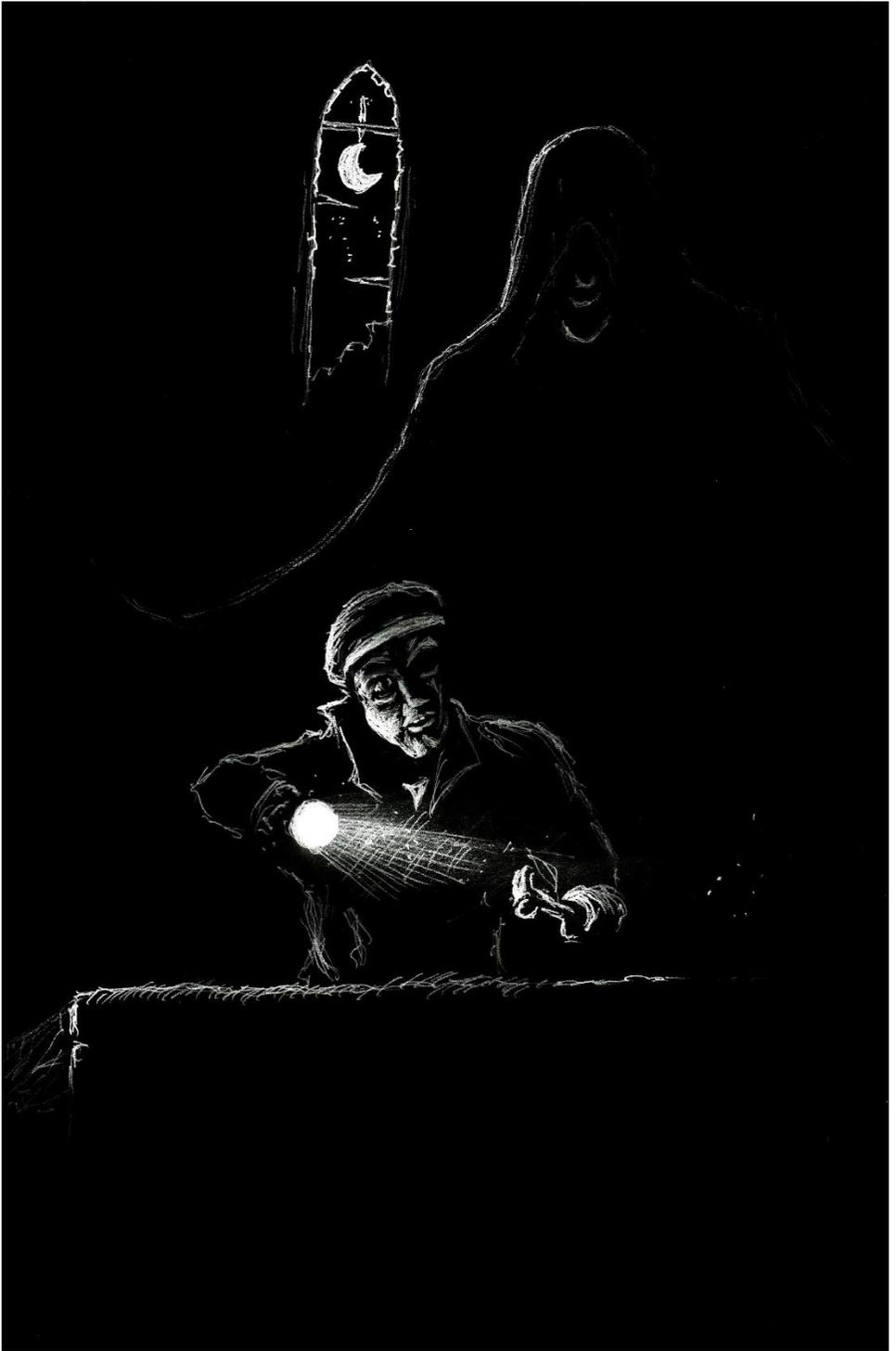
The ground begins to soften under his feet as he enters the muddy outskirts of the woods. The torch cuts through the shadows, plunging everything outside its narrow reach into absolute blackness.

A rook cries out from its perch in a nearby tree, its black eyes flashing in the light of torch. He ignores its watchful glare, and presses on. Slowly, his senses adjust to the night. The woods creak around him. Adrenaline pricks through his body, a paradoxical mix of fright and anticipation swirling in his stomach.

Just like before, the trees began to thin out, and relief sets in as he realises he is approaching the clearing. He points his torch toward the direction of ruins, but they are not yet in sight. As he flicks the light from back and forth across the clearing, his ray falls upon an unusual shape.

Immediately he swings it back, the bright light casting long, warped shadows on the ground. His eyes scour the area, desperately trying to make sense of the tangled web of branches and shadows he spots it.

A figure.



Partially obscured by a tree, it stands like a statue.

His heart freezes in his chest.

Shaking hands fumbling in his pockets, he pulls out his hammer, brandishing it at the darkness.

In a split second, the figure disappears. He flashes his torch around, frantically trying to lay eyes on the thing in the trees.

“Who’s there?”

He grasps the hammer tightly, and tells himself that he should feel safe.

He does not.

“Hey! I know you’re there!”

Birds take flight above him, but no reply comes. Nothing moves in the darkness beyond, and he begins to wonder if his imagination is running away with him.

Panicked breathing racks his body, the bitter night air tearing ragged from his lungs. The beam of the torch shakes in his grip. He doubles over, swallowing hard, and attempts to steady himself.

Finally, his breath leaves him more slowly, gently pouring from his mouth into the night air before him. He pulls himself up, and makes toward the spot where he saw the figure. Running his torch over every side of the trunk, he finds nothing. Not even footprints in the mud.

A few steps further, he finds his church. Hopping over the collapsed wall, he reaches the altar and pulls apart the ivy.

It’s still there, still safe.

He rests his tools on the stone top, and he tries once more to pull out the chest. It remains as stubborn as ever. Tucking the torch between his neck and shoulder, he places the chisel along the seal, and brings his hammer to it sharply. The sound splits the silence of the night, and he stops and looks over his shoulder. Nothing, but the sense of being watched only seems to grow.

He strikes the chisel once more, and again. Heavier. Again.

Then, the sound of wood cracking. He successfully lodges it under the lid of the chest, and pushing down upon it, pops it open a few inches. He grabs his torch and seeks to examine his trophy. Through the small gap, he slides his forearm, his eager fingers scooping at the cold, hard treasures inside.

Pulling himself out, he opens his hand and out falls several gold pieces.

He can hardly believe his eyes. Shining the light onto coins, he can see they are genuine. He scoops more out, their weight confirming their value.

A branch snaps beyond the ruins.

He hears nothing but the excited thumping of his heart, as he begins to collect the coins. They clatter together as his pockets fill.

What am I doing? He thinks. What the hell am I actually doing?

Two branches snap in quick succession. Closer now.

This time he does hear, and turns an ear behind him as he places the last of the gold into his coat, his greed overriding his previous alarm. He peers into the woods, but keeps the torch pointed at his feet, afraid of what he might see. He

flicks off the torch to hide his movements – from what exactly he does not know – and makes his escape.

His knees tremble, his pace slower than he'd like. He wills his legs to keep going, and they oblige. A hush falls across the woods, as if every creature within listens to the jangling in his pockets.

Another branch snaps, directly behind him.

The last of his courage leaves him instantly.

He runs.

He breaks into an outright sprint, sharp twigs tearing at his face as he mindlessly pushes through. His body wants to stop but he won't let it. Not until he reaches his car.

*

After scanning the seat of his car for any escaped coins, he heads into his house, the familiar setting of his home putting him at ease immediately. Locking the door behind him, he presses his back against it. He's safe now, and quite possibly, a tad better off.

As he walks the short hall toward the living room he stops by the kitchen to collect a bottle of Ale, deciding it time for a celebratory drink. Flopping onto the couch, he takes out his phone. It hums in his hand, his connections to the wider world fizzling into life again. His soggy coat still draped around him, he places a free hand in his pocket and absently turns over a gold coin.

He taps the web browser on his phone, and begins to search for some kind of context for his new found riches. Deep in the furrows of his search, his eye falls upon an extract from an obscure website that seems to specialise in historical oddities:

"...the village of Hawkswood... No doubt it was the folklore surrounding the church that drove the residents away..."

Immediately, he clicks the link and waits impatiently for it to load.

"...drove the residents away. As the local priest apparently became more unforgiving of the everyday sins, he became stricter in the confessional, and more vocal in his damnations. The story spread of his requests of for bribes, the desperate, and highly devout villagers began to pay. While there is circumstantial evidence to these claims, the fact remains that Father Jonah Callaghan lived a comfortable life. Upon his untimely (and reports had hinted at a somewhat suspicious death), the Priest's home was immediately ransacked, and his grave desecrated. Some families reported their riches still unaccounted for. And appeals were made for information in the town. Accusations were said to have been thrown between neighbours, but the animosity did not end there. Violent crime began to rise in Hawkswood, all under the watchful gaze of the empty church. For reason we cannot confirm, and can only speculate, the church chose to never send a replacement to Hawkswood."

He scrolls past a few paragraphs.

“...The village no longer stands, nature has reclaimed the land. The crimes are mostly forgotten, as such things often are. However the name lives on in Hawkswood Country Park, a delightful-”

His eyes leave the screen as he leans back into the couch, deep in thought. He removes his hand from inside the pocket and reaches absently for his drink. The nature of his discovery has more or less become clear to him, yet the new-found information rests uneasily upon his shoulders.

His hand is unsteady, and rather of gripping the bottle, he knocks it off the arm of his chair and onto the carpet, its contents spilling onto the floor with a repetitive plugging.

He exclaims aloud and dives after it. Quickly, he leaves for the kitchen to grab something to clean up the mess. After some frantic rummaging, he eventually finds an old towel. Just as he turns to leave, something outside the window catches his eye. He faces it, and can just about make out something beyond the reflections on the glass. He switches off the light and looks again.

A face, looking in.

Submerged in darkness, the pale, genderless face is visible for only the briefest of moments. Shadows flow over like blood spilling in water, and before they consume it completely, he is able to see the expression; a countenance of malice and hatred. The lips, twisted in a mocking snarl, seem to hover on the cusp of screaming.

His own mouth opens, but his cries die in his throat. He blinks rapidly, refreshing his eyes.

The lone tree in the back garden shifts innocently in the breeze.

He shakes his head and forces a laugh, feeling quite the fool, if not a little shaken. He's tired, and surmises the face has surfaced from a long forgotten nightmare.

Squinting into the murky darkness outside, he senses not simply an absence of light, but something far more tangible; something he could almost touch and feel. Then from its depth, he hears an odd, faint, uneven sound of scratching.

His imagination has teased him all night. Now, determined for logic to triumph, he ventures back to the front of the house to get ready for bed. The front door enters his sight as he makes his way. As he reaches the last few feet, the scratching begins again. Louder this time, he realises they clearly emanate from the other side.

He approaches the door, and slowly unlocks the latch; the scratching does not falter.

With a deep breath, he swings the open door, ready for what awaits him.

The street is empty, and more importantly, silent. The mist still lingers, a drizzling dampness in the air. The darkness of the surrounding houses is interspersed with the glowing from cracks in drawn curtains. These signs of life empower him with a sense of security; surely his neighbours would rally with him against a potential prowler.

Something on the floor glistens in what little light there is, and he stoops to look closer.

He recognises it immediately.

His hammer and chisel.

Perfectly parallel to each other in the middle of the road.

The memory suddenly strikes him; he had failed to collect them in his haste to escape.

He realises his fears have been warranted; his nervous mind has not been playing tricks on him.

He has not been alone since he set foot in those woods.

Something is watching him, he knows now. He feels it abruptly, indisputably, as stares up and down the road with wide, startled eyes. Stepping onto the wet ground, his bare feet instantly ache with the cold. Tracing the sensation of being watching further down the street, he sees the darkness peppered by the beams of a street lamp;

something abnormal draws his eye.

A dim shadow billows in its shaft, standing unnaturally against the flow of the light; a vague outline of a figure, draped in swirling darkness. He finds it difficult to focus on, as if it exists in some strange blind spot. The desire to race back into the perceived safety of the house fills him; he subdues it, with great effort.

He has to have answers. Had this been the watcher in the woods?

He walks out onto the road, his anger growing, swallowing up the sensible instinct to flee.

“Hey, you!”

The figure does not answer, instead its shadowy veil begins to bleed, its darkness consuming the light of the street lamp.

Growing closer, he feels a force emitting from the watcher; malevolence and bitter hatred. It calls to him, taunting him. He breaks into a jog, his fury swelling in response.

Two beams of light crawl up the road. He calls out to the watcher again.

“Hey! You need to back off, right-”

He doesn't finish. A great force slams into him. It launches him from his feet, sending him hurtling through the air. He lands with an unpleasant crack, the side of his skull shattering instantly.

He hadn't noticed the car coming.

The driver slams on the breaks and only just avoids hitting the body again.

Lights flicker on, and curtains twitch. A nearby door opens and its resident steps out; her screams at the mangled and bloodied figure lying on the road ring through the street.

None saw who he had been yelling at.

THE APOLLYON GAME

— *F. C. Hunter*

THE floor was littered with the debris of human bodies, wasted and butchered. At the center of this ordinary space was a bowl fashioned plainly on its sides and interior, white in color and smooth to the touch. Inside was a shallow pool of some unidentified liquid, thick in consistency and corrosive in odor.

A plain man in a yellow pastel suit casually walked through the aftermath, kicking pieces of flesh and trash from his path. He stopped at the bowl and peered down at it. His breaths became heavier with each passing moment until he finally knelt down and collected the bowl. With his index finger he swirled the rim and collected a thin layer of material there, put his finger into his mouth and sucked on it passionately. His eyes closed as he savored the taste but this was not the time to indulge. The bowl went into a plastic grocery bag and as he left the room, he noticed the decapitated head of a young boy—no more than sixteen—staring at him with a gaping mouth and widened eyes.

“Thank you, Joseph,” the man spoke silently. “Thank you for being you.”

At the corner of Holmes Street and Drake Lane sat a single apartment building, off from the rest of the complex, built of brick and aged by decades of weather and neglect on the outside. The inside was renovated however and the apartments themselves were spacious. On the top floor, in unit 3D, resided Mitchell Maclaroy. Tonight he wasn't home. Away on business he left the place to be watched by his younger sister Portia, a rebellious girl with an affinity for being a darkly dressed outsider.

It was a little before eight and the night had taken over the sky. Portia stood on the balcony and observed the night, breathing in the damp air that had been chilled by a rain shower some hours earlier. The moon was a faint sliver on this night, its glow barely cutting through the blackness of the sky. This was certainly not a normal evening—Portia had already reconciled that—it was a night where strange energies lingered in the air. She could taste them on her tongue and feel them in her nostrils as she inhaled deeply, held her breath for a moment and then exhaled slowly. This process was an ingesting and expelling of the night's energies, or so she hoped. They would be needed for what lay ahead.

Over the next quarter hour came a number of guests. Five arrived during this time and what a collection of diverse personalities she had gathered. Portia had invited them all over to play a game, a new game she had purchased over the internet through one of her social media groups. It required six to play, but Portia really considered herself having only two friends. Liz, an Asian-American gothic girl whose wardrobe was just as black as Portia's, and Kerry, a slender boy who had just recently burst out of the closet with an abundance of flamboyance that was

ever evident in his decorative eye make-up and loud jewelry. The other three were people Portia had known but was not necessarily close to.

Latoya Russell was as 'hood as you could get. She was tall, naturally muscular and had a mouth and personality that would overshadow anyone else in the room if she felt like making her thoughts on anything known. Portia had met her in rehab last year and the two had kept in touch over the last few months. That was their bond but beyond that there was very little they had in common.

Callie Creedlove came from an entirely different world than either Portia or Latoya. She was fond of lacrosse, her Tuesday youth group after school, and unlike Latoya, rarely had anything negative to say about anyone. In grade school Callie and Portia were the best of friends but by their teens their divergent interests and decidedly different family lives drove a wedge between them. Now they would consider each other friends in the loosest of definitions, so when Portia called Callie to come over for a small gathering of friends, Callie was equally surprised and excited. She had longed to renew her friendship with Portia but had never been able to find a way to do it. Tonight could possibly provide that very opportunity.

Lastly was Meredith Mumpower, a neighbor of Portia's brother Mitchell who lived in the very same apartment building. Portia had known her for a few weeks through her brother. Meredith cared for men, clothes and reality television. Not much else sparked her curiosity from what Portia could tell as the woman only seemed to engage in conversations about those three topics. She was friendly though so Portia saw her as a good candidate for the sixth player in the game, a spot that she was having a hard time to fill but Meredith seemed to fit perfectly.

"So, what's up with this game?" asked Latoya, already becoming bored with the company at the party.

"Yeah," Meredith chimed in, "what is this thing? I've never heard of it. What's it called again?"

"Probitas Comburo," Portia answered.

"Sounds like Latin or something. Where did you find this game?" Kerry asked, not wanting the conversation to go on without him.

"On the internet, where else? This guy I met at Otakon last year told me about it. It took him a while to track down someone who actually had the game pieces. Some guy in Germany was selling original copies online so I bought one."

"Must have been expensive," Meredith remarked.

Portia smiled at her, "More than you can imagine."

"And what is the purpose of this game? I mean, what kind of game is it?" Callie asked.

Portia now had the full attention of her guests. They had managed to form a semi-circle around her, focused on her every word. It wasn't often Portia was afforded such attention. She had been often ignored in public life.

"It's kind of like a truth game, you know. Like truth or dare, but it's got a bit of a Halloweenish tone to it."

“This isn’t like devil worship or something?” Callie asked, her voice showing great caution. “You know I’m not comfortable with anything like that.”

Kerry groaned at her worrying. “God, really? I mean, I shouldn’t have said God because that might have offended you too. But I mean, come on. It’s a freakin’ game! You’re not going to Hell if you play a game that has some twisted pictures on the cards so stop worrying.”

He flipped his hand towards Callie in a dismissive manner. She didn’t see reason to protest any further. Portia was staring at them both and for a moment Callie felt a rush of coldness from Portia’s gaze. Perhaps she was imagining things because the scowl quickly turned into a grin.

“No, this isn’t devil worshipping, Callie. But please don’t thump the Bible at us tonight. Most of us aren’t really up to hearing that here. It’s a party, try to have fun.”

Liz, who had been in the bedroom for most of the conversation, entered the room with a box full of items that ranged from bottles of alcohol to small closed plastic containers.

“You got everything, right Liz?” Portia asked her friend.

Liz labored to get the box into the living room and sighed with relief when she no longer had to carry it. “Yeah, everything’s here. I guess we can start this shit.”

“Sounds good. Okay, let’s play.”

“This better be fun Portia. I ain’t staying here all night for some bullshit,” Latoya warned as she read through text messages on her cell phone.

“Trust me, Latoya. You won’t be bored,” Portia smiled.

The living room was the largest room in the apartment and came with the standard beige carpet, off-white walls and sliding glass door the led to the patio. A flatscreen had been affixed to the wall along with a video game system that sat on the floor beneath it. Aside from that, the room had no other real furniture. Portia had moved the small loveseat into the dining room so everyone could sit in a circle and play the game.

She put the cards out first. They were elegantly designed with intricate spirals, circles and triangles that surrounded a symbol in the center. The symbol was of a shut eye that was either crying or bleeding between its lids. There were three stacks as Portia explained: the Spirit cards, the Time cards and the Challenge cards. The white bowl was placed at the very center of everyone and Portia seemed to take great care in making sure it was precisely in the center of the circle. Finally, she set the oddest part of this game down: a single triangular die. It was quite larger than any dice the party had seen before, about the size of a two liter bottle. The piece was made of two pyramids, stacked end-to-end, with the same intricate patterns etched on each of its polished bronze sides. At the center of each of the six sides was a number which looked as if painted on by an unsteady but deliberate hand. The numbers went from one to seven, skipping the number three.

Latoya picked up the piece and turned it in her hands. “What the fuck is this? This shit’s heavy.”

“That’s the Pith Dice,” Liz explained, showing a growing irritation with Latoya’s blunt personality.

“A what?” Latoya said, rolling the die back into the circle.

“Pith. Dice. P-p-pith,” Liz repeated slowly.

Latoya noted the attitude, “Don’t get smart, alright little chow mein. I will go off on you in her house, trust that.”

“All right, all right, we’re not here to have a fight,” Kerry said, breaking up the fight before it got started. “So, Portia how do we play this thing?”

Portia was about the business of lighting candles. She set a few in the kitchen nearby, some in the bathroom and another two dozen in the living room with them. She then turned off the lights and joined the circle.

“Is that really necessary?” Callie complained. “I told you, I don’t ...”

“Yeah, yeah, blah blah church girl. We know,” Kerry cut her off. “This is supposed to be a spooky game. You have to turn the lights off.”

Portia took one of the candles in her hand to bring some more light into the circle. She proceeded to explain the rules of the game to the party.

One player, the Souttender, would take the Pith Dice and turn the top half clockwise according to the number on the bottom half, then turn the bottom half counterclockwise according to the number on the top. Once they were done, the Souttender would pick a partner, a Soulcatcher, for that round.

The Soulcatcher would have the choice of answering a question from the Souttender. If the Soulcatcher chose not to answer the Souttender’s question, the Souttender would use the top number of the Pith dice to draw a Challenge Card (face down), the bottom number on the Pith dice to draw a Spirit card (face down), and then draw the first Time card (face up).

At that point, the Soulcatcher turns the Challenge card face up and would have to complete the task on the Challenge card within the time allowed on the Time Card. They still have the option of answering the Souttender’s question at any time to end the round if they didn’t want to complete the Challenge.

If the Soulcatcher completes the task in the time allowed or answers the Souttender’s question, they win that round, keep the Spirit Card face down as part of their hand, and the game continues. If they do not, the Souttender shows the Spirit card drawn and the fate of the Soulcatcher is determined. A Soulcatcher can choose to use a Spirit card in their hand, if they have any, to determine their fate in the game if they lose a round. A Spirit card can save a player from being removed from the game, require the round to start over again, or (most likely) remove the player from the game.

“Sounds complicated,” Callie commented as she cautiously scanned over the game pieces before her.

“Not so much,” Portia reassured.

There was an awkward silence as if no one wanted to be the instigator of the game’s beginning. Liz braved up to it and placed her hands on the Pith Dice. She

marveled over its design – the intricately detailed swirls and lines – and with a hint of wonder in the pupils of her eyes, turned the top clockwise twice, which revealed the number five. She then turned the bottom counterclockwise five times, which revealed the number seven. Looking around the circle, she knew who she wanted to ask a question of first.

“Latoya,” she grinned, “I choose you.”

Latoya had not really been paying attention to what was going on for the last few moments, preoccupied with text messaging. She awoke from her trance and stared deadly at Liz. She had no time for this girl and her interest in the game was waning with each passing moment. However she would play just to see if this game was entertaining in the least.

“All right,” Latoya scoffed. “Ask what you want.”

Liz took satisfaction in finally starting the process. She gently placed the Pith Dice down on the carpet and folded her hands together as if pondering some great question about the universe. What came out was less than transcendent.

“Do you hate white people?” she asked.

Latoya, who had been chewing gum rather obsessively, stopped her chewing immediately and threw an insulted look at the gothic girl across from her. Liz turned the Time Card over, revealing three minutes.

“I don’t need three minutes to answer this. No, I don’t hate white people. I mean, y’all get on my nerves sometimes with the crazy shit y’all do. I mean, look at you.”

Liz sat up straight, offended at what she thought was about to be an assault on her person.

“What about me? I’m not even white!” she protested.

“I mean, you act white. All that mess you wear. Black eyeliner, black lipstick, black fingernail polish. What is that? You supposed to scare somebody with that?” Latoya asked.

“It’s being original, not that someone like you would know anything about that. You’re hip hop ghetto trash 101,” Liz responded.

“Now, let’s not get nasty with this. She answered the question, she gets the Spirit Card,” Portia interrupted, not wanting the game to get contentious so early.

Liz drew to the seventh Spirit Card and slid it over to Latoya, face down. Latoya looked at the card, turned her face up in disgust at what she saw, and then sat it face down in front of her. It was now her turn. Latoya grabbed the Pith Dice and instantly began turning the top and then the bottom in a reckless manner.

“I’m gonna ask your boy over there a question,” Latoya said, pointing at Kerry. “Have you ever slept with a girl?”

Without hesitating, Latoya turned over the time card and it marked one minute. Kerry was clearly caught off guard by the question and stumbled over his words for a few seconds. He then opted defiantly to take the challenge instead. Latoya drew to the fifth card in the Challenge deck and turned it over.

“You must consume half a bowl of a clear spirit before the time expires, or offer your fate to the spirits,” read Callie as she was taking more of an interest in the game now.

“Spirits?” Latoya questioned.

“It means liquor,” Kerry snapped. “Someone get the damn vodka before the time runs out.”

Liz had it next to her in the box she brought from the other room. She poured the white bowl half full of Grey Goose and they all sat back and waited for Kerry to drink. He looked into the bowl and then the clock, seeing only thirty seconds left for him.

“That’s a lot of vodka for a damn shot,” Kerry exclaimed, now realizing that a half bowl of vodka wasn’t the easiest thing to go down. “Can I just ...”

“Answer the question or drink the vodka,” Portia cut him off. “Or, leave you fate to the spirits.”

There was something eerie in the way Portia spoke, but Kerry was willing to play along with this game. He grabbed the bowl and sloppily gulped down the drink. Half way through, he coughed and stopped drinking. The room laughed and started to chide him.

“Come on, Kerry! All mouth and no game!” Liz smirked.

“You’ve got ten seconds to finish that,” reminded Portia, the second hand on the clock in the living room ticking away without concern.

With a gasp, and a few more sarcastic remarks from the rest of the party, Kerry choked down the rest of the vodka with two seconds to spare. He dropped the bowl and shook his head in an attempt to endure the sting of drinking so much vodka in such a short period of time. He coughed, his eyes watered, he snorted, but after a few moments finally composed himself.

“Are you okay?” Callie asked, patting him on the back.

Kerry pushed her hand away and coughed again before answering, “I’m fine. Give me the card girl!”

He smiled happily at Latoya, having bested her in this round. Latoya drew his Spirit card. She nodded to him, impressed that he could actually drink that much and not vomit on the spot. It appeared that some of the intensity of this diverse group was, for the moment, lessened. Perhaps that was the point of the game to begin with, Latoya thought.

“My turn,” Kerry exclaimed as he coughed one more time before picking up the Pith Dice.

He turned the top and bottom and revealed a five for the top and a two for the bottom. The Time Card had two minutes on its face. Kerry didn’t know exactly who he wanted to ask questions of but decided, since it was her game, to go for Portia. She nodded and waited for Kerry — who seemed all too enamored with the attention of everyone in the circle — to ask his question. He looked up, then down, then stretched his arms out, all before finally getting to his query.

“What are you afraid of?” he finally asked.

Portia took a moment to look around at the circle. It was a question most in the circle wanted to her to answer as most of them didn't think Portia was afraid of anything. She carried herself as an outcast, a tough girl, and that perception went unchallenged until now. What could someone who showed such disdain for most of life's trappings have to be afraid of?

"Losing this game," she said flatly.

There was a groan from someone in the circle. Portia didn't catch who it was but had her suspicions. No one apparently believed her answer and Portia knew this but she also knew she had in fact told the truth.

Without waiting for complaints, she motioned to Kerry to draw her Spirit Card. He did so with an upturned lip and handed it to her. Portia looked over the card and smiled to herself as if she had just gotten away with robbery. She then picked up the Pith Dice and continued the game, drawing a one for the top number and a seven for the bottom. The Time Card had ten seconds on it and she quickly looked to Callie as her Soulcather.

"Are you really a virgin?" Portia asked bluntly.

"Ooh, that's a good one!" Kerry chirped. "Now we're getting into the good stuff. Ms. Virgin Callie, a real virgin or not?"

"I don't think that's an appropriate question," Callie debated.

"You've got five more seconds," Portia said coldly.

"This isn't fun," Callie said, "I don't think I want to play this game anymore."

"Answer the question or you lose," said Portia.

"No," Callie spat.

She pushed a Spirit Card to Callie who didn't seem too into looking at the card. Instead, she stood up and left the room. Portia watched her angrily as Callie headed to the bathroom, the card still sitting in her spot.

"Let's just keep playing. Let the little bitch cry," Liz said.

Portia hesitated and looked around the room as if she was expecting something to happen. After a moment, she twisted the Pith Dice again and drew the Time Card. The time had five minutes. This time, Portia took a moment to pick her Soulcather. Meredith was her choice and Portia knew exactly what she wanted to ask.

"You've been so quiet tonight," Portia muttered under her breath, almost in a whisper.

"Just watching," Meredith replied. "Wish your brother was here. This would be a bit more fun if he was."

"Really?" Portia spat at Meredith. "Funny you should mention him. I know you're not really all that quiet. In fact, you make a lot of noise when you're fucking don't you?"

Kerry and Liz looked at each other stunned while Latoya stopped her texting completely. Meredith bit her lip, wanting so badly to rip into Portia but thought better of it.

"If you've been listening to me and your brother having sex, that's kind of creepy, you know. Maybe if you had a man you'd find better things to do."

“It’s not my brother I heard you having sex with.”

“Aw, shit!” Latoya shouted. “Gettin’ real now.”

Meredith started to fidget where she sat. The truth behind the claim was evident in her demeanor so there was no use denying it. Portia continued to stare at Meredith, her anger and bitterness at this woman’s betrayal of her brother so palpable now that Meredith swore she saw fire in Portia’s eyes.

“So my question is, who was it?” Portia asked.

The clock on the wall shook on its own. Liz was the only one who noticed it, but thought it to be a coincidence. Not wanting to go any further with this, Meredith elected to take the Challenge instead of letting her personal business be spilled out for a room full of strangers. The Challenge Card asked for a dead bug to be placed in the bowl and consumed.

“What kind of shit is that?” Latoya said. “This is getting stupid, Portia. I mean, she ain’t eating no damn bug. Where are you going to find one anyway?”

“I’ve got one,” said Liz as she went to the box of items she had and pulled out a jar.

Inside the jar was a dead roach. She quickly dumped its lifeless body into the white bowl and pushed the container over the Meredith.

“You’ve got four minutes left,” Portia exclaimed.

“Fuck this, I’m out of here. Go fuck yourself, bitch!”

“You would know about fucking wouldn’t you? But don’t worry, my brother doesn’t know. I didn’t tell him. I hoped you would.”

Meredith stood up and headed to the door. She stopped, not wanting to let this go just yet. She turned back to Portia, seething now with anger, and pointed her finger at her lover’s sister.

“You don’t know shit about me, okay. It’s none of your business what happens between me and your brother.”

“You can’t leave,” Portia said, ignoring Meredith’s words. “You have to finish the game.”

“I’m not finishing this crap! You know what you can do with your little game.”

“Time’s up,” Liz said, looking at the clock.

“Turn the card over,” Portia demanded.

Meredith scoffed and continued to the door. Portia drew the Spirit Card. She turned it over and walked over to Meredith who was at the front door now and showed it to her. Out of pure interest Meredith looked at the card. It had a demonic female figure on it clad in red clothes, grey skin and fire pouring from between her legs. The top of the card had the title Mellachious and below the drawing was an inscription which Meredith read aloud.

“The Spirit you’ve called is Mellachious, the demon of lust and pain. You have lost this round, Soulcatcher, and are now owned by Mellachious. Your judgment has been told.” Meredith laughed at the card and threw it to the ground. “I guess I can leave now. I’m out the game, right?”

Portia didn't say anything. She seemed to be waiting for something. Meredith just stared back, and when Portia didn't have more words for her, she turned towards the door to leave.

Without warning Meredith was flung backwards to the wall, pinned against it by some unseen force. She let out a shriek and then coughed as blood spilled from her mouth. Kerry, Liz and Latoya ran into the foyer to see what was going on. Callie emerged from the bathroom, streaks of dried tears on her face, and immediately went to help Meredith.

"What the fuck? What the fuck?" screamed Latoya.

Callie turned to Portia who seemed to be enjoying whatever was going on. Meredith's arms began to twist on themselves, her knees bending inwards with a sickening series of cracks and pops. Callie and Kerry were now both trying to pull Meredith from the wall, but their efforts stopped when another set of hands reached from within the wall and took hold of Meredith's midsection. They were sickly hands, reddish brown with green sores covering the flesh. Callie and Kerry backed away and could only watch as Meredith gargled up bubbles of blood. More hands claimed her body from within the wall. With a sudden thrust they pulled parts of Meredith's body into the wall while leaving others to burst throughout the room in a shower of tissue and blood. Kerry and Latoya screamed while Liz turned to Portia in amazement. Portia wiped the blood from her mouth slowly, savoring the moment with a look of satisfaction.

"That was for my brother," Portia exclaimed.

"What the fuck was that?" Latoya screamed. "This is some sick shit."

"That's the game, I told you the rules," Portia said.

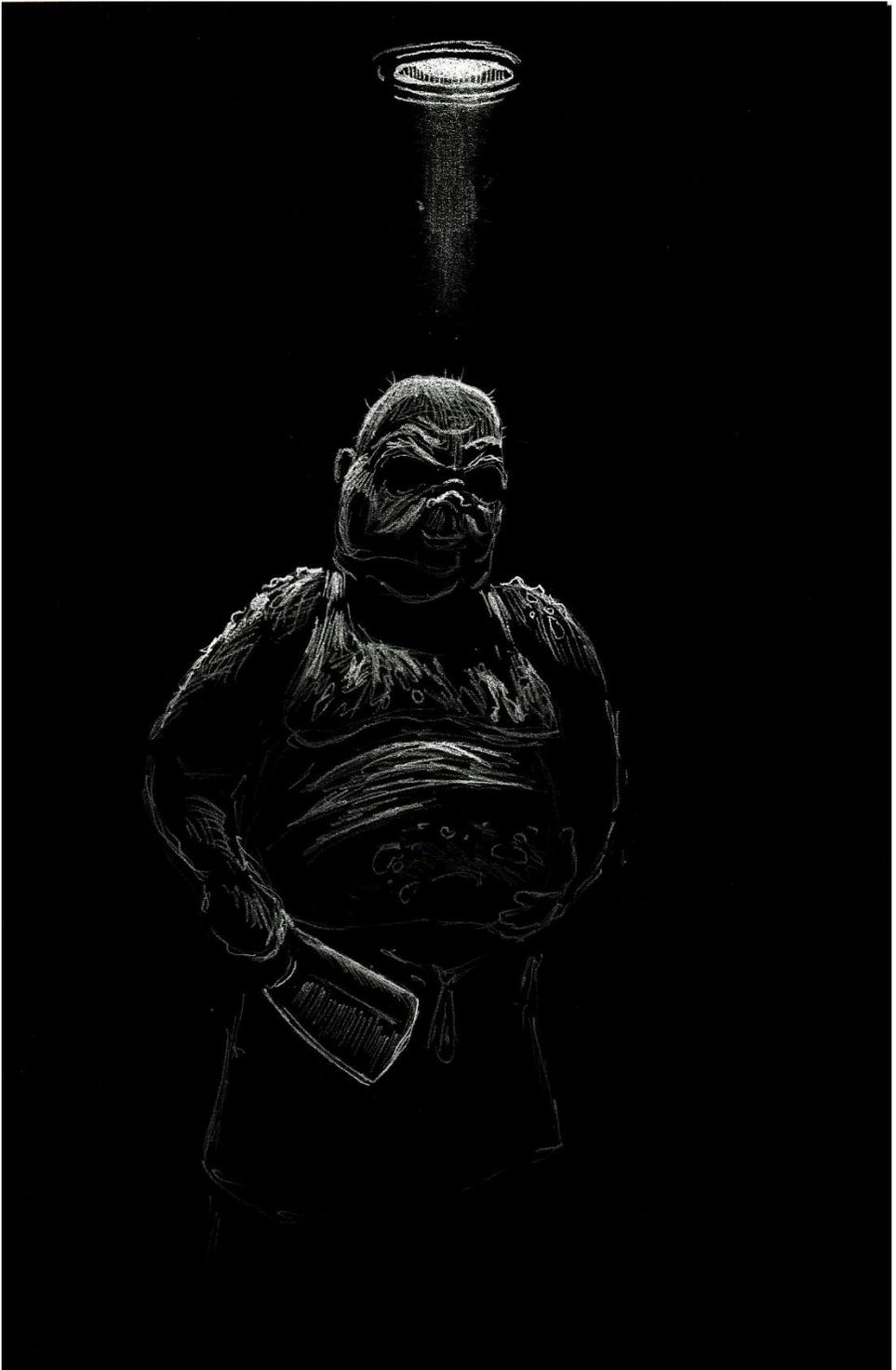
"You did this!" Latoya yelled again, now face to face with Portia. "I don't know what kind of sick devil worshipping shit this is but I'm out of here. You're a sick little bitch, Portia."

Stone faced, Portia dismissed Latoya's rants and walked back to the living room. Kerry stood stunned for a moment, but soon followed Latoya's lead and headed towards the front door. Portia gave them the same warning she gave Meredith, but they weren't having any of it. They opened the front door of the apartment and headed into the hallway. Callie took one more look at Portia who was about the business of turning the Pith Dice again. She wondered if the game would continue even if they weren't in the circle. If so, Portia could choose whoever she wanted to and if that person didn't complete the task or answer her question, they'd suffer the same fate as Meredith. It did make Callie wonder why she hadn't been attacked when her Spirit Card was drawn, but there was no time to ask.

Another problem quickly put those worries to rest. As Callie followed Kerry and Latoya she noticed they hadn't gotten too far into the hallway. She looked over Kerry's shoulder to see what had stopped them.

"I don't believe this," Kerry whispered to Callie. "I think we have to stay."

Standing between them and the staircase the led downstairs was a grotesquely obese man holding a meat cleaver. His head was bald and full of spots



that also covered his shoulders and arms. He wore a white cotton undershirt that was two sizes too small. The shirt itself was covered in a variety of colored stains that one could only speculate the origins of. He stroked the cleaver against his stomach which billowed out the bottom of the undershirt. He seemed to enjoy scratching the sharpened end against a rash of bleeding bumps around his bellybutton. He made no attempt to speak, but grunted and wheezed at the trio. It was clear that he had no intention of moving from that spot and none of them wanted to get within arm's reach of him and that cleaver.

"Get back inside! Get back inside!" Latoya ordered the rest of them as she pushed backwards into the apartment.

She closed the door and locked it behind her. Kerry and Callie walked back to the living room. Callie began looking for another way out of the apartment while Kerry chose to confront Portia.

"Okay, I'm on your side, you know. We're friends," he said to Portia, almost pleading with her. "I mean, I know you're into some weird shit, obviously, and it was fun and cute and all but ... really? This is some twisted shit, a bit much for me, and I ... I ... I think I just want to go home. Okay?"

"Sit the fuck down," Portia demanded.

Kerry's pleading stopped as he backed up. Portia and Liz both stared him down, as if daring him to continue his whining. Callie came back into the living room after looking in all the other rooms for an exit.

"There's no fire escape or anything. We're too high to jump off the balcony. We'd break our necks. So, that's why you wanted us to play here," Callie said directly to Portia.

"Smart, isn't she?" Portia laughed. "You should sit down too. We've still got a way's to go."

"I'm not playing anymore, remember," Callie countered.

"I don't think we have a choice," Kerry whimpered, already back at his seated position in the circle.

"Latoya!" Portia yelled. "Come sit down."

Latoya was at the front door, feverishly trying to send out text messages and becoming increasingly frustrated that they weren't going through.

"That's not going to work," Portia told her. "You can keep trying but the phone is not sending out anything until we're done."

"How the fuck do you know that?" Latoya yelled. "Someone's going to get this message. And when I tell my brothers what you did, they're going to ..."

"They're not going to do anything because they won't know anything because you won't tell them anything," Portia said in a controlled and even tone. "Now, put the phone away and sit down. We have to keep playing and I'm picking you as my next Soulcatcher."

"The hell you are!" Latoya said and rushed at Portia.

The two girls wrestled to the floor. Latoya swung violently at Portia who covered up. Liz was trying to pull Latoya off but did not have the strength to control her. Kerry noticed the Time Card had already been turned over. It revealed

a minute and a half for this next question, but Portia had yet to ask it. She was desperately trying to between punches and kicks from Latoya.

Liz finally managed to wrestle Latoya backwards, wrapping her arms around her neck and her legs around her waist to get some separation between the two fighting girls. Portia stood up and put her hand to bludgeoned face. She spat at Latoya and pushed her black hair out of her eyes before finally asking her next question.

“Latoya! Do you think you’re for real?”

Once her anger subsided, Latoya stopped fighting against Liz’s restraint and asked to be let up. Liz complied, untangling their bodies. Callie and Kerry watched with anticipation, expecting Latoya to strike Portia at any second. Instead, she picked up her cell phone and tried to make another call. The battery had died. Seeing this, Latoya laughed at the phone and then threw it at Portia as hard as she could.

“Fuck you,” is all Latoya could muster.

“Uh, you better answer her or do the challenge or something,” Kerry warned. “Who knows what the hell is going to happen if you don’t.”

A large slam came from the master bedroom. Latoya turned to look into the bedroom but didn’t dare get any closer. She looked up at the clock, seeing only thirty seconds left for her time. Panic began to set in. There wasn’t anything she could actually do here but answer the question or take the challenge.

“Before you say anything,” Portia started, “you should know that if you lie it’s the same as failing the challenge or not answering. They’ll know if you lie.”

“They’ll know?” Callie asked. “Who will know?”

She didn’t get an answer as Portia had her entire focus on Latoya. Latoya’s focus was on the splattered body parts in the foyer. That would be her if she didn’t answer honestly. It was a simple question though.

“I am,” she said.

“You lied.” Portia responded.

“How are you going to tell me whether or not I’m for real? Do you believe this bitch?”

Portia snickered to herself and sat back down in the circle, lighting candles that had been blown out during all the commotion from earlier.

“When we were little kids Latoya, you were just as much of an outsider as I was. Your brothers called you weird, your mother called you weird, everyone called you weird. You used to like the same shit I did. We used to read the same occult books, go into the woods and pretend we were summoning spirits and all that stuff.”

“That was a long time ago,” Latoya said in a much calmer tone.

“Yeah, but all of a sudden you tried to act like you were hood when you’ve never step foot inside a ghetto. You started wearing this shit you’ve got on, talking like you’re on BET and hanging out with a bunch of assholes. Assholes who, by the way, beat the shit out of me in eighth grade.”

“So that’s what this is all about? You mad because my girls beat you down. I told them not to. I told them ...”

“You didn’t stand up for me. You didn’t do anything. You’re phony Latoya. You know that and so do I.”

“So what?”

“So, you lied, and that means you lost.”

The time had expired. Latoya couldn’t look at Portia any longer. It was clear that Portia wanted Latoya to come to some admission of guilt for being phony or for abandoning their friendship in order to be more socially accepted. Latoya didn’t care. There was no great revelation. There was no agreement. Instead, there was just resentment that she had been tricked into this trap and couldn’t get out of it. Whether or not she felt she was a fraud in personality, Portia’s deception nullified any remorse or repentance Latoya could possibly feel. Now, she just waited for the final card to turn over.

“Look at it,” Portia said, holding the Spirit Card in her outstretched hand.

Latoya had turned her back completely on Portia and didn’t care to read what was on the Spirit Card. She remembered the rules of the game though, and it was possible that the Spirit Card was not murderous, but perhaps forgiving. The one she had collected earlier was certainly not. It held a mischievous demon whose name she couldn’t recall at the moment. That creature would certainly lead to a horrific death.

Taking her chances, Latoya turned back to Portia and took the card. She sighed for a moment and then looked at its face. Her fortunes were none better with this one. It was a spirit whose name she also couldn’t pronounce, but the illustration told the whole story. The image was of a three-mouthed creature with a singular eye, devouring victims at will. She sat down and closed her eyes, waiting for the end.

“Come on with it then!” she shouted. “Let’s get this over with.”

Nothing happened. After a few seconds, everyone began to look around wondering if something was going to happen. Perhaps the spirits were no longer interested. Perhaps a rule had been overlooked. Perhaps Latoya had answered correctly after all.

Portia was not pleased but Latoya couldn’t have been happier.

“Seems they know better,” she exclaimed, standing to her feet now. “Your bullshit is broke, Portia. And I don’t give a shit if that fat bastard is sitting outside. I’m getting out of here. You can finish your game on your own.”

Feeling vindicated, Latoya picked her phone from off the floor. The battery apparently had regained its charge. She smirked to herself and then dialed her brother’s phone number. A ring! She put the phone to her ear, eagerly waiting for her brother to answer.

A sharp pain quickly shot through her skull. She dropped the phone and put her hand to her ear. It fell off into her hand. She held it in her palm, bleeding heavily from the side of her head. Another crash came from the bedroom, same as before, and this time Latoya could see what had made the sound. The three-

mouthed demon, very real and larger than she estimated from the card's illustration, sat in the doorway to the master bedroom. She collapsed to the ground, the pain now shooting from both sides of her head as her other ear fell to the carpet.

Callie and Kerry screamed, seeing the blood fill the carpet and Latoya grasping at her face. Her nose slid down past her lips, leaving a trail of blood and mucus. Latoya quivered as her body continued to fall to pieces, and just before she passed out from the pain, the demon snatched what remained of her body, dragged it into the bedroom, and slammed the door shut. The sounds of eating — ravenous chewing and slurping — came from the room for a minute or so. Then, all was silent again, and Portia went back to the Pith Dice.

"Enough!" Kerry yelled. "This is insane Portia. Stop this now. Why are you doing this?"

"Oh dear, he wants a motive," Portia grinned to Liz.

Liz was about the business of washing out the white bowl in the sink. She tossed the roach down the drain and wiped the bowl dry before returning to the living room.

"You all are jerks, that's the motive," Liz explained.

Portia looked at the bowl as Liz sat it back in the middle of the circle. She became preoccupied with it as she continued to talk to what remained of the party.

"You see, there's no justice in this world. People like Latoya, who was as fake as you can get, just go on hurting people and no one does anything. Meredith can betray my brother and I'm just supposed to live with it. Not anymore."

"What did I do to you Portia? Huh?" Kerry asked. He wasn't scared anymore, as it was likely he would be meeting his end soon if this continued.

"You? You're just as fake as the rest of them. But we'll get to that later, won't we. Oh, I do have questions for you my friend."

Liz decided to add to the story. "And Callie," she started, "everything about you is fake. The bible thumping, the Ms. Average Good Girl routine. We know you have secrets. Portia's told me. You two used to be friends and you turned your back on her just like Latoya. All of you screwed her over because you thought you could. Because she's not like you, because she's different."

"Yes, all of you did," Portia said coldly, turning the ends of the Pith Dice as she did.

The emphasis on all did not escape Liz. Portia had just as cold a stare for her as she did for the rest of the party. Bewildered at why her friend had turned on her, Liz started to protest being the next Soulcatcher but Portia would hear none of it. Kerry and Callie had no remorse for her and simply sat and watched.

"I know you are the one who told my mother I was using. That's why I was sent to that shithole I met Latoya in. Don't bother denying it. I know it was you. So my question is, friend: why did you do it? Was it out of concern for me?"

Looking at the Time Card and seeing she had only forty-five seconds to answer, Liz didn't hesitate.

“Yes, I was concerned for you Portia. That’s why I did it. You know I’m your friend. We’re just alike.”

“We’re nothing alike, Liz. What, because we wear the same clothes you think you’re like me? You’re some goth girl. I never claimed to be that.”

“Doesn’t matter. It’s my turn though. So hand me ...”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Portia stopped her. “How do I know that’s the truth? Let’s wait to see the time run out.”

“Of course it’s the truth. What, do you think I’m lying to you?”

“No, not to me,” Portia answered. “I think you’re lying to yourself. You didn’t give a rat’s ass about me being healthy. You did it because we had a fight about Justin.”

“Really? You think I ratted you out because of Justin?”

“Well, time will tell now won’t it?”

The second hand on the clock continued to tick. Five seconds were left and Liz began to sweat. She wondered if in her mind she had convinced herself that she ratted Portia out because of concern, but in her heart it was from jealousy. As the second hand reached its final tick, she realized what the truth actually was.

“Oh no,” Liz whispered.

Portia turned the Spirit Card over. It was the Jackyl, perhaps the most devious of all the Spirits in the deck.

Liz looked around the room, terrified that something would happen. She stood up and stumbled over one of the lit candles, knocking it to the carpet. She stomped out the flame and then sought somewhere safe to stand. She didn’t want to be near the bedroom, or the front door, or the kitchen with all the ways she could be murdered in there. Instead, the only place she thought would be safe was next to Portia.

“Please, please Portia,” Liz cried, grabbing at the Soultender’s shoulders. “Make it stop. Don’t let it happen. You can stop it! It says so in the game book. You can end this if you want to.”

Callie and Kerry took note of this. Callie immediately went to Liz’s box to look for the book. Portia and Liz continued arguing, which was becoming so intense the two girls had lost all concern for the game and knocked over the bowl and the stack of Challenge Cards. Kerry looked at the scattered deck, paused for a moment, and then began the task of putting them back into a stack.

Amidst all the confusion, a nasally snicker was repeating itself, growing louder and more insane with each iteration. The group soon noticed the sound and Liz immediately began crying. She grabbed Portia by the arms so if anything would do harm to her, it would do harm to Portia as well.

The strategy didn’t work. Liz felt cold, rough hands at her shoulders and claws digging into the top of her chest. The snickering was now at her ear and she knew what it was that had her. Portia freed herself from Liz’s grasp and stepped back, watching the Jackyl as it caressed its prey.

“Please ... no,” Liz muttered in a desperate cry.

The sobs only seemed to excite the Jackyl more, as it sniveled and snickered uncontrollably. It began humming as it danced its sharpened nails up and down the nape of Liz's neck. Its face was bright red with tattooed black lines and circles around its mouth, eyes and nose. The monster wore a needle-toothed smile in a mouth twice the size of normal proportions to the rest of its head. The demon's reptilian eyes blinked twice and the humming stopped. It remained stiff as a board, still clasping its hands around Liz's upper body. She whimpered, waiting for the creature to make a move. It didn't. The Jackyl simply froze for a while, Liz still shaking in its demented embrace.

She thought to move. Maybe she could get away. Perhaps the thing was petrified, or something had gone wrong. This was her chance, if there was going to be one, and she took it.

Before she could take that first step the Jackyl let loose an earsplitting howl and began ripping at Liz's flesh, tearing her into ribbons with each ravenous gash. It cooed and giggled as Liz collapsed on the floor in a heap of her own tissue.

As her sobs ended the Jackyl looked over her and pretended to be saddened, stroking her body with the knuckles of its hand. It placed its finger in its mouth, tasting the juices it had collected. The demon looked to Callie, licked its hand clean of blood, and then began snickering again before disappearing into the shadows of the living room.

Portia returned to her seat in the circle and picked up the Pith Dice. Her next target was clear as she eyed Kerry with each turn of the dice. In contrast, Kerry did everything he could to look away from Portia, not wanting to make eye contact with her. His body was shaking even though he tried desperately to control it.

"Fifty seconds," Portia remarked as she looked at the Time Card.

"Just get this over with," Kerry replied bitterly.

Portia smiled at his defiance. Callie watched Kerry intently as he waited for Portia's question, and she couldn't help but notice beneath the shaking in Kerry's body a sense of impatience, as if he couldn't wait for her to ask her question.

"Are you really gay?" Portia asked her Soulcatcher.

Kerry went to the Challenge Card and turned it over. His task was rather mundane: to fill the bowl with water and drink it. He did so eagerly, and in about fifteen seconds was done with his challenge.

Something was wrong and Portia knew it. The look on her face was a mixture of surprise and distain. Regardless, Kerry had won the round and thus won the right to roll the Pith Dice himself.

"Now, it's my turn bitch!" he said with a glimmer of revenge in his voice.

"I'm not afraid," Portia said, "it's my game and I know the rules."

"Whatever, I'm ending this bullshit right now."

The door to the apartment shook with a large bang. All three players stood up immediately, their attention to the door and the heavy thuds that were being levied against it. Someone was knocking and would not be satisfied until the door was opened or knocked down.

"You answer it. You're the host," Kerry said to Portia.

She scoffed at him and confidently walked to the door and without hesitating opened it. There stood the fat man from the hallway, breathing heavily and still brandishing his bloodied cleaver.

“Cheater!” he bellowed.

The words were enough for Portia to know what happened. She looked back at Kerry and pointed to him. Callie also knew what had happened and turned to Kerry.

“You cheated?” she asked the guilty party.

“Not necessarily. I reshuffled the deck when it got knocked over.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes ... well, no. I may have looked for an easy Challenge Card and put it at the top.”

“That would be cheating, Kerry.”

“I know.”

“Cheater! Cheater! Cheater!” the fat man continued.

He didn’t wait for any invitation from Portia. The butcher pushed his girth past her on a straight course for Kerry. Not wanting to see what the punishment for cheating this kind of game was, Kerry ran into the kitchen to put something between him and the fat butcher. It wouldn’t do him much good as the butcher smashed into the waist-high countertop that separated the living room from the kitchen, swiping at Kerry with his cleaver. The third swipe came close enough to Kerry’s mouth that he could taste the metal of the blade on his lips.

With a terrified screech, Kerry jumped over the counter and ran towards the door. The butcher wasn’t far behind and quickened his floor-shaking pursuit, repeating the word cheater as he went. Portia was knocked over by Kerry as he sprinted past her and out the front door, down the stairwell, screaming for help as he went. She smartly moved out of the way of the butcher who was still swinging his cleaver wildly as he followed Kerry.

Two were now left. Portia and Callie watched each other to see which one would move first. Portia was concerned that Callie would try to escape as Kerry had, but the young blonde did not move from the living room. She simply waited for something to happen. Her mind told her to make for an escape but who knows what other barriers — demonic or otherwise — the game would throw at her to keep her from leaving.

“We don’t have to finish this, Portia. You’ve made your point.”

Portia took offense to Callie’s words. “My point? You don’t know what my point is! This is not about making a point, this is about justice.”

“How is this justice? You’ve murdered your friends.”

“Give me a break, Callie. Friends? You think those people are my friends? You think you are my friend? You’re dumber than I thought you were.”

There was a muffled grunt coming from the opened front door of the apartment. Callie could see a large shadow moving up the stairwell outside the apartment. As it moved towards the door, she gasped as the butcher returned with what remained of Kerry.

The body was barely held together by bones and threads of flesh, but the meat had been hacked all over. Kerry's arms, legs, torso and neck all bore deep slices that spilled red. Surprisingly, Kerry was still alive. His head was barely hanging on to the rest of his body, but his eyes moved back and forth beneath ever-closing eyelids. He was trying to speak, but the butcher's hand covered his mouth.

The fat man threw Kerry's body to the ground in the foyer and pointed at it. His shirt was afresh with new stains from Kerry's fluids as he wiped sweat from his brow and mouth.

"Cheater," the butcher exclaimed one last time.

Kerry turned his eyes up to Callie. His head was twisted at an angle that was only possible because his neck was sliced halfway through. There was such sadness there. She wondered what prayers or deals he was making in his mind to the spirit world. There was something going on in his head, some moment of reckoning that in these last few seconds, she hoped he resolved.

A second later, the butcher raised his cleaver above his head and brought the sharp edge down with such force it split Kerry's skull in two. The contents of his head spilled onto the carpet, cerebrum and fluids oozing from some places and bubbling in others.

Callie couldn't look but Portia did with a breath of satisfaction. The butcher quietly left through the front door and in an unsettling gesture of civility, closed the door gently behind him.

Two were left.

Callie was so frightened at what would come next she could feel the bile in her throat almost choke her. Her stomach was turning over itself. Her palms were glistening with perspiration. She had to do something before she was the next, and final, victim of Portia's twisted game.

"Why him?" she asked quietly.

"Like I said, he was a phony. Kerry and I slept together, regularly, but he kept acting like he was a queer. I have no idea why. Maybe because it's en vogue now, who knows. All I know is that he treated me like some dirty secret. It was disrespectful and he deserved to pay for it. You all do."

"What did I do to you, Portia? Huh? What am I so guilty of that you're going to throw me into this meat-grinder you've thought up?"

Portia laughed to herself, "I didn't think this up. This game has been around for centuries. It's made for the victimized to get justice."

Callie watched as Portia reached for the Pith dice. There wouldn't be much more time. She had to keep Portia talking while she simultaneously thought of a way out of this.

"It sounds more like a petty way to scream at the world," Callie uttered under her breath.

Portia heard the comment and it enraged her enough to want to defend herself. She put the Pith Dice down for the moment. She needed to set Callie straight before the game ended.

“Listen to me,” Portia yelled as she came face to face with Callie, “this isn’t about me wanting to yell at the world. This isn’t about revenge, even. It’s about doing something right. There are too many of you phony people in the world — the uncreative, the unimaginative, and worst of all people like you: the self-righteous.”

“I’m self-righteous?” Callie sarcastically replied, although Portia missed the implication.

“Of course you are! All you religious people are. That’s why you’re the worst, and the last, in this game. You abandoned me when you ‘found Jesus’ and couldn’t spend time with your friend of fifteen years because I was a bad influence. Isn’t that right?”

“Portia, I—”

“No! Isn’t that right?”

“Maybe,” Callie confessed, throwing her hands up in admission. “Yeah, maybe you cutting yourself, getting high every single day, having sex with anyone who would pay attention to you ... yes, maybe that didn’t mesh well with my beliefs.”

“Aren’t you supposed to try and save me?”

“I knew better than to do that.”

Portia scoffed. She turned back to the circle and went for the Pith Dice again. Callie still needed more time.

“Would you have listened? Or would you have just dismissed me?” she asked.

Portia picked up the dice but turned back to Callie to answer.

“Probably not. I don’t have much use for religion.”

“So either way, I would be doing wrong in your eyes. No matter what, you would have dismissed whatever I had to offer you because you have already predetermined my beliefs as being crap.”

“Not your beliefs, just the organization that goes along with it. All those judgmental, tight-assed, middle America jackasses.”

“And what you just said isn’t judgmental? What you’ve done tonight isn’t passing judgment on people?”

“People like me aren’t the oppressors! Don’t you get that Ms. Perfect? People like me aren’t abusing little children. People like me aren’t damning anyone who doesn’t fit in our little box to Hell.”

“So, you think anarchy and violence and spitefulness is far better than even considering anything someone like me has to say?”

Callie’s words were penetrating somewhat but Portia had come too far. The voice in Portia’s mind reminded her of how just her cause was. Callie was one of them, the type that she despised with everything in her being. The family life, the house, and the so-called values they had. It was everything she found offensive and oppressive. This, right here, tonight, was her liberation from that. It was her chance to spit in the face of that very concept and she wasn’t going to let any doubt prevent that from happening.

“Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven, right?” she smirked.

She spun the dice and proceeded to pick the Time Card. It was a long session, two minutes. Seeing that her time was up, Callie calmly returned to the circle and sat down. After seeing this game play out, she knew Portia was going to ask her something she either wouldn't answer or would be tricked into answering wrong. She had to answer correctly, no matter what. The Challenges and the Spirits were things she surely wanted to avoid at any cost.

With a deep breath Portia asked her question.

"If you're a believer, do you really think all that crap they say to you on Sundays is true? Do you think your God is going to save you tonight?"

The clock was ticking. Even though an answer sprung to her mind immediately, she didn't want to say it. This was a time to think, a time to learn from what the others had done wrong, which led them to having their body parts strewn about the room she sat in now.

Oh, that smell! The detritus from all of Portia's victims was beginning to sicken Callie. It was becoming a distraction. The more she thought, the more intense the odor got. It was to the point that she believed it was penetrating her skin, sticking to her insides and crawling underneath her flesh.

No! Concentrate!

"What's taking so long?" Portia shouted. "Come on! Answer the question, Callie! You know the truth."

Callie just sat in the circle, her head down and her hands clasped in prayer. Of all things for her to do, this was the funniest to Portia. She stood up and hovered over Callie like a hawk over its prey.

"That's right, pray bitch! There's nothing there! There's no one to pray to! There's no one who is going to save your life, your ass, your soul tonight! God is a damned joke and if He ever existed, He's long since died. Even if He did exist, as your pathetic people think, do you honestly think He could give a rat's ass that you play lacrosse and have perfect attendance at church and live in a nice house?"

Undaunted, Callie continued to sit. Ironically, she wasn't praying, she was deep in thought. The smells of the room, the visions of what she had seen tonight and Portia's ongoing tirade all were working against her mind. She wanted to answer cleanly. If she thought God was going to save her — and truly believed that in her soul — she wanted to say so. If there was doubt she wanted to express that. In a sense, her waking mind would have to give way to her immanent consciousness for any kind of salvation.

"Callie!" Portia screamed.

Callie did not answer.

"You've got ten seconds! You had better answer!"

There was still time for thought. Not yet.

"Five seconds."

What was the answer?

"Four!"

Ah, yes, of course!

"Thr—"

“I do,” Callie said flatly. “I do believe God will save me.”

She covered her face as a tear trickled down her cheek. She had been honest, perhaps more honest than she had ever been in her entire life. Such honesty had exhausted her emotionally and she continued to weep. Portia watched her for a moment, curious about what she was seeing. Anticipating the Spirits to claim their prize Portia waited for a sound, a movement, a shifting shadow. None came.

Callie had answered truthfully.

Before Portia could even protest Callie had taken hold of the Spirit Card she had not used earlier in the night. She didn't care what was on the card and left it face down in front of her.

The game piece had other plans. It spirited from Callie's hand and rested at the dead-center of the circle next to the white bowl, as if the bowl had ripped it from her hands. She took a moment to observe it and then reached out to grab it again. Perhaps she was wrong. Perhaps the Spirits were coming to take her. A moment of fear crept into Callie's heart. She had answered honestly and she knew it. Was this game rigged that much?

During all this, the Spirit Card Callie had received earlier in the game was turned face-side up. She looked down at the card and seeing what was on it gave her pause. Portia looked at the card too. Both women became entranced at what they saw, one out of relief and the other out of dread.

You have drawn the Angelic Savior, a spirit that will protect you should you have need. You may proceed to the next round as Soulcatcher, but your Soutlender has lost and must suffer all the spirits drawn before.

The words sat heavy on the card with a painted image of an Indian woman dressed in blue robes with white clouds surrounding her arms and feet. It wasn't the image Callie had anticipated but what else had been this evening?

For Portia, it was the ultimate defeat. She knew what the Angelic Savior was. It was one of very few cards in the deck that saved the Soulcatcher, and in particular, turned the full wrath of the game's demons on the Soutlender.

“I don't believe it. No! No! No!” Portia screamed.

It was the card Callie had the entire time and the irony of this did not escape her. Despite all that had happened, it appeared she was indeed protected the entire time. Whether through divine intervention (as Callie suspected) or dumb luck (as Portia believed) this was the fate of the game. Portia's vengeance had been turned on her.

“You little bitch!” she yelled at Callie.

There was no time for argument. The air in the room turned numbingly cold. Both girls could see their breaths bursting and disappearing in the room. A light came from the Pith Dice, deep red and pulsating. The entire apartment was lathered in the unnatural glow, casting solid black shadows where it could not illuminate.

Then the laughing began. The Jackyl was lurking behind Portia, licking at its long nails while salivating over its lips. The fat butcher had also returned, appearing silently from behind Callie but paying her no attention at all. Whatever

abomination that had consumed Latoya earlier could be heard pounding at the walls of the bedroom, sounding as if it was starving for new flesh. Above Portia, the hands of the demon that had claimed Meredith swiped at her from the ceiling, its talons curled into great hooks that nipped at the top of Portia's dark hair.

Even though she knew they were not there for her, Callie felt a great unease at their presence. She backed into the kitchen, the only place in the apartment where the red light was not so heavy, folding her arms around herself.

"Help me," Portia whispered to Callie. "You have to help me."

Callie didn't know what to say. The demons were making their way towards her, slowly stalking her and savoring their victim's whimpers and sobs. She wanted to help Portia. Her mind was working ways in which she could. But there was nothing she could do. The power of whatever evil lay within this game was in full control. Portia had sealed her fate long before this moment and nothing would be able to stop what was coming.

The Jackyl struck first, sinking its teeth deep into Portia's arm. It uncontrollably giggled and slurped as it tasted her blood on its tongue. The fat butcher was next, wrapping his massive hands around Portia's leg, tugging at her violently. The wall to Portia's left burst open and a long strand of greenish-brown flesh, dotted with boils and quivering bumps wrapped itself around her torso. Callie couldn't see what monster was at the other end, nor did she dare move from her spot to look. Lastly, the swiping talons from above Portia finally took hold of the top of her skull, the fingernails pressing deep into her flesh.

During this entire trauma, Portia had not let loose a single scream or cry. In fact, Callie could swear she saw a smile on Portia's face. Even as the blood flowed from her limbs, the tendons in her legs stretched to snapping, her ribs cracking to the point of becoming powder and her skull compressing her brain, Portia stood silent with a smirk.

"Portia," Callie muttered, tears now coming to her eyes as she watched her once-friend being mutilated before her eyes. "I'm sorry. I will pray for your soul."

The smirk turned into a scowl and Portia spat blood at Callie just as the Jackyl took another bite of her. She then cocked her head to the side and bit her lip, drawing more blood on her own, and licked the fresh wound clean with her tongue.

"Keep your prayers bitch. The devil is my messiah!"

A second later, her body was ripped into pieces. Callie let out a cry but it was too late. Her vision was blinded by the red glare of the Pith Dice, which had grown so intense that she needed to cover her eyes with her palms for fear they'd be burned out of her skull. A sickening noise of eating and laughing whirled throughout the room like a fowl wind. After a few seconds, it dispersed as did the light.

Callie opened her eyes slowly and slid her palms from her face. The room was empty now. Neither the demons nor any remains of Portia had been left behind. The litter of the other victims still lay in the room, scattered here and there, rotting and festering.

In that moment, Callie's sympathy for Portia had vanished. There was nothing to be remorseful about. Portia was not her responsibility and whatever evil she had conjured had lay claim to her soul long before tonight. The only thing Callie had done was save herself from being another victim.

She went to the center of the living room where the Pith Dice and the white bowl still remained. Both were stained with the waste of murder. Inside the bowl were pieces of all the victims. She could see a slab of flesh with a tattoo that she recognized from Kerry, a finger that belonged to Meredith, several teeth — one which was gold plated — that belonged to Latoya, and a clump of hair that was clearly Liz's. Nothing in the bowl of what she could see was of Portia and Callie knew why.

She remembered earlier that Liz had said Portia could stop the game if she wanted to. Perhaps Portia had done so with her final words.

As Callie had been embraced by her God, so too had Portia.

The front door of the apartment swung open. Callie turned to see who or what had forced its way into the apartment. She hoped the cops were coming. Surely someone had heard the noise and screams during the night. How she would explain being the only living person at a scene of such dismemberment she didn't know.

To her surprise, a small man wearing a yellow pastel suit came through the open door. He casually observed the aftermath in the apartment and walked to the white bowl on the floor. Callie watched him as he passed by her, paying her no attention at all.

He picked up the bowl and swirled the inside of the blood-stained porcelain with his index finger and then sucked on the residue. A grin crossed his lips and as he placed the bowl inside a grocery store bag and tied it shut.

"Who are you?" Callie said.

The man did not answer.

"Did you hear me? I said who are you? What are you doing?"

He still ignored her and proceeded towards the open door. Callie followed him for a moment, but then stopped as the smell of the dead overwhelmed her again. She clutched at her stomach but regained her composure.

"Don't you have anything to say?" she pleaded, feeling sick and saddened as she realized fully what had happened tonight.

The man in the yellow suit stopped. He scratched the back of his head and turned to look at Callie. She could see him clearly now. His ears were large, his eyes a light blue, his teeth as yellow as his suit and his head balding.

"Thank you, for being you Callie," the man said.

With that, he continued out the front door. Callie went into the stairwell and watched him, puzzled and shaken, as he walked out of the apartment building into the blackness of the night.

THE PEER REIVEW PROCESS

— *Evvar Hill*

“THERE are those who say you are a scourge! What do you say to that?”

Professor Dickon Clinton chortled, smiled obligingly at the interviewer and noticed, with an air of self-satisfaction, the eager faces of his followers awaiting his cutting reply.

“No doubt, my full title would be ‘the Scourge of Pseudoscience’,” he nodded, “Fitting that my opponents should say that, for while it is undoubtedly painful, as far as I know there is, sadly, no proof of medical efficacy of scourging in any impact factored, peer reviewed journal I know of!” His audience guffawed approvingly.

“If these practitioners of pseudoscientific fakery wish to use scourging, I happily say, ‘Physicians, heal thyselfes!’” The crowd applauded as the interview ended and Professor Clinton made his way from the room, shaking hands and signing the occasional copy of his books, thrust forward by eager hands. Ushered towards a nearby door, he entered the hospitality suite and accepted a glass of wine from an attendant.

“Well done, Dickon, another superb presentation,” said a thin gentleman standing nearby. Clinton, a portly, middle-aged chap, smiled at his friend and nodded,

“Wasn’t it, Harry? I must admit, it was a pleasant surprise to find such an interested audience. I was expecting a lot of rowdy hippies waving magic mushrooms and talking about Templar medicine or some such nonsense,” he chuckled. ‘It just shows that even in the sticks there is thirst for the truth,’

“Indeed!” agreed Harry Samuels, Clinton’s agent. “Talking of thirst, would you care for another before we drive back to the hotel?”

“Don’t mind if I do,” he replied, “All this scourging takes it out of me!”

*

Professor (dr habilitatus) Dickon Clinton FRSA, SRC, relaxed in the village pub, appreciating the local brewing technique. This was one of the few things he didn’t subject to a more rigorous scientific analysis than his tastebuds. Of course, amongst brewers and beer afficionadoes, there were probably many Old Wives Tales (OWT- “Some folk will believe OWT” as he was fond of saying). However, if they made for a delightful pint, he, Professor Dickon Clinton, was prepared to let it slide.

One of the leading medical biologists of his day, Professor Clinton had more recently become a celebrity science writer and lecturer. His first book for the popular science market, “Beware the Snake-Oil and the Apple”, was an exploration of food and health based myths. Riding high on a general confusion about wonder diets and apparently conflicting government health warnings and advice, Clinton’s book had given a sound thrashing to both popular misconceptions and what he

saw as official misinterpretations about food and health; 5-a-day did not cure cancer and neither did chanting neo-shamanic incantations whilst chewing on dried rabbit droppings. His no-nonsense, acerbic delivery was popular with cynics of the New Age and the general public at large. His battle cry, soon to be adopted by his followers as a kind of catechism, was ‘Show me the research in a peer reviewed, impact factored journal, and I’ll believe it!’

Whilst many, particularly in the natural medicine field derided Clinton, his initial point was a fair one. When asked why he was so aggressive against what he branded ‘pseudoscience’, he simply said, he honestly believed that while some stuff was of no harm, it could also prevent people getting real treatment through false beliefs. Some commented, however, that this initial egalitarian campaign seemed, as his fame and notoriety grew, to have become more of a sadistic witch-hunt, with the good Professor laying waste to all around with the joy of a pantomime villain. Secretly, even Harry Samuels had to admit his old friend seemed to have developed an air of smugness.

Clinton and Samuels had just finished an exquisite steak and kidney pie were contemplating whether to retire for the evening when a young man approached and nodded to ask if he could approach. The two gentlemen motioned to the young man to join them. Introducing himself as William Boine, the newcomer expressed his admiration of the Professor’s work, which earned him a fresh pint. He also admitted he didn’t always agree with Clinton, which earned him a laugh and an invitation to discuss the matter.

Boine acquitted himself well and Clinton enjoyed mixing it with a young chap who, although not always agreeing with his views, at least had read up thoroughly enough and was able to cite some respected peer reviewed journals with significant impact factor, to make it a worthy discussion. Eventually, the two gentlemen felt they should be retiring. As they began shaking hands, Boine said,

“By the way Professor, on the subject of folk medicine and natural healing, there is a local tradition which you might be interested in. Would you have time for a drive tomorrow?” His interest piqued, Professor Clinton consulted with Samuels about their arrangements for the next day. Finding it convenient they thanked the young man and agreed to meet after breakfast.

*

Boine met Clinton and Samuels outside the hotel. En route, he explained what they were going to see.

“It’s a small village which is pretty remote even for these parts. It has some kind of old legend about a book of healing and some mystical ceremony connected to it. It’s mentioned in some of the old antiquaries.”

“Ah, so it’s some old tale,” Clinton sighed, feeling that the morning might be a bit of a disappointment. “Is there anything concrete?”

“Well, the book is on show in the church.”

“I see, so probably just a few tales from the crypt and a dusty old book of OWT remedies?”

“No, not exactly. There are quite recent accounts of it being used in healings. I mean within the last few years.”

“Really? What, little things, like colds and flu?”

“No, actually some quite serious conditions, by all accounts.”

“Whose accounts?”

“Well, a couple of local doctors, I believe. Of course the problem is that confidentiality doesn’t let them reveal names to allow a check up of the facts”

“Of course, and then nobody knows whose son of which milkman’s granny it was, eh?”

“Well, locals are pretty adamant about who has been treated, just won’t give you a lot of information.” Boine admitted. Samuels laughed,

“Unless the glass is refilled, I imagine!”

*

The little car pulled up outside the village church, which Boine had arranged for them to visit before the morning service. The curate, Reverend Hawkins, was preparing for the service and welcomed them amiably, showing them the points of interest in the church; the Anglo-Saxon font, the Crusader tomb and the stained glass, which the party took in both out of courtesy and genuine interest.

“I imagine you don’t often find yourself in a church, Professor,” Boine quipped. Clinton, however, shook his head with a smile.

“On the contrary, William, churches are wonderful places. I mean look at all the superb craftsmanship and loving attention in this building,” he gestured, “The history! People make the mistake of considering them a monument to a god whilst they’re a monument to the creativity of mankind, don’t you think?”

Eventually William approached the curate and enquired of the book. Whilst the request raised his eyebrows, the curate nodded and made his way to a small cabinet in the corner of one end of the transept. Lifting the velvet covering, he raised the lid to reveal an ancient looking volume with a dried, cracking cover that appeared to be some kind of leather. Clinton was delighted. This alone was worth a visit.

“Am I correct in thinking that’s human skin, Reverend?” he ventured.

“We believe so,” Hawkins nodded, “To be honest, we have never had it properly analyzed as the villagers are very protective of it. However, one or two specialists have suggested the possibility, likewise with the pages,” at which he slowly opened the book to reveal some of the contents.

The pages contained small, colorful drawings of body parts and diagrams. These appeared to illustrate different ailments and means of treatment. However, the Professor found it impossible to be certain as he couldn’t read the tiny, sprawling hand which accompanied it.

“That isn’t Latin, is it?” he asked. The curate smiled and shook his head. “Not any form of script I recognize, although I’m not a specialist in this field. Well, I must admit, I’m stumped!” This time the Rev. Hawkins grinned,

“Well, a number of linguists and historians have also come away shaking their heads. Again, we won’t release it for analysis so they can’t tell if it is a code or simply bad handwriting,” he chuckled.

“Would it be possible to take a more detailed look?” Samuels asked, his own interest as a publisher now stimulated.

“Perhaps,” the curate replied, “But I’m afraid I have to get ready for the service. However, if you’d like to stay, I’d be happy to invite you for a cup of tea afterwards and we can discuss more about the local folklore.”

“Well Reverend,” Clinton chuckled, “how can I resist an invitation like that? There’ll be a bishopric in the works when they hear you’ve got me, of all people, to attend a service!”

*

Relaxing in the rectory with some strong tea and excellent homemade scones, the Professor was enjoying himself, attempting to gently bait the amiable curate, who took it all in good humour. Eventually the conversation moved onto local folklore and the book within the church. The curate, as many of his ilk, had a keen interest in local history.

“The language, as I mentioned before, has baffled a few linguists” the curate reminded them.

“But I don’t understand why you don’t let them take it away and analyze it,” Samuels said. The curate smiled and shook his head.

“Well, as I said, the locals are very protective. They enjoy having it here and having the little mysteries. They don’t want it proved or un-proved. You, Professor, with all your research and fact-finding are the ‘antichrist’ to us.” He chuckled, topping up the Professor’s tea. The antichrist guffawed.

“Of course,” the curate continued, “the other thing is, we do know which language it is.”

The guests stared at the curate, who enjoyed his moment of power before stating,

“It’s Elven!” There followed a stunned silence before Samuels said,

“Elven”

“Yes,” he nodded, “Obviously a local dialect, but definitely Elven.”

Clinton sniggered into his teacup,

“Do you have any... basis for this belief?” The curate reached over to his bookcase, taking out a small, withered volume and thumbing through the pages,

“Yes, the local vicar, about two hundred years ago was a keen collector of tales and we have his word on the matter. In the ninth century, the locals used to take their sick to a local glade and leave them there overnight. Legend has it that the elves would heal the sick in exchange for milk.”

“Well, it’s certainly cheaper than Harley Street!” quipped Samuels. The curate continued,

“When the priest first came, he tried to stop what he saw as ‘superstition’... “

“Can’t fault him there!” chortled Clinton.

“... But the practice continued. The Bishop commanded that the woods be destroyed but the priest entered the glade at night and spoke to the elves, offering them protection if they agreed to put themselves under the Mother church, which they did. He built his new church close in the glade, allowing them to live under the roof.”

“He did what?” Clinton snorted.

“Well, I think the idea was that they could keep the book in the church and heal people in a special chamber which was built for them. The elves themselves, I believe, lived in the wood, coming into the church only to carry out healings, which continued for centuries, according to local tradition.”

“And... you believe this, Curate?” Boine asked.

“Who knows, Mr Boine? Maybe there was a local healer, perhaps some kind of coven of local druids. There are a number of old theories about ‘hidden folk’ who moved into mountains or forests etc to avoid invaders. These might be the basis for ideas of fairies, elves and so on. Probably the priest knew he wouldn’t break the locals’ loyalty to them, so better to contain and control it under the power of the church. As I’m sure the Professor will agree, we do have a good track record of doing that.”

Clinton nodded,

“Indeed, Curate. But how long did these healings go on for?”

“I understood they were still happening recently,” chipped in Boine.

“Certainly into the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. There were many reports written by the local priests. However, during the twentieth century these dried up. Either the healing stopped or the writing did.”

“So what about William’s idea that they were still happening recently?” Samuels asked.

“Well, there are still people in the village who claim to remember healings and one or two who say they’ve experienced them themselves, and yes, I am aware of at least two alleged healings in the last ten years but those were before I came here.”

“Convenient!” said the Professor.

“The thing is, Professor, the locals are a bit secretive about it and it wouldn’t surprise me if there had been more, even more recently, without my knowledge.. You see, it gets harder to allow such things in the church officially. Believe it or not, the Church doesn’t like superstition!”

Professor Clinton almost choked on his tea.

“Does anyone have any information about them?” he asked

“Well, the best person to speak to about it would probably be old Joe Matlock, he’s considered a kind of ‘guardian’ of the book.”

“And where could we find Mr Matlock?” Harry Samuels asked.

“I imagine you’ll find him at the end of the bar in the local pub about now.” said the curate.

*

Joe Matlock eyed the outsiders warily. However, his caution still allowed him to accept a double brandy. Now he was waiting to see what they wanted. He didn't need to wait long.

"Mr Matlock, the curate tells us that you might be able to tell us something about the book in the church and the healings," William Boine said. Old Joe nodded to himself as if confirming his initial suspicions.

"Oh, did he now? The book, eh? Figured." he muttered. Clinton looked quizzically at the old man.

"Do people often ask you about it?" he asked. Matlock gave a sideways smile.

"Oh, now and then, especially after buying me a drink... but I'd reckoned it was what you wanted, Professor," he chuckled. Clinton stared in surprise. "Oh don't look so surprised, we do 'ave tellies here these days. Saw you on some programme giving some hippies and church folk grief." At this Clinton and his friends laughed, "Appen as like you'll be wanting to do the same with our 'ere book, I imagine."

Harry Samuels started to say something but Clinton, laying a hand on his arm, interjected,

"Now, Mr Matlock, I understand why you might think that if you've seen me on TV, but on those programs I was invited to have a debate... everyone knew what was going to happen. However, I am also a scientist and I am asking purely out of interest."

"Ahh, that's what they all say but 'appen as you'll 'ave a motive. Thy kind usually do, Professor," Joe Matlock replied, with a knowing wink.

"Ah, you're too canny for me, Mr Matlock?"

"You'd be surprised!" he smiled, "An' you can call me Joe, I'm not one for formalities, Professor."

"So you may call me Dickon, Joe!"

"That's kind of you, Dickon, but I'll stick with Professor, if you don't mind. Tha's earned a title, I'll use it."

"Very well then, Joe. Now, what will it take for you to tell us about the book," Clinton asked, "I mean, as much as you feel able to?"

"If you're meaning as much as you want, Professor, it'll take more'n you have. But for a few stories... well, it'll take at least another brandy, if you don't mind?"

*

"Well, a very interesting day, William, thank you!" said the Professor as Boine pulled up outside the hotel. The younger man smiled,

"I'm glad you enjoyed it, Professor. I look forward to discussing it with you next time."

"Of course, dear boy! Please, let's keep in touch."

As William drove off into the night, the two men walked into the hotel and made their way to their room. Sitting down on the edge of his bed Professor Clinton undid his tie and looked at an equally exhausted Harry. The two burst out laughing, it had indeed been a wonderful day and evening.

*

By closing time it hadn't quite taken all Clinton had to glean some useful information from Joe Matlock but it had put severe strains on the Professor's wallet and the landlord's top shelf. The trio had watched the old man staggering away before Boine had driven them back,

"The amount he could put away he must have regular elven-detoxes!" Harry had joked. The Professor nodded,

"I hope he has a private health plan with them if he drinks like that all the time".

"No," said Boine, "It'll be on the National Elf Service." The two older men looked at him witheringly.

Joe Matlock maintained that he was a "keeper" of the book, a position which seemed to have been handed down from his father and grandfather. How exactly the tradition had come into his family, he had no idea but it was one which was taken very seriously. The book, he maintained, had been written by the elves as a kind of medical manual and rewritten or edited by them over the centuries. As to what it said, he had no idea, not knowing the language at all. He had never seen the elves or spoken to them but he did not doubt the reality or efficacy of them and the book.

Even the Remy Martin and Talisker had not been able to loosen his tongue enough to reveal details of the actual ceremony or what went on during a healing but he did admit to at least three people having undergone the process in the last ten years. Of these, two had died a few years later of old age ("They only 'eals illnesses, can't do owt about age!") but one was still alive and living in the village. Another couple of glasses secured her name. William Boine said he'd try to contact her and arrange a meeting (although he might be too busy with work to accompany them). Soon after that the landlord had (thankfully) rung last orders.

Back in the hotel, Samuels finished brewing some tea and sat opposite the professor. He enquired of his thoughts about it all. Clinton pondered a little before answering,

"On the surface, it seems just another local superstition. But the book alone makes this worth investigating, don't you think? Also, a chance to see this ritual could be fascinating, eh?"

Samuels recognized the look in his friend's eyes: it was the investigator, the researcher, the hunter after his prey. He returned the smile and nodded excitedly.

Margaret Hollinswood was a frail-looking lady of 86 who assured the professor that the doctors had all but given up on her and her liver problem before a friend had suggested she try a by-the-book healing. Being a local it hadn't been hard to arrange and Joe Matlock had taken her to the church one evening whilst the curate was elsewhere. She admitted to feeling a little uneasy about this strange, "heathen practice" but she knew Mr Matlock to be a regular church goer and a number of respectable people had encouraged her decision. She became rather coy when asked about what had taken place but with gentle persuasion, she eventually got up and drew the curtains, invited her guests to partake in a sherry and, having

poured herself a rather large one, sat down. Taking a large sip of the drink, she leaned forward in a conspiratorial manner,

“Those of us who have been healed are not supposed to tell of it, you know,” she admitted with a furtive look, “But I’m getting on and I doubt there’s much left for me to worry about in this life. You may as well know,” she whispered. “Just don’t let on who it was told you!”

Clinton and Samuels swore undying confidence.

“Well, Mr Matlock had me bring a night gown and I had to undress and put it on in the vestry, of course he didn’t look. When I was decent, he came back and sat me down. He gave me a drink of something from an old bottle... said it were a kind of potion his family knew about. I don’t know what it was but it tasted foul. Anyway, he took me into the healing room and laid me down on the table. Then he took the old book and laid it open at my feet, then left, locking the door after him.” She paused to take another sip of sherry, the two men leaned even further forward in anticipation.

“Well, it was... queer, yes, that’s the word, most queer. My head became light and I suddenly saw them. They came out and began to look at the book while some others put their hands on me.”

“What were they?” Clinton whispered. Mrs Hollinswood gazed at him as if surprised by the question.

“Well, the healers, of course! I was proper scared but I couldn’t move, only watch. Then one of ‘em suddenly stuck its hand right into my body, through the skin and all! I was terrified, thought it would hurt but I can’t say as it did. That said, I could feel it squeezing my liver. Then he stuck his head in the hole and I swear he took a bite out of it. At that point I fell asleep. When I woke up they were gone and I felt wonderful. Next day the doctor at the hospital, he couldn’t believe it. Said it was all healed up and better. I’ve had no problem with it since.”

*

Over dinner that evening the two men discussed the matter. Samuels shook his head at the story.

“How can anyone believe such a thing in this day and age, I wonder?” he chuckled. However, to his surprise, Clinton stopped him.

“Oh, you’d be surprised how common this is. Read a rather interesting article in *The Journal of Shamanic Medicine*, a small but respectable peer reviewed journal, low impact factor but probably due to the field being small.”

“Surely you don’t believe it?”

“Well, Harry, it’s quite common in reports of shamanic healing for the patient to undergo a journey into the spirit world and be dismembered by the spirits, sometimes eaten, and then reassembled. Often, they eat the specific part which is ill. Then the patient’s cured.”

“And you think this is true, Dickon?” asked Samuels. Clinton shrugged,

“I believe they see it, or think they see it. The healing is probably some kind of autosuggestion or placebo. That said, there aren’t many reports of how long they lived afterwards.”

“But Mrs Hollinswood...?” Harry asked.

“I think, Harry,” said the Professor, “that we are going to have to do some special research of our own” he paused and smiled wickedly, “Is there any part of you that needs healing?”

A few months later Clinton and Samuels sat in the pub playing chess with Joe Matlock. Their frequent visits to the village over several months had made them recognized and welcome regulars. Under the guise of learning about fading local rural customs and practices, they had asked Joe and some other older members of the community to educate them in aspects of such skills as farming, forestry and hunting. Clinton had explained that he wished to compare these with more modern techniques to see if he could prove advantages of the old ways. Pleased that somebody was interested (“The young uns ‘ave no interest in it these days, Professor”) the old villagers had embraced the chance to teach a real professor. That night, however, Hawkins was unusually quiet and seemed distracted.

“That’s the third game I’ve taken from thee, Professor,” Joe laughed, “Appen as your heart’s not in it tonight?” Clinton smiled weakly,

“Perhaps you’re right Joe. Maybe I’m just too tired. If you’d excuse me, I think I need to turn in for the night but would you like another pint before I go?” Joe accepted and the Professor limped to the bar, returning with two pints for him and Samuels. With that, he bade the bar goodnight before slowly hobbling up to his room.

Samuels and Matlock both sipped their beer in silence. Joe studied the publisher’s solemn face before quietly asking,

“So, what is it you two are trying to keep quiet?” He held Samuels’ startled gaze for a few seconds before continuing, “The Professor isn’t well, it’s plain, and you aren’t happy about something. One of the chaps said he’d caught sight of the Professor’s leg the other day when you were fishing at the lake... bit of a mess by all accounts. I’d say we’re friends enough to be trusted, wouldn’t you?”

Samuels sighed and explain about the professor’s illness and suspected cancer in the leg. The doctors, he said, were not optimistic

“So, was that the interest in the book? I notice you haven’t mentioned it for a long time. Changed your minds?”

Samuels shrugged and looked into his beer. Perhaps, at first, it had seemed like a straw to grasp but Clinton’s scientific discipline wouldn’t let him accept it and his interest in it became strictly as a historic curiosity. His friend had quietly come to accept his fate. However, he didn’t want to simply curl up and die. He was a researcher and wished to keep going as long as he could, hence the project with Joe and his chums.

“So, he’s given up on the book? Did he ever believe in it?”

“I don’t know, to be honest, Joe. He trusts so much to his science...”

“Ah, course! He likes his books, what is it... ‘peer reviewed’ or summat? Imagine he thinks our book aint good enough for him but he’d be surprised. ‘Appen it’s peer reviewed of a sort. But maybe it’s not enough for him.” Shortly afterwards, Joe said his goodnights and left.

A few nights later, Clinton was walking back from an evening's night-fishing with Joe Matlock and a couple of the local old boys. The invitation had been sudden and Harry Samuels had made his apologies but prior engagements prevented him from joining them so the Professor had gone on his own. As the group walked into the village Joe suggested a walk past the church.

"If your leg is up to it, Professor," he said. Clinton coughed and agreed he was able to walk a little further. "Comes and goes, does it?" Joe asked, "Aye, often the way!"

As they passed the church gate, the group stopped. Joe Matlock turned to Hawkins,

"Professor, we know about your illness. Neither you nor Mr Samuels couldn't keep it from me and, to be honest, I'm surprised you never asked. Normally it's only locals can get it but you've become a friend of the village. Scientist or not, I know the book can help you and if you'll trust us, we can do a healing tonight. The time is right and you're here," he paused, "Dickon, will you let us help you?"

Clinton entered the chamber in the white gown one of the old men had brought with him. They had stayed outside the church when he and Joe Matlock had entered. After changing he had drunk the foul brew which Joe gave him from an old earthenware flask. The old man explained that he should enter the chamber and lie down and not be scared. Joe placed the book at the foot of the table and left the room. The door closed and the key turned. Clinton lay silent for a moment until he heard Joe's footsteps echo from the church.

"Harry, are you there?" he asked drowsily. Samuels chuckle came from behind the heavy curtain.

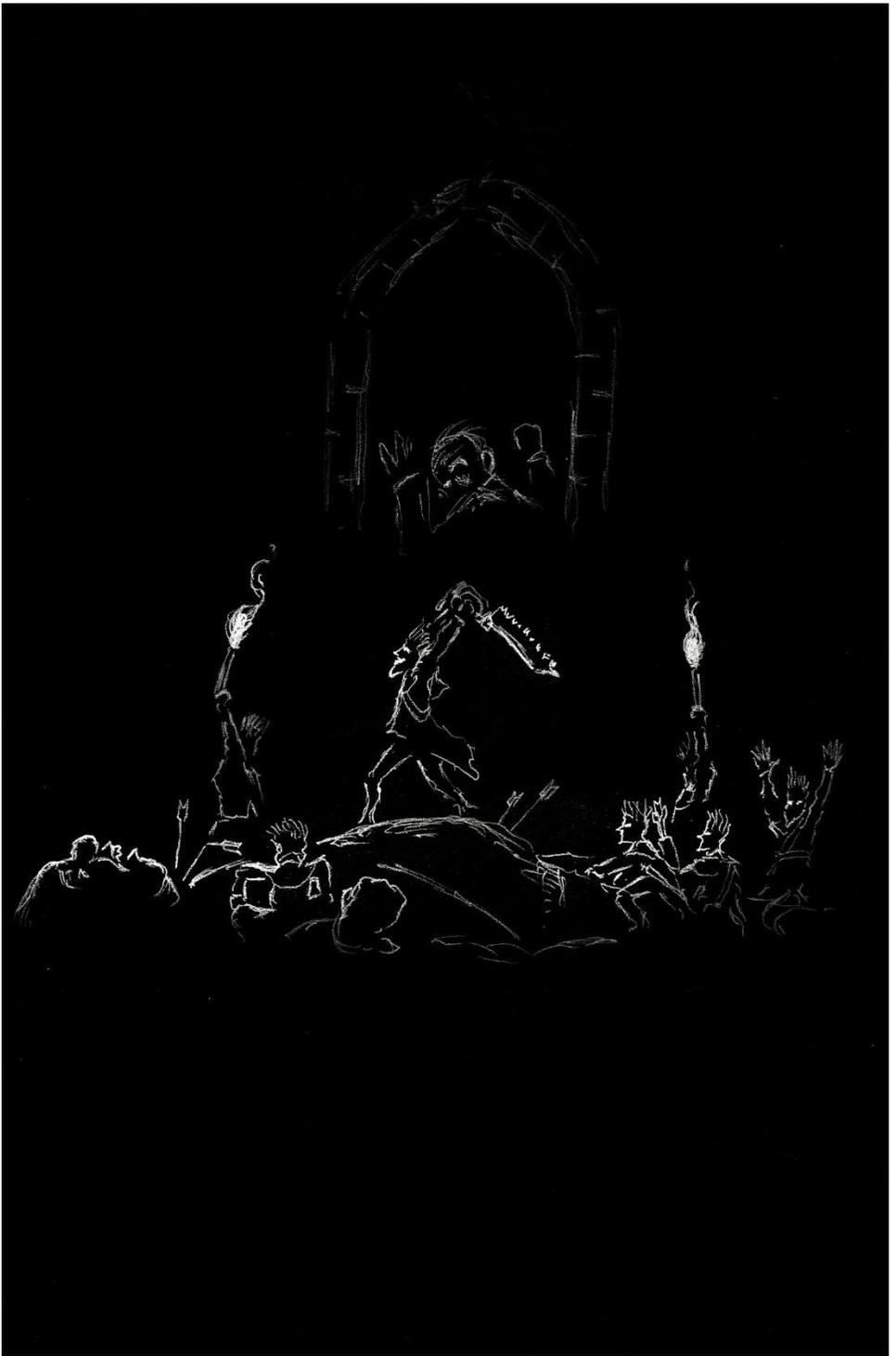
"All ready, Dickon. The camera's set. Not sure how much it'll work in the darkness but we'll see," Samuels replied. "I've been here hours. I thought you were never going to come and we'd misjudged them."

"Glad we timed it correctly, I don't know how much more saline I could stand injected in my leg!" Clinton said. Samuels laughed,

"Yes, interesting little trick, isn't it? Swells up nicely. Now you lie quietly and wait for the little people!" Both men chuckled and Clinton lay quietly for a moment.

Suddenly, he saw the first little light, then several pairs of little lights moving across the top of the curtain and underneath the hem. The lights hovered, still, like little eyes peering at him. It was then that he felt the first hand on his leg, then a second and third. He could feel the sharp, claw-like nails of the hands drawing up and down his swollen limb. He forced himself to look towards his feet, gasping as he saw the wizened little creature staring at the book whilst leafing angrily through its pages. Alongside his leg three more angry looking figures were rubbing the skin and barking angry sounds to the reader.

At his gasp, the healers snapped their gaze onto him. Clinton writhed in fear as the three by his leg squealed aggressively and thrust their claws into his flesh. He moaned, although he felt no pain. Then his eyes widened as a fourth creature approached with an instrument resembling a bone saw. The three others held him



tightly as the saw was placed on the swollen limb and drawn across it. This Clinton did feel. He screamed in pain and the saw cut into the flesh and bone. He shuddered, trying desperately to remind himself this was all a hallucination until he heard something else. Harry Samuels was also screaming.

Twisting his head around, the professor saw his friend staggering from behind the curtain with two more creatures clinging to his head, clawing at his face and eyes. A third creature was smashing the camera against the wall. The adrenalin of fear surged through him, over-riding the drug potion and Clinton began kicking at the creature which held the saw. The saw swung wildly, lacerating his foot, but the Professor pulled himself up and, seizing one of those which held his leg, threw it at its blade wielding partner.

At this point, Samuels ran blindly, screaming, into the middle of the room, tripping over the table and landing heavily on Clinton's leg, knocking the remaining healers away. Rolling from the table, the dazed professor crawled madly to the door, pounding on it and screaming for help, driven on by the howls of Harry Samuels. Suddenly he felt a sharp pain in his arm and saw what looked like a small dart or arrow buried in his skin. A second one pierced his wrist and he hammered even more furiously on the door. Glancing over his shoulder he saw a group of the creatures holding Samuels across the table and the saw bearer holding the pointed end of the blade above the chest of the shrieking publisher.

The door was wrenched open and Clinton fell face first onto the cold floor of the church, strong hands, human hands, pulling him out of the chamber whilst others forced the door shut. The thudding of tiny arrows drummed against the wood of the door. Then, through the thick cloud of his delirious mind he heard the sudden impact of a heavy object and Harry Samuels stopped screaming.

"Well," came the voice of Joe Matlock, "that wasn't very clever! It'll take a lot of milk to pacify 'em now." Clinton stared goggle eyed at the old man's stern face. "I told him that book was 'peer reviewed' of a sort. They use it to treat what they know and rewrite it when they find a new ailment. Don't suppose they've encountered paraffin injection before, or whatever it was you used. Oh yes, I thought it looked familiar, saw it in the army when some lads tried to work their ticket, just didn't think as someone like you'd try it. Still, thanks to you, they now have something to write new pages on!"

THE STATEMENT OF CHARLES WALLACE

— *M. D. Campbell*

IT is with great haste that I write this, having just consumed a great quantity of fertilizer. My limbs are seizing and pain wracks my every movement but I can think with a clarity I have not felt in days. It is imperative that I leave this record and I will attempt to master my nerves, that this might be legible.

I had been in Cape Colony for a week, called there to assist Sir Hely-Hutchinson in dealing with the rebels that had plunged the colony into civil war for 3 years. I was to manage one of the camps for refugees. I despised Africa immediately. A hot, dry, and filthy country full of disease.

The only respite I had in this time was my manservant, Walter. His constant presence at my side saved more than a few subordinates from reprimand. Walter seemed to take to the continent far better than I. My work weighed heavily on me and Walter's encouragement kept me at my desk even as further reports of deaths came in weekly. No matter what I requisitioned, they continue to expire in droves and if I could not curtail it soon, I would be removed from my post in disgrace. It was this that brought me to what I believe was my point of exposure.

Walter led me from my office in the government building to the camp I was responsible for. The area was safe and I felt more than comfortable leaving my revolver behind in my office. It was a sweltering day and were it not for proper breeding as an Englishman, I should have removed my coat. I needed to ascertain the reason for the continued decline in population and also estimate how much more the local graveyard could hold.

The camp was teeming with the emaciated. It was most frustrating. I requisitioned all the food I dared and now, seeing my charges for the first time, I could see that my efforts had been wasted. The crates of food remained piled in the center of the camp, reeking of spoilage. The people milled about aimlessly in the sun, shamelessly undressed. They had no drive to eat. They were killing themselves through sloth! Many of them lacked even the desire to move out of the sun, some of them being visibly blistered. Talking to them proved useless. Walter spoke to them in my stead. Those who could speak simply shrugged and said they hadn't noticed the food or the hunger or the deaths. When pressed, when Walter begged them to explain themselves, they ignored him. Frustrated, I called him off and asked him to take me to the next leg of our trip.

The graveyard was one in only the loosest of definitions. It was comprised of large, unmarked mass graves, more an abattoir than cemetery. It certainly wasn't fit for a proper servant of the crown. Even for the people in the camp, it didn't seem like enough. One of the largest graves wasn't even filled properly. I could see a hand protruding out from the mound of earth. It attracted my gaze to the flower.

Poking out from the side of the earth was a vibrant purple flower. I knelt down and examined the bloom. I grasped it by the stem to pick it and cut my

finger on the thorns hidden beneath the petals. I drew back my hand, drawing the cut down the full length of my finger. A small rivulet of blood dripped onto the ground. Walter reacted cutting a strip from his shirt with his knife and quickly tying it over the wound. I asked that he take me home.

Without Walter, I suspect I would never have noticed the changes that consumed me. The peculiarities began two days later. I began shedding my clothes. My coat fell into disuse and was discarded entirely after four days. I recall only that I was warm. I didn't think it odd to be about in a state of undress. It simply seemed the most obvious way of cooling down. Soon after, my waistcoat, too, was gone. A week after the visit I was shirtless.

I had felt too confined in my office. The walls were getting to me and I felt a tremendous desire to venture outside. I must have spent several hours milling about the courtyard of the government. It was nearly sunset before Walter found me. He had been searching the building for hours before looking outside on a whim.

I laughed, "I'm sorry. I'll keep you abreast of my wanderings next time. It was a flight of fancy."

"Are you alright, sir? You never go outside except on business."

"Walter, I'm fine. I was simply taken with the desire to walk."

"Sir, I think you should see the doctor."

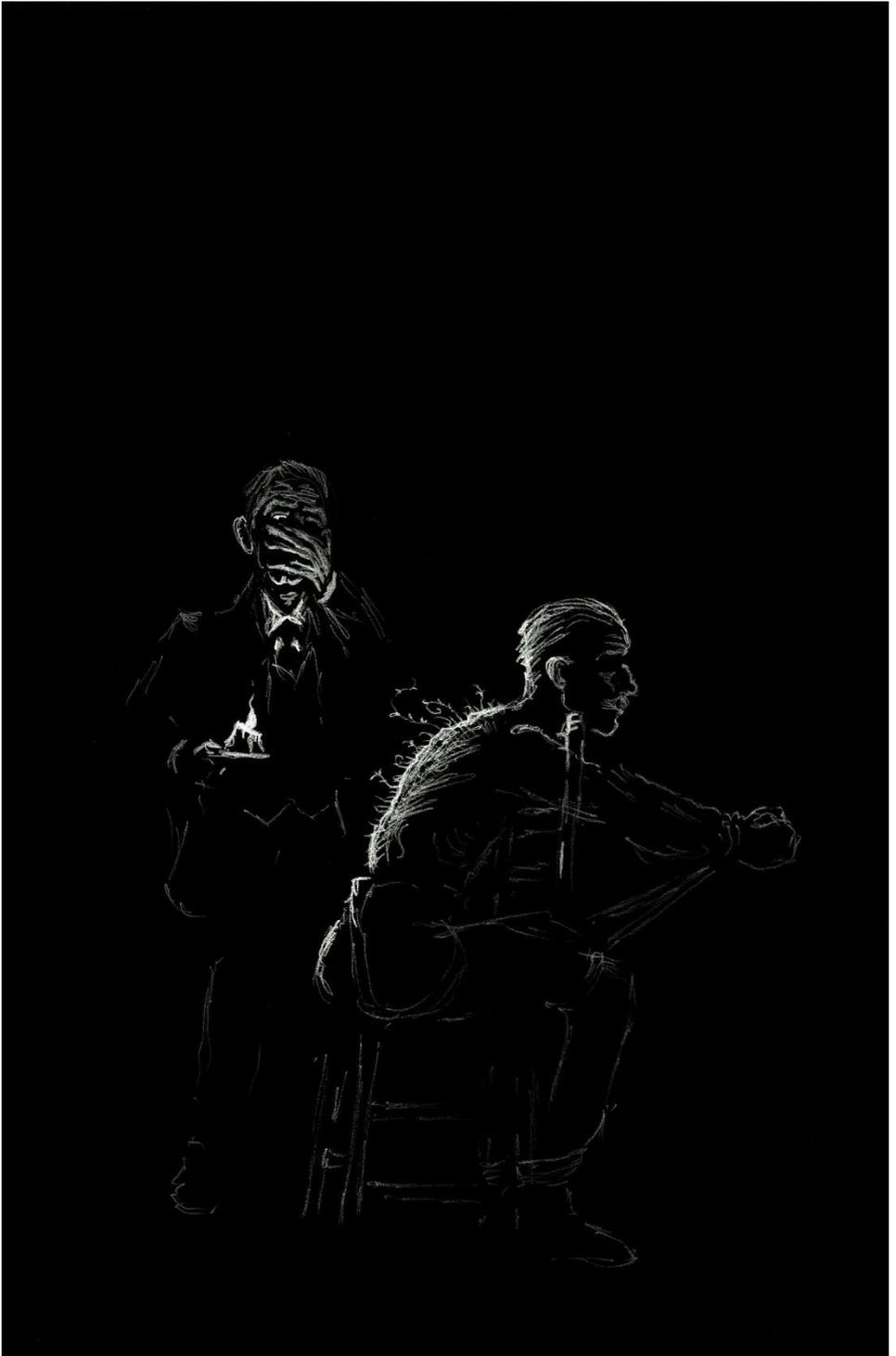
"Walter, I'm perfectly-"

Walter cut me off by grasping my right arm. He ignited an explosion of pain where he touched me. Walter raises my arm. It was a deep red from sunburn. I looked down. My entire upper body had been burnt to blistering. I hadn't felt a thing. In fact, I still wanted to be outside but I was shaken and I allowed Walter to lead me to the doctor. I was given an ointment to ease the burns.

I was restricted to my bed for the next two days, applying the ointment myself. I tried to piece out what might be wrong with me. I felt fine aside from a lingering desire to be outside. It was a deep longing and consumed my thoughts. I reviewed my work from the previous week and discovered numerous errors. I could only attribute it to the distraction my longing presented. I even forgotten to feed myself. Had Walter not made it a point to regularly bring me food, I think I might have risked starvation.

It wasn't until then that I realized that, for days now, I had been exposing myself at work and now in public. It didn't bother me. I didn't want the shirt or the vest or the jacket. I was troubled that it didn't bother me.

After two days of bed rest I forced myself to return to work. Only one thing remained: Another visit to the doctor to check up on my burns. I forced myself to don my full suit, even as sweat beaded on my brow with each layer. I arrived at my appointment as scheduled and the doctor was quite jovial. I disrobed to my shirt for him. He rolled up my sleeves. My skin was peeling off in chunks. The blisters had gone. He was quite pleased with my progress. He passed behind me to finish the examination form. I was about to put my shirt back on when he stopped me.



“Hold a moment. You have.. It looks like a sliver here in your back,” He said, gripping my shoulder lightly. He gave a closer inspection of my back, “The little things are all over. You must have almost two dozen. No, three. Not sure what they are but you should have your bedding checked. They’re quite large. One moment, I’ll remove them.”

The physician moved over to his table and picked up his surgical knife. He walked back toward me. Rage rushed over me. I acted without thinking. He held one hand out for my shoulder to hold me steady. My body twisted off the chair and rose to stand while knocking his hand aside. My fist struck his face, sending him sprawling on to the ground. My hands closed around the chair. My body loomed over the physician. One swing of the chair knocked aside the arm he was using to defend himself. My body fell to its knees over the physician and brought the chair down again onto his skull, dashing his brains out on to the floor. The chair continued to come down until it shattered into pieces against the floor. The physician’s head had been ruined. He was unrecognizable. His body’s tremors had been done for minutes by the time I stopped.

I stood up and backed away from the body and into a nurse who had been attracted by the noise. She had been too shocked to stop me. She screamed as I backed into her and I whirled around. The lie slipped out easily.

I pointed to the surgical knife still in the physician’s hand, “He attacked me. I had to defend myself.”

I quickly fled the examination room as the shocked nurse continued to stare at the corpse. I tracked down Walter, finding him in my office. I explained what happened.

“You killed him, sir?”

“Yes. But, I.. I didn’t think about it. It just happened. I was moving. It started when he went to cut out these slivers,” I said, turning so Walter could see my back, “I want you to try to remove them. But, restrain me.”

Walter nodded and fetched a chair. When I was securely tied to it, Walter went about examining my back. He counted thirty-two little green slivers in all. Walter cautioned me and drew his knife. I winced as he made a small incision in my back and fished underneath the sliver with his knife. Pain struck my entire body as steel touched the thing. Rage flashed over me and my body thrashed in its bonds, but was held securely.

“Sir, it is much longer than it appears,” Walter said, pulling on the sliver and sending more pain coursing through me, “It feels like a vine or root. I think all of them may be connected. Sir, I don’t think we can remove them. How did this happen?”

“I don’t know, Walter,” I said, “Maybe that flower I cut myself on in the camp.”

Walter gripped my right hand in his left and carefully cut his bandage away. The cut had healed but a thick green vein was clearly visible beneath the skin. Walter cut me free.

“Get dressed, sir,” Walter instructed.

“What for?”

“We are going back to the camp. If this can make you murder a man, we must eradicate the plant.”

“Yes of course,” I said.

“Will you be alright on your own, sir, for a moment? I need to gather a few things and we will need to leave before soldiers come for you?”

“I can handle myself, Walter.”

Walter left to gather his things as I went to my own quarters. I changed into a new suit. I was so distracted I barely notice when I slipped my revolver into my pocket. I wanted to take it. I felt I might need it. I finished locking my things up when Walter arrived at my door. I shot him. Walter stumbled forward and his hand found his knife. The revolver was empty before I stopped firing.

I knelt next to him. I couldn't make it to the graveyard. I no longer wanted to. I searched through Walter's pack discovering oil and matches. I took his knife, cut the strap, and took his sack. I couldn't dispose of the graveyard but I could dispose of myself. The flower had grown on and bloomed on one of the corpses. If I were to be arrested for my crimes, I would be sent back to Britain. I would be executed.

I took my small chest, emptying it of my meager belongings, and stole out of the government building and ran to the gardener's shed. I took the inventory records down from their hook. I had to leave this record. You must understand. There, I set upon the work of depositing the oil about the shed. I stopped as my eyes fell upon the bags of fertilizer. They looked so good. I tossed the oil aside and sliced a bag open and began shoveling handfuls into my mouth. It tasted like fire as I swallowed it. The pain brought me back. There was no more time. I began writing. With this concluded I need only start fire. I can hear the search parties roaming the ground.

I will make sure this letter survives my immolation. My body and the camp must be destroyed. I leave it to you.

— *Charles Wallace*

SWIM AT YOUR OWN RISK

— *Matthew Gorman*

THE trip to Rome had been a bumpy one. Overcome by exhaustion, Mrs. Worthington flopped onto the gilded bedspread and affixed her sleeping mask while her husband paced neurotically about the spacious suite commenting upon its amenities.

“Darling, please,” she scolded him. “The flight was simply atrocious, and if I don’t get a nap in before dinner I’ll be a complete disaster.”

“Well, don’t sleep too long, turtle dove, we have reservations at Il Paradiso at 8, and you know how much I’ve been dying to try their taglierini con tarufi,” Mr. Worthington said, over pronouncing the Italian like he always did.

“Yes, I am well aware of our reservation, darling.”

“It’s supposed to be the best in all of Rome, even better than the one they do at La Pergola. Did you know they actually have the truffles sent in daily from Alba, dear? That certainly must cost them a pretty penny.”

“Chester Worthington,” she said, speaking as if a mother to a wayward child. “Surely, there is something with which you might occupy your time while I take a short rest. Doesn’t this hotel have a casino or something, darling?”

“I’m afraid there are no casinos within Rome, my dear. In fact, I believe that there are only five land-based casinos in all of Italy and, sadly, none of them here in the city. A shame, as you do know how much I enjoy my baccarat.”

“Yes, yes. Well, something then, darling. I really must sleep and that’s quite impossible to do with you standing there yammering on and on about gold-plated bathroom fixtures and imported truffles. Surely, you must see that?”

“Yes, my dear, I’m sorry, my love. Actually, I’d thought I’d be up for a little swim. Did you know that the Palazzo d’Oro boasts one of the first indoor Olympic-sized swimming pools in the world? In fact, several members of the Italian national swimming team even used the hotel pool as a training ground in their preparation for the 1960 Summer Games right here in Rome. Quite fascinating, wouldn’t you say?”

“I most certainly would not. A pool’s a pool. So go, go, swim, swim,” Mrs. Worthington mumbled, the half of a valium she had taken at check-in already starting to work its magic.

“Of course, dear,” Mr. Worthington said, and went to fetch his swimming trunks.

By the time he left the hotel suite, shutting the door gently behind him, his wife was already snoring peacefully away.

*

Mr. Worthington made his way to the basement level of the hotel where the pool was housed. A few dozen laps ought to be the very thing to work up an appetite for the rich pasta that he planned to consume at Il Paradiso tonight.

He located a small but richly appointed changing room just off the pool's main entrance and there he traded his shoes, shirt, and linen trousers for a pair of electric blue swimming trunks with a red racing stripe down either thigh. He drew his fitted neoprene swimming cap over his balding head, attached his purple silicone nose clip, and donned his anti fog goggles before leaving for the pool. Mr. Worthington was a rather capable swimmer and with all his fancy accoutrements he felt he truly looked the part.

Ready to swim, he stepped out barefoot into the pool's natatorium and found himself instantly struck with awe. As the Chief Financial Officer for a Fortune 500 company for nearly two decades before his retirement, Mr. Worthington was accustomed to a certain standard of luxury, particularly when he traveled Europe, but the opulence of the pool and its environs were far and away above most that he had seen.

Inlaid pillars of pink marble rose high to meet the vaulted ceiling adorned with intricate frescoes of cherubs and angels that called to mind--quite intentionally, no doubt--those of the Sistine Chapel as they gazed down upon the water below. The floor surrounding the pool was wrought in a chessboard pattern of alternating Italy pink marble and stunning white Calcutta marble veined with gold, while potted palms thrust their fronds from intermittent alcoves along the walls to lend a hint of lushness to the massive room of metamorphic rock.

And the pool, itself, was a perfect shimmering field of turquoise blue that stretched the length of the enormous space with wispy white tendrils of steam rising up from its heated water.

But despite the grandeur of the room, there was an unsettling quality about it that Mr. Worthington couldn't quite put his finger on. It certainly didn't help that the only source of light came from a pair of crystal chandeliers suspended from the muraled ceiling high above. They bathed the room in a subdued and somber light where shadows hung from the corners like dark draperies. Nor did it help that he appeared to be the room's sole occupant. It seemed rather odd to him that none of the hotel's other guests had been up for a mid-afternoon swim.

And then there was the sign.

Affixed to the far wall was a white metal signboard, oddly unremarkable amidst the lavish décor, which provided a familiar warning in Italian: NO LIFEGUARD ON DUTY. SWIM AT YOUR OWN RISK. It was a notice he'd seen in many languages and at many a pool throughout the world, but here for some strange reason it struck an ominous chord.

But Mr. Worthington was here to swim, and he wasn't about to let some silly sense of unease put a stop to his plans. It was likely to pass once he found himself in the water, anyway.

The soles of his bare feet padding against the ornate tile, he approached the edge of the pool. Even with his nose guard in place, the smell of chlorinated water

hung heavy in the air. It filled his mind with fond memories of a childhood spent swimming in the pool at his grandfather's estate in Portola Valley, and did much to assuage his unquiet nerves.

He dangled one foot over the edge and plunged his toes into the water to test its warmth. Olympic racing pools were generally heated at anywhere from 77 to 82 degrees Fahrenheit, and it seemed the Palazzo's pool certainly fell somewhere within this ballpark. It would make for an undoubtedly pleasant swim.

Taking care--though still strong of upper body, his knees weren't what they used to be--Mr. Worthington lowered himself into a sitting position with his legs submerged before sliding his buttocks across the tile to come to a full stand upon the bottom of the pool's shallow end.

He stood there for a moment enjoying the heat of the water against the paunch of his belly, his palms fanning to and fro across its surface. The far end of the pool looked truly far away and he was deciding whether it was best to swim his laps by employing the less exhausting breaststroke or by sticking with his usual forward crawl when he heard a child's voice addressing him from somewhere nearby.

"You going for a swim, mister?"

Startled, he spun in the direction of the sound, the water churning up around him like a boat's wake. There, he was surprised to find a young girl, no older than 8 or 9, seated demurely upon the edge of a waterproof chaise lounge staring down at him from poolside. Where had she come from? he wondered. Had he simply missed her when he'd first come in, or had she been hiding until now as part of some frolicsome child's game?

"Uh...hello," Mr. Worthington said.

"Hello," the girl replied. Her eyes were wide and prepossessing but somehow quite sad.

"You're American?"

"Yes," she said. "From Philadelphia."

"Myself as well," he told her, smiling as warmly as he could. He'd never been too comfortable around children. "From the Bay Area. In California."

"Oh, I always wanted to go to California, but we never did."

"Well, you're young, still plenty of time for that, I'd wager. Besides, you're in Rome, that must be very exciting," he said, trying his best to sound encouraging.

When the girl declined to reply, Mr. Worthington felt his uneasiness begin to grow once more. It was more than just the usual awkwardness he felt in the presence of the very young; there was something most peculiar about this particular little girl.

For one thing, her skin was unusually pale. In fact, it appeared almost translucent in places, the light blue veins in her forehead visible beneath the flesh. He wondered somewhat morosely if the poor thing might actually suffer from anemia. His former company had once manufactured a ferrous gluconate supplement to help combat the disease, and he'd become familiar with its symptoms.

A head of jet-black hair pulled tightly back from her face by an elastic tie or some similar device offset her milk-white skin, and the one-piece bathing suit she wore was a similar shade of ebony. Mr. Worthington thought her swimming attire appeared to be well made but--his snobbery getting the better of him--horribly out of fashion. Quite possibly she hailed from one of those formerly affluent families whose wealth was now in a state of gradual decline.

"Are you here with your parents?" he asked, uncomfortable with the silence.

"I came here with my grandmother, only I don't know where she is right now."

How wholly irresponsible, he thought, to leave a child so young completely unattended in a foreign country. And by a pool, no less. Of course, he could recall plenty of unsupervised swims at his grandfather's pool when he wasn't much older than this one.

"I'm sure she'll be along shortly. What's your name, child?"

"Elise."

"Why, that's a lovely name, isn't it? Well, Elise, it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Chester."

"Pleased to meet you, Chester."

Such proper manners, he thought, perhaps there was indeed still hope for the youth of today. It seemed a shame that such a polite little girl ought to appear so lonesome and dejected. But that was hardly his concern.

"Well, it's been lovely chatting with you, Elise, but I really must get my daily regimen of exercise now. At my age, this isn't getting any smaller," he said, patting his gut beneath the water.

"If you're going for a swim, Chester, you should stay away from the deep end."

"Is that what your grandmother told you? I do suppose that's rather sound advice for little girls, Elise. But you see, I'm a grown up, and grown ups are allowed to swim in the deep end."

"It doesn't matter. You just shouldn't go down there."

"And why is that, sweetheart?"

"Because that's where the bad man lives."

Children and their fanciful imaginations, he thought. Still, he couldn't blame her for making up some sort of game to pass the time while she waited for her grandmother to return. Chances were the old woman was sitting half-soused on gin martinis or Campari sanguineas in the hotel lounge.

"That's funny because I don't see anyone down there now, Elise," he said, electing to play along.

"He hides," she whispered.

"Well, I'll be sure to keep an eye out for him," Mr. Worthington said with a chuckle, hoping to lighten the mood.

But the girl only stared at him with her sorrowful eyes.

Having had his fill of this conversation and wishing to begin his swim, he bid her a pleasant day and turned to face the length of the pool. But as he prepared to shove off from the wall, a thought occurred to him. Perhaps he should help the

poor child in locating her neglectful grandmother, maybe giving the old woman a piece of his mind in the bargain. He was certain that the friendly, if overly talkative, front desk attendant could aid him easily in this endeavor. He'd have to change back into his clothing, of course--it certainly wouldn't do to have him go traipsing around the Palazzo in his swim wear especially with a strange little girl in tow. But despite the minor inconvenience, it seemed the proper thing to do.

"Elise?" he said, turning back around to offer his proposal.

To his astonishment, the girl was gone.

He'd had his back to her for but a moment, he thought; not nearly long enough for her to make an exit. Besides, he was quite sure he would have heard the pitter-patter of her tiny feet against the tile. Even within the heated water, a chill fluttered up his spine like a wriggling tadpole.

He scanned the room and its contents, searching for any sign of her behind the pleather upholstered furniture and fancy potted palms. But she was nowhere to be found.

There had to be some rational explanation, Mr. Worthington decided. Maybe he'd simply been lost in thought for far longer than he'd surmised and the girl's grandmother had appeared at the pool's entrance to collect her. His wife had so often accused him of failing to "be present" whenever he set to wandering too long inside his head. And really, that had to be it, he reasoned, as no other scenario made the least amount of sense.

A bit shaken but satisfied that everything had worked itself out somehow, he shrugged off this somewhat unusual encounter and returned his focus to the task at hand.

Deciding upon the breaststroke, he immersed himself completely before pushing off from the wall and letting his body glide beneath the water for the first several meters. As his head broke the surface he began the frog-like stroke that would carry him to the pool's opposite end.

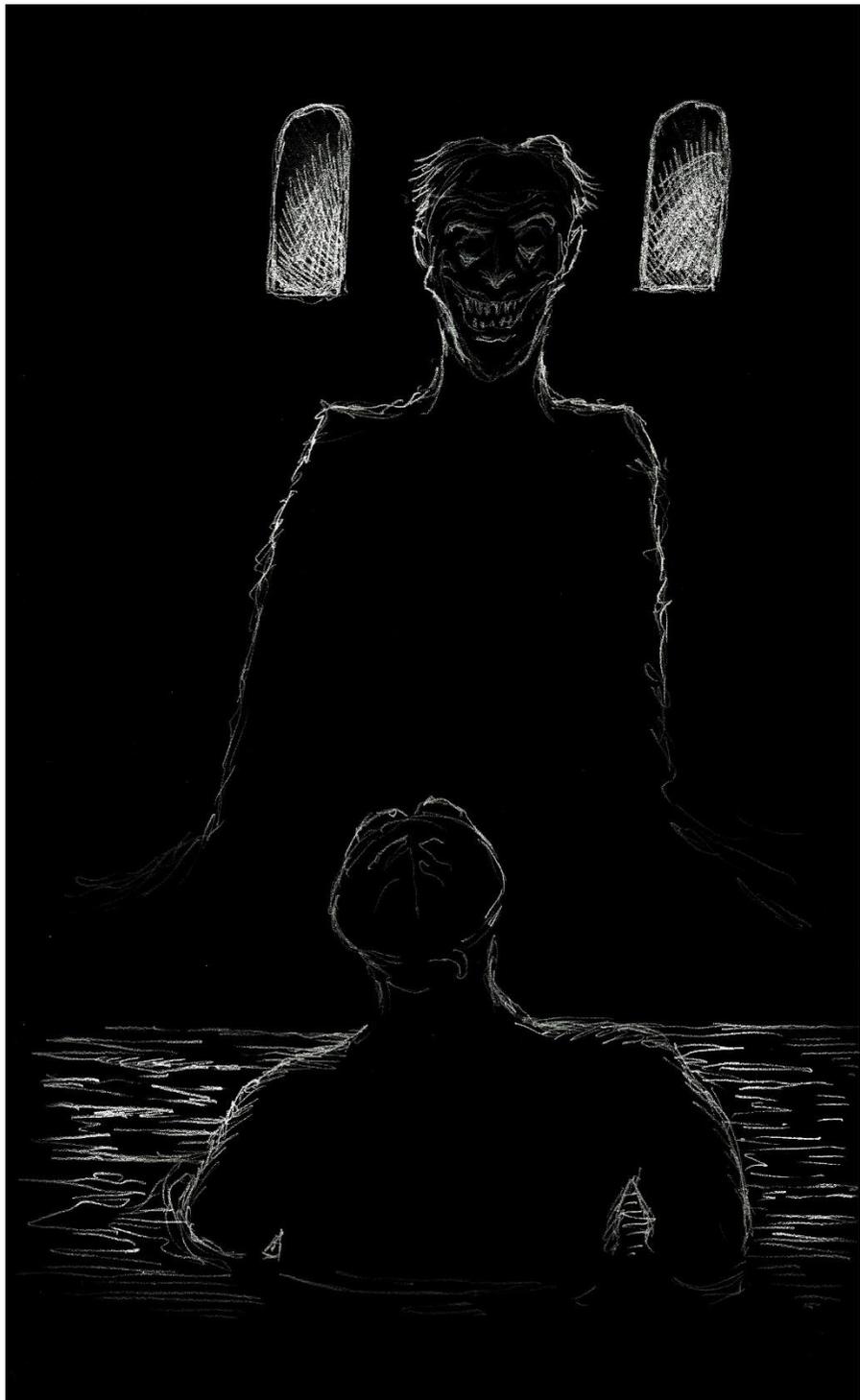
With each successive stroke Mr. Worthington came up for air at the start of the motion and then plunged his head below the water as he propelled himself forward during the stroke's second half. It wasn't long before he began to relax, fully engulfed by the near hypnotic movements of his own body.

Each time he rose for a breath, he was afforded a view of the room's far end. It was somewhere around the mid-way point of his 50 meter long course that he thought he saw something moving down there.

It was subtle and gone in an instant, the way an errant sunbeam might render a well-placed spider's web briefly visible, no more than a swirl within the shadows. But he was almost certain of what he'd seen. His brow furrowed beneath his swimming cap as his head went under.

When he came up again there was nothing there.

Probably just some trick of the light, he thought, nothing to get himself all worked up about. Or maybe it was the girl, Elise, far more proficient at hiding than he'd assumed, and waiting to play a prank upon an unsuspecting old man. He'd *definitely* be having a discussion with her grandmother if that were the case.



He continued on, soon becoming lost once again in the rhythmic movements of his own limbs as he crossed into the deeper end of the pool. So much so that he failed to notice when the chandeliers began to flicker high above.

At just ten meters from the far wall, he came up for air and saw something again. This time it was no flash of movement but a clearly discernible form: the black silhouette of a man standing bathed in the shadows of the room's far corner. The sight was so jarring it caused him to gasp as the forward momentum of his stroke brought him face down into the pool.

He resurfaced sputtering, expelling the sharp tang of chlorinated water from his mouth and throat. He looked once more at where the figure had been and saw nothing. Even still, Elise's words seemed to echo instantly through his mind.

Because that's where the bad man lives.

Treading water, Mr. Worthington tried to wrap his brain around what he'd just witnessed. The rational part of him was already blaming it all on jet lag or his aging vision, but even these simple explanations didn't seem to sit well. Whatever it was that was happening here, he was giving serious thought to cutting short his swim. This place was really starting to get to him.

He nearly turned himself around and swam all the way back to the shallow end, but he was so close to the deep end wall that it seemed foolish not to finish his meager half a lap before calling it quits. Somewhat reluctantly, he resumed his stroke. And with each rise for oxygen, he watched the wall grow closer. When, at last, his hands made contact, something terrible occurred.

The water all around him turned to icy cold. So sudden, in fact, he felt his chest seize up. But as his mind roiled with the panicked thoughts of a possible heart attack, Mr. Worthington looked up to find something far more terrifying standing there above him.

Towering over him was the figure of a man, dark and diaphanous as if fashioned from smoke or from the very shadows themselves. It glared down at him with a pair of coal black eyes that seemed to swim with unspeakable madness. It was hard to make out its other features but it seemed to have a mouth as well, the lips peeled back in a snarl of rage.

Mr. Worthington screamed, his cries echoing back at him from the marble walls.

The figure lunged at him, its arm reaching out, the hand landing upon the top of his swimming cap. And with one powerful motion, it thrust his head below the water.

Arms thrashing, he struggled against it, bubbles of precious oxygen erupting from his mouth. He tried to lock onto the shadow's arm but his frenzied grasping found no purchase. It was as if there was nothing there but the water and the air above it. And yet he could still feel the weight of its hand upon him, its fingers pressed hard into the sides of his skull.

As his eyes bulged beneath the turquoise depths, he watched in horror as the water turned as red as blood around him. Was it his? Was he the one who was

bleeding? he scarcely had time to wonder before the shadow pressed him deeper and deeper below the surface, its arm seeming to grow to an impossible length.

He kicked and fought to escape its grip in the crimson liquid now surrounding him but could not break its hold. The shadow's hand had pushed him nearly to the bottom and he could do nothing to stop it. This was the end he could never have imagined.

Soon, his struggles grew faint. His kicking feet slowed to a lazy treading. His limbs went slack. He watched as the last of his oxygen became a flurry of blood red bubbles rising quickly to the surface. Then his lungs began to fill with pool water and the darkness settled in.

*

Mrs. Worthington awoke several hours later annoyed to find her husband had yet to return. She leaned over and grabbed her bag from the side of the bed, produced her Cartier and checked the time. *It was only 45 minutes until their reservation!* Chester hadn't come back to wake her and now it would be a small slice of hell to get dressed, do her make-up, catch a cab and make it halfway across town before their table was given away to a more dedicated pair of diners. One simply did not show up late at Il Paradiso.

Somewhat vexed, she rose and went to her luggage. With some expediency and a little luck, she thought she might just be able to pull off an ensemble and a full face in time to get downstairs and have the bellboys hail them a cabbie who wouldn't get them there late. But all that was contingent upon her husband whose whereabouts were currently unknown. Probably still lollygagging about the pool like some silly little boy, she thought.

By the time she had finished dressing, Chester still had not returned. With a slow simmering anger, Mrs. Worthington snatched up her bag and room key, left the suite loudly and rode the elevator down to the lobby.

Behind the enormous marble check-in desk, she found the same attendant who had checked them in was still on duty. A well-pressed young man with a thin mustache whom she had deemed more than a little chatty upon their first encounter.

"Signora Worthington! Come posso aiutarti?" he greeted her.

"English, please," Mrs. Worthington said, rolling her eyes.

"But, yes, of course, Signora Worthington. How may I help you?"

"I need you to point me in the direction of your pool. My husband went for a swim, and now we are running late for our reservation."

"Oh, I'm sure your husband would have found that quite impossible, Signora."

"*Impossible?*" Mrs. Worthington said, one eyebrow arching up at him. It was not a word she was used to hearing.

"Oh yes, Signora, our pool here at the Palazzo has not been open for many years. Perhaps Signore Worthington is in the lounge. Or perhaps the spa?"

"Not likely," she said, fixing him with an icy glare. "My husband does not drink before dinner nor waste time in spas. And what do you mean the pool has not been open for years?"

"I mean exactly that, Signora. The pool has been drained and locked up for many, many years now."

"And for what reason does a hotel of this supposed caliber not maintain its pool?"

"Well...there were troubles. Troubles with the pool."

"What do you mean troubles?"

The young attendant leaned in closer, adopting a conspiratorial tone. "I maybe shouldn't tell this, Signora, but you see...there was a big story, on the front page even of *Il Messaggero*, back in the '70s. It made quite a big deal out of what happened at the pool. After that, the owners, they decide it's better just to close the pool."

"You've told me absolutely nothing. What happened at the pool?"

The clerk took a quick look over one shoulder, then leaned in closer still.

"There was a murder, Signora."

"How ghastly," Mrs. Worthington said, taken aback.

"Yes, and that's not the worst part, Signora."

"And why is that?"

"It was a little girl, Signora. An American girl. The one who was murdered."

"That is positively dreadful. I certainly pray they caught the killer."

"Well, it was bad for the hotel, Signora."

"I can imagine."

"It was especially bad because the man who did it, Signora, he worked here at the hotel at the time. He was...how do you say, sick in the head? Yes?"

"Yes."

"He drowned the girl, and then cut his own throat," the clerk said, dragging his index finger across the front of his neck to illustrate. "They found both of them floating in the pool."

"Well, that's certainly an awful story. Probably one I'd refrain from telling future guests."

"Perhaps, Signora, but some of them actually come for the ghosts."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"Some people say...the hotel, she is haunted, Signora."

"Hogwash!" Mrs. Worthington said.

And with that, she turned sharply upon her Manolo heels and went to search the grand hotel for her ridiculous husband.

EVERY GOOD NEIGHBORHOOD HAS ONE

— *Earl Wayne*

WHEN I was a boy, the year drew to a close when the days shortened, when the air grew frosty at night, when leaves turned gold and fell and the wind taught them to play cat-and-mouse games around our feet. Soon, it was once again Halloween, a magical night of liberation and revelry before the paralyzing snow. That was long ago, however ... before Halloween was signaled by the cheap holiday merchandise that appeared on the shelves at Wal-Mart and Target just days after Columbus Day.

I was only eleven or twelve, and already beginning to wonder if I was too old for Trick or Treating. After all, my big brother Doug was just two years older than me, and already he was saving up to buy a car the moment he was able to get a driver's license. Every week he would show me a picture in one of his racing magazines. "That's the car I want," he'd say, pointing to a sporty, rear-engine Corvair Monza, or a convertible Mustang. He looked longingly at it ... but next week it would be something different. In the end, he bought a second-hand '61 Pontiac Laurentian, which was neither sporty nor fashionable, but was cheap.

As well, my dog-eared copies of Famous Monsters of Filmland, with their covers falling off from obsessive re-reading, were beginning to seem like kid's stuff. Clearly, I was growing up.

All the same, that year the weather for Halloween was gorgeous – just as though lifted from the pages of a DC comic. A gibbous moon darted from one pearly, backlit cloud to the next, and bare trees stretched their skeletal hands upward to grab for it. Underfoot, thick carpets of leaves skirled with every step. Thankfully, there had been no rain to turn them into a soggy, slippery layer of linoleum.

As usual, I had asked if I could dress up as an astronaut, or an alien. As usual, there were no such costumes for sale, and no one in my family had the know-how to make one, so I ended up dressing as a Beatnik, just like my idol (after John Glen), who was Maynard G. Krebs. When I had first asked to be an astronaut or alien, four years ago, I had had to settle for being a matador: I didn't even know what a matador was. In subsequent years I'd settle for cowboy, pirate, hockey player or ghost ... but my heart was never in it.

Out on the street, all that was forgotten. I didn't care if I was dressed as a horse's ass, as long as I was carrying a sturdy paper shopping bag with string handles from Eaton's or Simpson's, and as long as it was big enough for all the candy I could imagine ... and I was an imaginative kid. I went from door to door, sometimes ringing, sometimes knocking, and often in the press of other trick-or-treaters who had their bags held out, open and imploring. Needless to say, one got a lot bruised apples that way – just like the ones you threw away from your school lunch every day – not to mention rice-crispy squares that were doomed to be

crushed to lumpy paste at the bottom of your treat bag. But the handfuls of miniature chocolate bars, cellophane-wrapped caramels, orange and black Halloween toffees in twisted wax paper, jawbreakers, Tootsie-Rolls, candy cigarettes, jelly beans, Scotch mints, licorice twists and all the other enticements for the sweet tooth more than made up for the occasional disappointment.

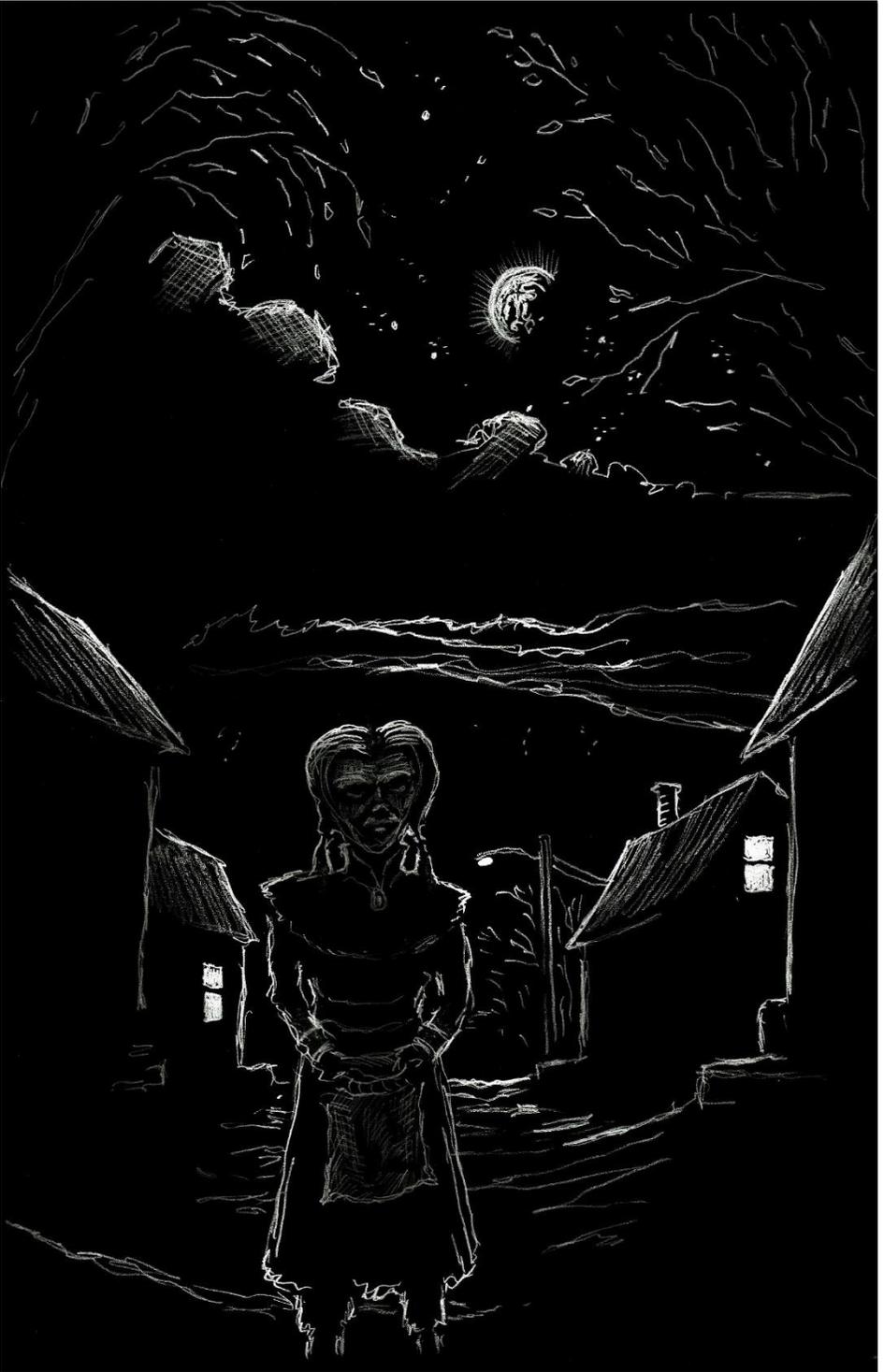
A full bag of candy was more precious than a chest of pirate gold! A decent-sized bag was hard to fill, though, taking miles of walking, hours of knocking, and more than self-respecting kid's share of "Oh, aren't you cute? Margaret, come here and see this adorable Batman." No "Batman" ever wants to be called "adorable." Unfortunately, because it took so much effort to fill your bag, a few of the older kids worked out an easier way. Never mind the Spanish Main, we had our own sort of pirates.

What happened this Halloween happened near the Old Hansen House.

Every good neighborhood has one like it. Normally, the kids of my neighborhood never went near the joint. For one thing, it was on the outskirts of town, at the end of the road, and faced nothing but a wood lot, so it was out of the way to begin with. The most important reason that no kid would be caught dead near it, however, was that it had an uncanny reputation. No one knew the real story – rumour had it that someone was murdered there, or that a demonic cult met in the basement, or that it had been built over an Indian burial ground. We all knew the stories were rubbish, but there was no question that the old house had been abandoned for as long as any of us could remember, and had an undeniably creepy air about it. The downstairs windows were boarded, the shutters hung crooked on their hinges and peering into the widows of the second floor was like looking into the blackness between the stars. The only sensible response to the Old Hansen House was a shudder and a rapid retreat back the way you came.

What most kids didn't know, though, was that they came close to the old Hansen place every day, because of the way the streets wound around back on themselves, so that the grounds in back of the old house were, in fact, on Bradbury Street. If you had ever climbed the five-foot cast-iron fence and penetrated the thicket of twisty old maples between numbers 129 and 131, you would have been able to see the abandoned house was only a stone's throw away. The other side of the lot was a cramped little parkette that not even the pigeons would use. Since Collier's Variety was on the corner of Beaumont, however, only a block away, we kids regularly hung out much closer to the Hansen place than we knew. Because I had once shot a plastic glider into the trees, and didn't have a dollar to buy a new one, I went after it. There was a loose iron paling that I could pull aside, allowing me to squeeze through. I found my glider, all right, but to my dismay found myself looking straight into the fathomless windows of the Hansen House. This was knowledge of some importance, I thought, so naturally I kept it to myself.

It was near this spot, on this particular Halloween, that something a little out of the ordinary happened.



Earlier in the evening, I had almost filled my bag when two older kids, who made no pretense of costumes, came up to me and said, "Give us your bag, squirt, and we won't hurt you."

I wasn't so easy to intimidate as that, so after handing them my bag I bravely demanded, "Just dump it into your own bags, why don't you, and give me the empty one back? I'll be able to start over if you do." I guess I must have given them a scare all right, because that's just what they did do.

Having a bag to start over with, at least, I beat a hasty escape in the other direction. But, after collecting only what earlier trick-or-treaters had left behind, my heart was no longer in it. I started back home, returning the way I came. Since I lived at the other end of Bradbury, I turned onto it with my head hung low. When I looked up, I discovered just about the last two people I expected to ever see again, the two candy-thieves! They were walking along Bradbury, sizing up new victims. While I followed them, the thieves innocently passed by several groups of much younger kids. It was quite obvious why. Those kids were escorted by an adult supervisor, who would grind any pirating teens into the pavement had they dared attempt a candy hijacking. Sooner or later, though, they were bound to find another victim.

When their next perfect victim finally appeared, it was opposite the empty stretch on Bradbury. I saw them approach a girl who looked a couple of years younger than myself, wearing a long black dress, as though for a funeral. She was carrying a funny sort of bag, too – not a paper shopping bag like mine, but cloth, and, as far as I could tell from a distance, embroidered. There was something very fishy about the tableau – the two 14-or-15-year-old creeps, and the little girl in her drab get-up.

"Give us your candy, girly!" I heard them say, while the nastier-looking one of the two snatched the bag from her hands. They pushed the girl aside and began pawing through her bag, apparently not finding quite what they expected. They frowned, but after a moment spilled her bag into their own, and strode off, laughing.

There was nothing I could do but watch.

I walked over to the disconsolate girl, and said, "Too bad. The bastards took all my candy too!"

She looked up at me with huge, dark eyes that contained all the melancholy of the world, but she said nothing. I picked her bag up from the sidewalk, and noticed that it was very old and worn. In fact, the girl herself seemed rather old and worn, somehow, though she was scarcely nine or ten. Her skin was pale, her hair drawn back into pigtailed; the dress she wore was strange and old-fashioned. I guessed that she had been made up as a witch, perhaps ... and had lost her pointy hat and broom.

She took the bag from me, careful not to touch my hand.

"What's your name," I asked? "I'm Russell. I live down the street ... that way." I pointed.

She looked down the street, forlornly, then turned her gaze back to me. But she still said nothing.

“Are you okay?” I asked. She didn’t reply. I noticed the chill, then, and realized it was late enough that I should be getting home. On impulse I said, “Hold out your bag!”

She didn’t respond to that, either, so I pantomimed with my bag. Reluctantly, she imitated me, holding her bag open too. I nodded and poured half the contents of my bag into hers.

The girl looked up at me with such astonishment that it made me feel real good. I emptied the rest of my bag into hers, and was rewarded with a genuine smile from her pale, pinched face.

Then she turned from me, walked toward the iron palings that fenced off the Hansen place, and passed through them!

At least that’s what I thought she did. Once I screwed up the courage, I went and looked for that loose paling that I had once pulled aside to squeeze through. Surely that was the explanation for the girl’s disappearance. I found it, all right, though I must have not been seeing straight, since it was not exactly where I thought I had seen her go through the fence. Still, that had to be the explanation!

All the way home, I mulled over the experience, wondering whether what I thought had happened had really happened. Every good neighborhood has a haunted house, it goes without saying. But a real haunted house, with real ghosts? That’s just the stuff of stories.

All the same, I wouldn’t have cared to be either of those candy-pirates after they ate what they stole from her. It couldn’t have been healthy.

THE BARCHESTER BOOKSHOP

— *Douglas Kemp*

THE last time he had been in Barchester, Martin was a boy of around nine or ten. He had been taken there by his parents, in their old green Ford Cortina on one of the family's regular weekend forays out to explore centres of English culture and history. It was always just the three of them on these jaunts; there had been no brothers or sisters for Martin, for which he was quite grateful at the time, having observed the seemingly constant squabbles and disruption in other families. There was no question of anyone else such as a school friend, being invited to go along on these regular excursions to "places of interest", mostly featured in his father's illustrated Shell Guide to England, which had been a present from his mother one Christmas in the early 1970s. The book now sat amongst Martin's crowded bookshelves, unread for many years and most probably dusty, and he imagined his mother's sighs of irritation were she still around to observe the undusted shelves, together with the unpolished and no-longer pristine state of the family home.

They had made many such trips out to cathedral cities, castles and derelict abbeys on weekends. He recalled the bright orange of the vinyl seats of their car that had the wondrous properties of being both incineratingly hot in the summer, and cold in the winter. And the smell of his father's pipe that lingered in the car; on the few occasions these days that he passed some man in the streets with a lit pipe, he could be taken intensely, but briefly, back to the lost days of his solitary boyhood. But his memories of these days were ones of mostly boredom. Even though he was old enough to understand the attraction of places that had existed for hundreds of years, and that almost dizzying feeling of near timelessness when standing gazing at an intricate church ceiling, he realised now that he was probably not really old enough, and neither were his critical faculties properly developed, to truly understand the beauty or the art of what he saw – if there ever had been a true measure of aesthetics present in him anyway.

Nevertheless, Martin felt grateful that his mother and father had taken the trouble to inculcate some sense of history and his surroundings; no doubt, it had given him a better understanding of the past and his place in it and the present. Perhaps it was his solitary existence that prompted these feelings of nostalgia. Both parents had died in their mid-sixties some years ago – his mother from a hastily aggressive cancer that took her before anyone, least of all her, had got used to the idea of her imminent death, and followed nine months later by his father, who fell off a ladder while trimming ivy back from their house and was found by a pair of Jehovah's Witnesses while Martin was at work. Martin lived alone; his experiments with relationships with females had not, in general, been happy ones, and he now accepted that the solitary state was the only one he could live with. He had a few friends – none of them close – and he could just about tolerate his work colleagues and their sporadic social occasions at The White Swan, although during those

evenings, he soon wanted to stop drinking and trying to appear to be interested in the banal conversations about sport, work and women, and return to the sanctuary of his home.

His main interest now was in reading and collecting the books of his favourite authors. Martin supposed he was fortunate in that he had few money worries and he could therefore afford to buy relatively expensive volumes and first editions. His work as the administrative officer in the company he had been with for five years was not particularly well paid – but it was mostly undemanding and he was left alone to perform his tasks, apart from the astonishingly corpulent assistant that had been foisted on him a month ago. Daisy (he could not imagine a more unsuitable name for such a behemoth of wobbling flesh) was a niece of one of the managers and had been given a place in the firm as an act of pure nepotism. She had left school with a few rudimentary qualifications and a seeming inability to write coherent sentences in English or spell with any degree of consistency. Her main talent seemed to be in texting with astonishing speed on her iPhone or engaging with her 763 friends on Facebook. He had once looked at her public profile online and was bemused by a photograph that she had appeared to have taken of herself (a “selfie” in the current lexicon of popular use, he rather thought) while she was wearing some entirely unsuitable and wholly unflattering short dress that displayed a simply enormous amount of white flesh, in advance of going out for a night on the town. Comments were along the lines of something like, “UR amazin babe xxxxxx” or “fantastic Daze”. One even from some oik called Jordan seemed to imply that her fleshy pose was arousing him beyond his ability to control himself. He assumed Jordan was trying to display a sense of irony, but one could never be sure.

Martin’s work colleagues all complained about either the costs of having to support a family and pay off mortgages, or being unable to afford a house in the first instance, such was the escalation of property prices in the area. Not many of his colleagues showed any interest in Martin’s personal circumstances, and those that had got to know a little about him, while seeming jealous of his comfortable lifestyle and lack of emotional or financial ties, expressed a measure of bemusement that he did not spend more of his free income on holidays or cars. Daisy, while still living with her divorced mother, had frequently expressed her excitement about a week’s holiday in Greece last August with a group of friends, which she had been keenly anticipating for some time. On her return, Martin was unable to shut out her raucous anecdotes about the various alcohol-fuelled and often sexual-themed escapades she revealed to others around the new open-plan office, which mostly involved her getting into a state which she aptly, if ungrammatically, described as “getting out of me fuckin’ head” or being “well pissed”. Daisy was already planning next year’s trip, which this time was to benefit the tourist trade of Spain. Martin had already made sure that he would not arrange to take any of his leave that coincided with Daisy’s own time off – the relatively peaceful days of the office when she was absent were indeed to be cherished.

There was one occasion when Martin did speak about his bibliophile interests and habits to Daisy. He could not quite remember how the conversation came about, but he was acutely aware that they might have been speaking different languages, such was her inability to understand in any way his own enthusiasm.

“So, you mean like buying smelly old books” she said, looking both bemused and with that stubborn, lumpen appearance she could adopt.

“Well, yes, in essence, I look for certain titles and authors, some of which are now very rare”.

“Oh. So what’s the point of that then? Me mum’s just got one of them Kindles, and she says she can get loads of books on them. Not that she reads much.”

It was a conversation and a subject not worth pursuing any further with Daisy. Instead, Martin returned to the herculean task of attempting to introduce to her the basics of Microsoft Excel for use in the office environment, while Daisy chewed gum noisily into his ear. He felt a sense of annoyance that she had the ability to somehow make him feel a sense of shame, even guilt, at pursuing an interest that she did not share or attempt to understand. Despite the difference in their ages and their personalities, as with many women he had known, they had a strange talent of being able to pierce his own often ineffective armour of self-regard and make it known, with varying degrees of subtlety, that he was an egregious and very possibly, weird, creature.

The books that he collected were generally nineteenth and early twentieth century English short stories and novels about the supernatural. He had a large inventory of favourite writers whose work he enjoyed and pursued, but E.F. Benson and M.R. James were permanently at the top. First editions of their stories, especially in excellent condition, could be very expensive and the copies of their books were the most valued volumes in his collection. He had no particularly strong religious feelings, and neither did he think much about the likelihood, or not, of there being such a phenomenon as ghosts or the existence of the paranormal. Martin had not given the reason much thought, but he supposed it was early exposure to supernatural television programmes and books that ignited this interest in the weird. He remembered occasionally staying with a cousin, or rather half-cousin, in a small town in Oxfordshire when he was a boy. Christopher had the almost unimagined luxury of a colour television set in an upstairs playroom, or “den” as it was rather oddly known, and they would retire there with sweets and fizzy drinks, watching British-made spooky films on Friday and Saturday nights, unmonitored by adults. Christopher’s parents were quite wealthy, and they had a large Georgian house in the town. He lucidly recalled settling down to sleep in his second-floor bedroom in their house, deliciously disturbed by the events seen on the screen, and then hearing all manner of inexplicable noises in the house as the family settled down for the night. There were creaks, cracks, and sighs; sometimes what he was sure was the unearthly moaning of a soul in absolute torment, but was probably the working down of either some ancient plumbing or

the ethereal determination of a breeze to find its way into his room through the mullioned windows.

Well, whatever the underlying reason, Martin still enjoyed the frisson of uncertainty, if he sat alone in his house on a winter's evening, reading one of his chosen authors; to go upstairs into the untenanted darkness would always bring with it, that distant but undeniably present element of doubt and ambiguity. It was one of the ways that he could both feel something different from the quotidian rationality of life, as well as a means to catapult him back into the world of his lost childhood. Not that he ever really wanted to go there, oddly enough.

And so Martin devoted money and time to hunting down books. Despite the barely-concealed scorn or puzzlement that his work colleagues and the pointed remarks of Daisy would invariably display if the subject of his "hobby" was broached, Martin did have sufficient self-belief to ensure that no mockery, however light or pointed, would prevent him from his singular interest. Had he more assertive self-confidence, then he would have enjoyed pointing out the utter paradox that while his imprudent co-workers would scoff at Martin for wasting his money, they were at the very same time putting away a variety of expensive drinks which did nothing but lighten their wallets and purses and make them even more incoherent and objectionable. While Martin would have a fine collection of soundly printed hardbacks on dense yellowing paper to savour, they had little else but a headache and a bilious stomach; and an emptiness at the heart of their being, or so he imagined.

And thus Martin was travelling on the slightly delayed, but agreeably quiet, 1134 train to Barchester on a Tuesday in late October. He had no aspirations to match Oscar Wilde and have something sensational to read while travelling on the train, so he looked through the day's Daily Telegraph on his iPad, gently gliding through the newspaper's constant mood of self-righteous indignation. As always, he had planned his journey and visit to the ancient cathedral city reasonably comprehensively mostly looking online for guidance and not having given his father's trusted Shell Guide another thought. The focus of the trip was to visit the cathedral, last seen around thirty-five years ago now. He supposed not much had changed in that time. Cathedrals had a habit of staying pretty much as you had last left them, except for the introduction of steep admission charges to some of them, and various exhibitions that demonstrated the admirable work that a diocesan-sponsored charity was doing in some appalling-looking place in Africa. There were other sites of historical interest that Barchester offered and which were on Martin's list of potential places, but in addition to the main cathedral, his main object was to visit an antiquarian bookshop, located in Orley Place, no more than a ten minutes' walk from the cathedral. Indeed, it was always the case that whenever Martin made one of these semi-nostalgic jaunts, there was a bookshop of projected interest to visit. He travelled more in hope than real expectation that there might be something of interest to his book-collecting habit. Most serious antiquarian bookshops these days had a website and a catalogue that you could search and interrogate from home, but there was always the chance, albeit slight, that some

gem of late nineteenth or early twentieth century English supernatural literature had not been included. The number of these shops declined almost by the day, however.

Even though he knew it was a wonderful resource and he could not now imagine life without it, whenever he went into a used bookshop, Martin had a sense of regret that the internet had changed things so much. He fondly remembered the days now long past when a visit to a small bookshop offered the enticing prospect of finding books that he had been searching for some time, and, more excitingly, volumes which, hitherto, he had not even known had been published. He acknowledged that online searching and buying had made the pursuit and capture of books so much easier; but in that very facility, something special and exhilarating had been lost forever. Not all that many years ago, most small towns had a used bookshop of some description. Now, it was increasingly unusual to find them. Those that were left were often in tourist areas, or sold prohibitively costly editions in London. But he was part of the global trend in buying volumes from an obscure book barn in, Wyoming say, that somehow had a not overly expensive near-fine copy of a volume that he had been seeking for some time.

The visit to Barchester cathedral was pleasant enough, if not exactly thrilling. He could not remember much about the place from his childhood visit, and took a slow walk around the cold, Gothic interior, looking at the marble inscriptions on the walls, and the paintings and statues that were spread around the large spaces. He had no great knowledge about church architecture or design, and hence was unable to get enthusiastic about the specific type of roof structure or the intricately-carved stalls that were supposedly a unique example of early-English woodwork. There were a handful of other visitors, as well as a corralled bus party of Koreans or Japanese or whoever, who jabbered away in seemingly-strident tones, pointing a variety of cameras, iPhones and iPads at the altar and recumbent, nose-less alabaster figure of Sir Henry de Peatlinge. Some of the women wore masks over the mouths, which gave them a slightly sinister, clinical look. Rather as if they were about to embark upon a dreadful medical experiment on him and would feel no human concern at all that the operation was mortally painful.

Martin sat on a wooden chair, and gazed in front of him, his thoughts mainly directed towards what he would like for lunch, and where he might look for it, rather than on matters theological. But he wondered just how many thousands of visitors had been here in the cathedral since that summer day when he was here with his parents. It gave him a quite odd, almost vertiginous feeling when he reflected that every day of his life since then, so many visitors from all over the world had been here, spent some time and departed, most never to return. And indeed, like his parents, many were now dead. And would remain dead eternally. Even after he himself had died, the show would go on, day after day. Until it all came to a boiling end, somehow.

On that uplifting note, Martin rose and moved slowly towards the exit. It would be unlikely that he would return here – there would be no chance of

bringing his own children or grandchildren to waste away part of a spring morning here, bored and sullen for not being allowed to use their digital devices. He made his pursed-up way out of the cathedral, glad that he had not been required to talk to anyone while there. It seemed that the only other individuals who felt keen to open up a conversation with him of some sorts in these places were eccentric, driven or disturbed in some way. He looked at the map he had printed off Google, showing the direction he needed to take to find the bookshop he had earmarked. It was on Corn Street, and he turned left, to go through the Close, and via two linking small thoroughfares, Grantly Passage and Proudie Mews. It was a dry, dull fairly mild day – unremarkable English autumn weather. These shadowed byways were quiet, off the most familiar tourist path, and Martin looked around at the stately Georgian proportions of the houses, faintly envious of those fortunate enough to live in these elegant, well-proportioned peaceful private properties.

And then he stopped still, and looked in surprise. For here was a small shop, that at first glance appeared to be selling second-hand books. He looked again at his map to see if he had somehow misjudged the distance for the place he was seeking. But no, he had not reached it yet. There was a small, old-looking sign above the narrow entrance that stated this was Worby's Antiquarian Books. Well, how unusual; he must either have not seen this in his research on the city of Barchester that he made before his visit, or either that the owner had so far resisted the seemingly irresistible compulsion to promote the commercial opportunities via modern technology. There was a selection of old hard backed volumes in the window, displayed with no particular theme or eye for marketing, which did seem to suggest that the proprietor depended upon a small group of customers, or maybe that being located so close to the cathedral, he (for such it almost invariably was) specialised in ecclesiastical books, and the prospect of shelves of collected sermons from rural, well-meaning Victorian rectors was not exactly enthralling. Martin would soon find out, for he grasped the old brass handle of the door and entered. There was a clanging from an old mechanism above the door to announce his arrival, and then silence. That familiar and welcoming musty and slightly sweet odour of old books met Martin as soon as he took the initial steps into the shop. It was a smell that announced he had arrived in a place where he most often felt comfortable. The shop was small, and like many such bookstores, shelves were crammed haphazardly along the walls and free-standing as space allowed. There was an untidy book-piled desk at his left, which seemed to be the location where you would expect the owner to be. But it was unattended, and neither did there appear to be any other customers, and Martin walked slowly to find out the plan and layout of the establishment. Being alone in a bookshop, apart from the occasionally interested gaze of the owner, was not an infrequent occurrence these days, which did explain why these places were disappearing quickly. There appeared to nothing immediately remarkable about the shop. It displayed volumes in the customary sorts of categories, and it did not seem to specialise in any specific arcane area of knowledge, and certainly not any proclivity towards the theological. Indeed, there were bookcases that displayed the

familiar brightly coloured spines of modern paperbacks – the pink and sugary colours of romance, and the raised gilt lettering of thrilling stories of international conflict. None of them worth any further investigation. He scanned the hardback fiction area, and could see nothing of great interest to him.

Still, there was no sign of anyone else in the shop. There was a small set of stairs towards the rear of the premises, with a sign on the wall that announced this was private and Martin thought that these probably led to the living quarters, and that the owner would be upstairs. Still, he felt quite conscious of being alone, and, of course, it was entirely possible that he was being monitored by some webcam device to deter any potential thieves. But his inexperienced eye could not see any telltale cameras and the feel and milieu of the place indicated that the owner had little or no association with modern technology in a fast-paced retail environment.

As he browsed from the rear of the premises back to the front, he noticed a small glass-fronted wooden cabinet by the front desk. By long experience, Martin knew that the most valuable items in any bookshop were most often stored and displayed thus, under the watchful eye of the proprietor for usual considerations of security. He had to do a sideways manoeuvre to get to the back of the desk, and felt that he was beginning to trespass on territory that would usually be frowned upon. But there was no other way of seeing what titles were contained in the cabinet. He squatted down in the gloom to get a better look, and, canting his head to one side to more easily read the titles that were conventionally shelved, he was somewhat disappointed to see that there appeared to be nothing much of great interest – some early Dickens, Thackerays and Trollopes, but nothing that was either hugely valuable through its rarity or of much interest to his own precise interests.

Just as he was about to resume a standing position from the rather uncomfortable squatting posture, a name on a spine of a book at the extreme right hand of the case and in the shadow of a larger volume, caught his eye – M.R. James. He fastened onto it with alacrity. Most usually, these precious books would be locked up. Martin pulled the handle and was surprised to feel the give as the door opened, with a slight creak as if it was either not fitted smoothly, or had not been opened for some considerable time. There was still no sign of anyone else, and so he reached inside and carefully withdrew the volume. Yes, it was by his favourite writer – Montague Rhodes James, that author of the gentlest, most disturbing and eruditely authored supernatural fiction he knew. And he was not alone in this assessment, for first editions of his books were rare and expensive. Although Martin had collected first editions of his short stories in decent condition, he was always looking to improve that which he owned. He read the title: *A Distressing Terror: Further Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*. And read it again, and once more. For this, he was certain, was not one of the few books written by James. He opened up the volume, and quickly found the title page – printed in 1933, and published by Edward Arnold, who had published previous volumes of his short fiction. The book felt and looked genuine. There was the sweetish smell of old, good-quality thick paper. The pages were slightly foxed, but

were otherwise unmarked, and there was no bookplate or anything like an inscription that could provide any clue to the provenance of the book.

This was intriguing! A number of possible explanations rushed through Martin's mind. Might it not be a parody or pastiche of some kind, a spoof designed to look like an M.R. James collection? Well, if so, on the face of it, it seemed a very good one. It looked remarkably authentic and he had not hitherto heard of the existence within the M.R. James scholarly community of any such book that had been printed. For he simply could not believe that he had hitherto not been aware of such a book. All of the short stories in the M.R. James canon were known and thoroughly discussed and analysed in the community that liked and collected his works.

There were two numbers written neatly in pencil on the front inside board – 4/6, which he supposed was the price of the book in the old currency of pounds, shillings and pence – which had not been used in Britain since 1970. In current money this was just 22½ pence, which seemed a ridiculously small amount nowadays for what could potentially be an immensely valuable and fascinating book. And now came the decision of what to do; for he badly wanted the book. Even if it were some pastiche, then it would still presumably be highly collectible, for its rare and novelty value. And if, by some bizarre happenstance, it was another unknown collection by James, then the interest that would be generated by this discovery would be immense – not just in the small community of ardent Jamesian scholars, but throughout the literary world, Martin was sure it would create a sensation. He was not someone who looked for a celebrity-like public prominence by any means, but the prospect of being the finder of such an unusual work and the prestige that would fall to him, would be most congenial.

The bookshop was still deserted, but Martin knew that to leave the shop without the precious volume would be impossible. He just could not risk returning later in the day, for the store might be closed, or indeed, the newly disturbed book could be sold to another customer or taken off the shelves. And so he placed the book carefully in his backpack and placed a two-pound coin on a clear space of the desk that he lent his backpack on, and quickly left the bookshop, pulling the door closed behind him as the bell juddered and crashed unconscionably loudly. He feared the owner emerging and telling him that the volume was not for sale or that it was prohibitively expensive. He felt an urge to leave the city at soon as possible – he had now no interest in finding and scrutinising the stock at the other bookshop and instead, trotted along to the train station, intending to catch the first available train back and take his precious cargo home.

The journey home passed unremarkably enough. There was the obligatory squalling infant in the carriage and the portly mountebank in the business suit, who bellowed into his mobile, either feeling that everyone else should be interested in his squalid financial transactions or, unbelievably for someone like Martin who was always painfully aware of his own presence in any social setting, wholly oblivious of the crass noise he made. Besides, he did not feel like reading – the morning's excitement coursed through him. He resisted the temptation to

examine completely the new volume – he wanted to keep this for the privacy of his own home. He bought a BLT sandwich from the passing trolley, with a bottle of still water - both overpriced, though Beata, the somewhat sharp-faced Polish girl in her early 30s who did battle with the reluctant and over-populated trolley did give him a brief, routine sort of smile, but which then unfortunately turned into more of a smirk of barely-concealed irritation as he fumbled the change and dropped a ten pence piece into the tray containing a mixture of packets of crisps, which he had to retrieve, as it was beyond the reach of poor put-upon Beata. He pondered on what drove her to exchange Poznan (or wherever) for the uncertain attractions of life in England – where houses were expensive and most of his fellows were boorish and unattractive. Such thoughts were soon forgotten though as Martin struggled to open the sandwich pack without destroying the fragile contents inside, and then after succeeding in extracting his belated lunch, dropped a slice of bacon, with attached squidgy tomato down the front of his corduroy trousers.

In the sanctity and peace of his home, he immediately examined the new book, and saw nothing to change his mind about its authenticity. The next task was to interrogate his reference books and bibliographies, as well as well to search the online sources, to confirm that he had not by some weird omission missed the existence of the book now in his possession. It was with some relief that he could see no reference whatsoever to such a book – he was not losing his memory, or indeed, slipping into dementia. The book, according to all the experts, simply did not exist. And yet he had it here in front of him. Indubitably present. He did think at first about firing off all sorts of emails and messages to those most interested in the author and subject, but it did not take much consideration for Martin to see the risks associated with such a triumphal exhibition. There would be all sorts of questions and demands, as well as indications of unconcealed scepticism and maybe hostility. He knew this, because he would very possibly take the same approach himself, had some virtual stranger made such an unlikely announcement. There would also be requests to examine the book, and until Martin could be absolutely sure that he had bought something unique and hitherto unknown, he wanted to resist the temptation to revel publicly in his good fortune, just in case he had made a huge blunder and was forced to make a humiliating climb down within the scholarly community.

The first thing he needed to do, though, was to read the short stories in the book, to confirm that they had been written by James, and were not the work of some imposter. There were ten tales in the contents list, and titles themselves seemed to speak of a Jamesian origin, but he could only be sure by reading the text. And so, with curtains drawn, and mug of tea made and the small table-lamp illuminating the immediate circle around himself and the book, Martin started to read the first story: The Disturbance at St. Luke's. His first response that the words did indeed seem to belong to that world created by James. The narrative felt valid, somehow comfortingly familiar, and yet also disturbing in a way that he found difficult to express truly. Usually, after finishing a short story, Martin would put the book down, reflect a little upon the tale and then possibly start another,

depending on his mood. Or, more likely, he would return to the next one after a break, allowing himself time to absorb the story. But without really thinking about it, he read on, and on. His tea was but half-drunk and he turned the final page of the last story in the collection, with a surprise to reach the end boards. He had read all of the tales in one, absorbed sitting. It was quite astonishing, that he had been so captivated, to have nearly forgotten his surroundings and plough on with the stories to the end of the book. He stretched, stumbled off to the toilet, and then began to feel profoundly fatigued. The day's excitement must have taken its toll on his rather weedy constitution, and Martin felt he could do little more, physically or emotionally, than go to bed and recover before his return to work the following day. Unusually, he did not read in bed, and he could not recall making that steady decline into sleep, and the transition from fleeting, disparate thoughts to slumber.

He did not wake in the night either, but the alarm clock roused him at the usual set time and Martin's whole consciousness was immediately covered with a dull sense of ineffable dread, a feeling that something appalling had happened or was about to happen, and there was nothing that he, Martin, could do about it. This disagreeable sensation was connected to the tenor of the dreams he vaguely recalled – they were limned by an indefinable awareness of the finality and futility of existence and the messiness of death. His mother, had she still been around, would no doubt have diagnosed a case of too much excitement the previous evening. Whatever the cause, Martin felt that things were just not right. Perhaps he was falling ill, for he was not usually subject to such bouts of gloominess. And he did not consider it likely that it was the hangover from the stories he had rapidly read through the night before, if only because, oddly enough, he could remember remarkably little of their content. For someone who liked to think and reflect on what he read, he was surprised by how little impression the newly discovered stories by M.R. James – for such now did he think of them – had made upon him. Even more disconcerting, was the lack of any sense of yesterday's excitement at this discovery continuing to the following day. The overriding bleak mood must have swamped the thrilling vehemence following his day in Barchester.

Many years ago, the first funeral he attended was for his mother's father – a rather crusty old man, who gave the impression that he could just about tolerate the boy that was Martin, and certainly did not demonstrate the grandparental affection or sense of fun that he saw elsewhere in society. His sudden death from heart failure while digging over his allotment had caused Martin little sense of grief, though what he remembered with an intense shock took place at the edge of the grave in the churchyard of Little Ashby. Preparations were being made to lower the wooden coffin into his newly dug grave, and shuffling forward to look at the moist brown soil and the neatly cut walls of the chasm, Martin had a startling and wholly unexpected awareness of life's contingency. His grandfather would be in that cold, damp hole for the rest of eternity, and that unavoidable prospect distressed him hugely. It was this sort of sensation that he had thought he experienced in his dreams during the night and which had settled upon his waking

consciousness like the dread thought of having to speak to a large hostile audience later in the day. There was no presentation or lecture to give, of course, just that awful anticipation of having to do something like it. He would be late for work, and on a whim, he decided he would not go in that day. He would telephone his manager to say he was not well – he had never done this before; Martin was conscientious in doing what he had agreed to do, but somehow, the thought of work, just seemed irrelevant and unnecessary.

Martin picked up the new book, and again did some online searching, but met with the same blank result as the previous evening. It did not exist, yet he was now sure that it was the work of M.R. James. The day was wet and windy, and Martin did little constructive in the quiet of his house. He did a few desultory tasks, but often sat in the drawing room thinking of little, but just letting the rather despondent mood sweep over him. Eventually, he took up the book, and started to read the stories again. It was puzzling that although they had a vague familiarity, it was not as if he had just read the same stories the last evening. He thought it must be some illness that was causing this odd reaction and a bleakness that he could not escape from. He did not feel hungry, but continued to read until, once more, he had gone through all of the volume.

After this he sat down at his laptop, intending to start drafting an article outlining the unearthing of his unknown book by James, but he just could not continue. There was no spark of inspiration he needed to start writing about his discovery; rather he felt it was something he needed to protect and hide, to keep for himself.

In the afternoon Daisy called him on his house phone.

“Hi Martin, I tried to get you on yer mobile, but you haven’t got it turned on. Terry says yer not feeling too well.”

“No, it’s just a cold or something like it, I should be back in the office tomorrow.”

“Ok, that’s good. I wanted to ask if you wanted me to send off that account thingy to Paul Robbins – you know, the one you asked me to do last week?”

“Yes, yes that would be helpful. Thank-you.”

There was a pause, and then Daisy finished the awkward conversation.

“Well, ok, hope you feel better soon. There’s not too much going on here, so don’t worry I’m going to do too much damage for you to sort out. Ta-ra”

“Yes, goodbye.”

And the phone line distantly buzzed as Daisy replaced the receiver. Martin looked at the handset and felt some shock at how distant, alien and almost hostile he felt towards her and the rest of the world. The way things were going with him, he would not be back in the office tomorrow.

That was indeed the case. He had another night of distressing images and distant visions that made him feel completely enervated on waking. But also a sense of relief that the phantasms had gone. Martin wondered whether he had some more serious illness – it could be one of those elusive viruses that can’t be accurately identified or treated or something like that M.E., which he had

skimmed an article on in the paper. What really made him consider that something serious was afoot, was his continuing inability to recall anything of substance about the stories from the new book that he now read twice through, as well as a general disinclination to read anything else. He telephoned his local surgery, and after the usual tedious menu and wait, his call was answered by a peevish-sounding woman who briskly informed that there were no more appointments for the day, but that he could schedule an appointment with a Doctor Sharma in two days time. He accepted, though Martin doubted if he would go – his condition seemed too tenuous and vague to be talked about and treated.

During the day he snacked on toast and peanut butter, drank mugs of tea and generally felt rather sorry for himself. After leaving a message on Terry Cook's answer phone to say he was still not able to go to work, he drifted around somewhat aimlessly, not settling to do anything substantive. The book, or the book as he rather considered it, sat on his be-ringed coffee table (something else his mother would have had kittens over, though it wasn't Martin's fault – it had been done when an electrician had thumped his tea mug down on the table while investigating a faulty socket six months or so ago). He was relieved that Daisy had not contacted him; he craved isolation.

With the days drawing in as autumn advanced, Martin drew the curtains and lit a lamp or two in the early evening. He felt cocooned in the house, but without that sense of security or peace. He tried watching the television, but it was hopeless (he rather grimly recalled his mother's plaintive bleat that "there's nothing on the telly".) He sat, alone and rather vacuous. He thought about going to bed, and using one of the sleeping tablets that his doctor had prescribed for his father when he had gone to see him and complained about problems with sleep following the death of Martin's mother. They were probably out of date by now, and were upstairs in his parents' bedroom – a room that he had not done much to since his father's death. He had supposed that at some point he needed to arrange to have their belongings disposed of, but there never seemed much urgency or necessity. His hand was on the door into the hall, from where the stairs dog-legged up to the three bedrooms and bathroom, when he thought he heard what sounded like footsteps above him. Martin stopped and waited, but there was no repetition. The house was terraced, but he very rarely heard his neighbours on either side. The houses had been built in the early years of the last century, and were solidly constructed properties. It could have been one of the houses either side, but the steps did sound like they were directly overhead – coming in fact, from where his bedroom was located. He felt his heart pound a little at this odd noise. And he stayed, with his hand on the door, but there were no more footsteps. In the silence of the house, there was a frisson of uncertainty about what it was that he had heard.

Martin remembered those nights at his cousin's house, watching frightening supernatural films, and then having to traverse the cold and dark landing, dubiously aware of the lurking shadows and unknown niches that, in his heightened sense of pleasing fearfulness, might just harbour all kinds of horrors.

He was a little perturbed to feel something along the same lines, as he entered the hall to the stairs and looked up to the dark depths above, and there was no sound except for the sonorous ticking of the old grandfather clock that had belonged to his father's father and had been in the family for many years. It chimed the quarter-hour, silence returned and then he heard a decided creak of a floorboard above him. There, some sort of noise! A few of the floorboards did whine when stepped on. And as the house was old and with seasoned timbered staircases and doors, there were very often odd noises that his father explained away by changes in temperature and atmospheric pressure. But this seemed different, it was a definite footstep or pace that he thought he heard. He went upstairs, a little tentatively, and there was nothing fearful to be seen or heard, naturally enough, for he was alone in the house. A sense of vague trepidation did not leave him, though. And for the rest of the evening, there was an edginess, a listening out for untoward noises, even though he did not wish to admit to himself that he was doing so.

He did not go to his bedroom, but sat feet up on the sofa, and drifted in and out of a restless, waking sleep. Dreams were distant and had the tincture of a vague terror. He thus felt dreadfully stale when morning came around, and the light leaked around the edges of the curtains. Again, there was no thought of going to work and Martin decided that he would take stock of his situation after visiting the surgery the following day and see what the outcome of that visit was. He mooched around for most of the rest of the day, reading a little, listening to music and thinking about the new book and what he should do about it. The daytime dissolved the uncertainties of the dark and the night, and he felt a degree of shame that he, a grown and rational adult, should still be subject to such juvenile and illogical emotions – it was so stupid that he should be scared of just a few odd noises in the house that no doubt had a wholly reasonable explanation. Upstairs just had the damp and rather bleak tenor that it had always seemed to have had; he located the strip of sleeping pills, now indeed, long past their expiry date, with a view to using one to ensure a better night's sleep.

In the evening, he again read through the stories in the James book – trying to find some possible clue to the puzzle in the text, and also making a conscious effort to remember the details of each harrowing story as he read them. With the departure of daylight, once more a decidedly unpleasant sense of gloom descended upon him, an unaccountable feeling that he was not alone in his house, even though he knew that there was no-one else around. Once again, his senses attuned themselves to listening for any odd sounds. There was the customary metallic thumping as the central heating started, and after thirty minutes or so of heightened awareness, he began to relax and think about getting something to eat, when there was again the dull, treading thumping sound that seemed to indicate someone or something was slowly walking around upstairs. It was impossible – it couldn't be. Again, after just a few seconds of this, the sounds stopped, and he sat on the sofa, alert and pointed. Martin felt an absurd combination of adrenalin and

fatigue fighting within him; he took two of the sleeping tablets, and after 20 minutes or so, fell into a deep and dreamless slumber.

He woke late the following morning, parched and stiff from his second night on the sofa. He would have to rush to make his appointment with Dr. Sharma, and just having water and a few biscuits for a quick breakfast, hurried out of the house into the watery sunshine. It seemed overwhelmingly bright after his recent incarceration indoors – there was a boundary-less wideness to the outside, which was rather intimidating, and it reminded him of going out for the first time weak and pale after one of the usual range of childhood illnesses. It was no more than a fifteen minute walk to his surgery. He waited for his name to be called – all of the doctors seemed to have either Asian or African names, and the patients were stridently black-haired east European women with young children, all with challenging-sounding family names and taking up more than their allotted eight minutes.

Doctor Sharma was a youngish male, with an air that suggested a barely-concealed indifference to Martin's health. He described the symptoms as best he could, feeling even as he spoke that they sounded implausible and wondering if the doctor considered that he was just looking for a period of certified sick leave.

"So, have you had any recent loss of weight?"

"No."

"And your appetite's ok?"

"Yes - well, no, I haven't really felt like eating much recently"

"Bowel movements as usual?"

"Yes, I suppose so".

Martin's blood pressure was taken and Dr Sharma said that he should have a blood test just to check on a range of indicators. If there was anything abnormal there, then they could look to treat it. Otherwise, there appeared to be no obvious signs of illness.

"You may just be a bit fatigued. I'm not presently seeing anything more serious with you, so, let's see what the bloods come up with".

And so he departed, without the consolation of a prescription to show that he was justified in attending the surgery and that there was something wrong with him. He waited for the phlebotomist to get to his number and two phials of blood were taken; results should be ready in two days and he was to telephone the surgery for the results. Martin returned home – feeling oddly disconsolate. He bought milk and bread from the local Sri Lankan shop, feeling disinclined to engage in much conversation about the weather and the cricket, and returned to his house. Somehow, it seemed that it no longer completely belonged to him now; there was some ethereal lodger that he shared it with, and this was not the M.R. James volume, but he did just begin to wonder his strange feelings might be linked in some preposterous way to it. It was time, however, for a usual bowel movement.

What most distressed him, was his inability to remember anything about the collection of stories in his new book. At the time of reading, the content of the tales seemed clear and easy to understand and thus recall. But every time he read

them, they disappeared from the mists of memory. So, that evening he decided to record notes about the plot and main characters after reading each tale. He also typed a few notes about the stories onto his laptop, so that he would have them ready if required. Another poor night's sleep followed, waking to hear at some point what sounded like a slow-deliberate tread overhead, but which the greater pull of the sleeping medication blotted out until the light of the morning. He looked at the notes he had made last night, and sat ashen-faced, looking at the indecipherable scribbles. He opened up his laptop, opened the files he had started and likewise saw nothing that he could read - but just what appeared to be a mess of computer code letters, symbols and numbers. He closed the lid with a snap and slumped back on the sofa, very worried about just what was going on.

So, reader, is Martin living in a haunted property? Well, no, as Martin knows full well, the existence of ghosts is an impossibility, in the material, empiric universe in which he and the rest of us are privileged to live. Even though he accepts this, he cannot account for the dreadfully oppressed way that he is feeling, allied to the odd noises he hears at night. A lifetime of engaging with fictional and dramatic portrayal of supernatural phenomena has given him a good idea of how these events develop, as well as the conviction that they are always imaginary. What concerns him the most in all of this is the possibility of a symptom of some deeper psychological issue. His customary phlegmatic outlook has never allowed anything like the condition of depression to afflict him, and he has no real conception of what it is like to live under the black dog. But he does suspect that some of the terrible rages and bleak moods that his father suffered could be akin to what might well be diagnosed today as a depressive tendency; it's just that men of his generation and lower middle class background very rarely sought medical advice on such mental matters. He contemplated the likelihood that he had inherited this tendency from his father. But, who knows. Certainly not Martin, and there was no one else he felt he was close enough to ask their advice; unquestionably, no family member was in such a position.

In the next two days, there were some telephone conversations with his office and Martin was able to dissuade Daisy from making a visit and bringing him anything he might need. The blood results revealed there to be nothing wrong or unusual with him, well certainly nothing that could be found from an analysis of his essential circulating fluids. Eventually, after rather too much introspective thought, Martin concluded that he really did need to seek expert help of some kind, and the best possible option would be to seek the advice of the foremost scholar in the field of M.R. James studies. Professor Edward Harker was the main authority on the life and works of James, his credentials having initially been founded upon his grandfather, who was a junior master at Eton College when M.R. James was Provost there from 1918 until his death in 1936. He had written the definitive biography, as well as the fully annotated scholarly editions of James's fiction. Martin had been in some correspondence with the great man some time ago and had Harker's email address. He therefore decided to draft an email, outlining the discovery of the new book, and see what sort of reaction that would

elicit from him. He did not go into considerable detail about the circumstances of finding the volume, but said that the stories seemed genuine (though he did not make a detailed description of them, for fear of coming up against the same nerve-atomising experience when he had attempted to record the content of the stories). Neither did he make mention of the curious noises he heard every night around his house. He did, however, take photographs of the book and its content pages with his mobile and add these as attachments to the email. It was sent off with a feeling of relief, that at last, he was in some way sharing this inexplicable experience and that he might be fortunate enough to get some sound and reassuring advice from Harker.

Thereafter Martin checked his email account thereafter, and apart from the usual ephemera that came in a constant dribble, there was nothing in response, not that he really could expect an immediate answer. But in late afternoon, when he clicked on refresh, there was a block-highlighted line with Harker's name and the title Martin had given to the email: "Possible New Publication by M.R. James?" the content of Harker's response was brief but intriguing. He expressed an interest in Martin's new book and said that he would very much like to visit Martin to examine the volume. Martin was pleased that Professor Harker had not dismissed the discovery out of hand and felt an unusual excitement at the prospect of such a relatively distinguished visitor. Usually he discouraged, or certainly did not invite, such incursions upon his privacy, but the prospect of such a respectable scholar wanting to take the trouble to come to his home to examine the book was pleasing and reassuring. Martin also thought he might be able to consult Harker about, or at least hint at, some of the suspicions and concerns he was beginning to seriously harbour about the effect this book was having on his psychological well-being.

After more email correspondence, it was arranged that Harker would drive over to see Martin and the book the following day in the late morning. Harker had semi-retired from Oxford University with the position of Emeritus Professor. He lived around 30 miles away from Martin's own town, but notwithstanding his relief, Martin was anxious about hosting the great man; would he expect lunch, and how would he perceive Martin's somewhat unwashed and unnourished figure? Something had to be done though. The noises continued at night, after dark, and Martin almost felt trapped and cornered by the book, his bad health and the inability to go back to the office to resume his normal existence. Though this, now, felt like his routine life. He needed something or someone to break this most disagreeable cycle.

In the afternoon, Martin had to undergo another awkward telephone conversation, this time with his line manager Terry Cook, who was clearly, and understandably, trying to find out what was the matter with Martin and when they could expect him to return to the office as there was a pile of tasks building up which Daisy could not be expected to tackle on her own.

"I hope to be back fairly soon Terry", Martin replied to his boss's question.

"I've got an appointment tomorrow morning" (which was true, its way) "I should be back soon after that".

“Well, ok, but keep me informed about how things are with you”

“Yes, I will. Thanks Terry”.

“Take care.”

Just after 11am the following day, Professor Harker arrived, having parked outside Martin’s house in his 1970s Alfa Romeo. Martin had not met him before, nor heard him speak. He was a tall, ascetic-looking man, aged over 70 in all probability; he had a sharp, straight nose and a penetrating look in his grey eyes that gave you the impression that he understood much about you and your innermost thoughts, or certainly that there was not much that could surprise or shock him about these, or human behaviour in general. He wore the customary uniform of the aged academic – a tweed jacket with worn leather elbow patches, brown corduroy trousers and polished brogues.

Martin was not very adept at making introductory small talk to start a conversation, and he got the impression that Professor Harker wanted to get down to business fairly quickly anyway. Martin had made some attempt to tidy the drawing room up a little and to clear away the evidence of his enforced (to him) incarceration in the house. The book was on the coffee table, in front of them.

“So, the notorious volume”, intoned Harker. He had a pleasantly baritone voice with a mellowness that indicated a regular smoker, though he had given up the habit some years ago. Harker picked up the book and spent several minutes in examining the contents, reading passages seemingly at random, as well as minutely examining the title page. He gently closed it, and replaced it on the table, apparently looking at nothing specific; he was lost in a reverie of some sort. After a minute or two of this reflection, he stirred himself and asked questions about the circumstances of Martin finding the book in the bookshop in Barchester, which now seemed an aeon ago, even though it was just over a week.

“I never thought that I would live to see the day when held this book in my own two hands”, and Harker picked it up again. “I suppose I never really thought it existed. But it does, it so undeniably does”.

Martin waited for the Professor to continue.

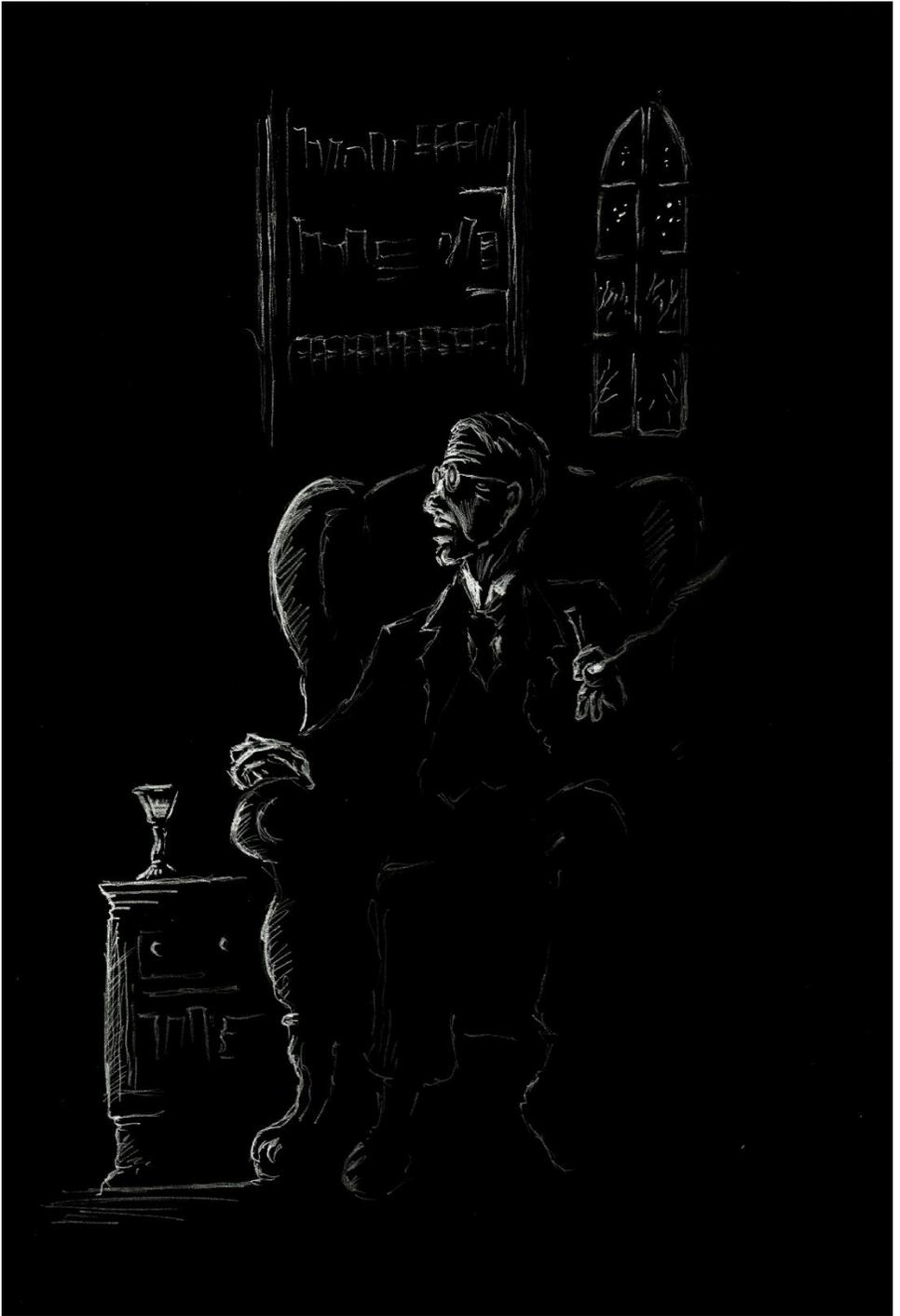
“I think you need an explanation, or else you will be wondering why I am talking in these riddles. I can’t provide full chapter and verse to all the background to this, for it happened many years ago now, and it was what I heard from my grandfather, who only told me elements of the story. As you know, my grandfather was at Eton with M.R. James; he was a relatively new master there, but the two of them struck up a solid friendship. My grandfather had published on theological subjects and he and Monty would discuss long into the watches of the night some fundamental questions about man’s existence on earth, the survival of life or consciousness after death, and all those kinds of things. I think Monty had a deep and reassuring belief in his conventional Church of England Christianity, but he wanted to test these beliefs and hopes against my grandfather’s theological knowledge and theories. “Monty was by this time renowned as a writer of supernatural tales, even though by then he had not written much for a number of years. I imagine he wanted to reconcile the odd trinity of his Christian convictions,

his fiction which spoke of all manner of ethereal phenomena, and to the increasing secularisation in society at the time and general speculation about the existence of God in 1930s England. It was still a time when the widespread acceptance of Darwin's theories and advances in science were increasingly challenging traditional religious doctrines. These conversations would often last long into the night; there were, by my grandfather's account, convivial and cosy occasions in front of the fire in Monty's rooms, with both interlocutors enjoying a sustaining whisky and soda.

"One evening, however, Monty approached my grandfather just after dinner and seemed to be in a state of some agitation. He asked that they meet in his rooms without delay to discuss a certain matter. This was most unusual, for James was customarily a serene man who was not given to outward demonstrations of emotion or worry. My grandfather thought that this was most likely to involve a difficult master or possibly a scholar that Monty felt some concern over. After they had settled down with their tray of drinks, though, Monty imparted a very different story than my grandfather had expected. It seems that some time before Monty had been contacted by a former student at King's College where Monty was a don in about 1905. This man, whose name my grandfather was not ever told, I believe, had been present when Monty read out to a small group one of his ghost tales for a Christmas gathering. Monty only knew the young man as a student at King's a little, but since leaving Kings had had no further contact with him. But it seems that this man had got into some rather unsavoury company – some sort of modern Satanist sect, I understand. There had been a connection to Crowley and his disreputable gang, but it was not a strong relationship. I don't know the precise details and I'm not sure that my grandfather was told all of the circumstances or background of the matter, but Monty's visitor had some remarkable information for him.

"Monty's visitor claimed that during some sort of séance or spirit-raising activity – and it sounds utter claptrap, I know – but some spirit or presence thus summoned spoke about Monty James and his supernatural fiction – claiming that somehow Monty had opened up a gateway to the occult. It does sound ludicrous now in the light of day and many years later, and I am sure that it appeared equally bizarre to my grandfather. The caller then explained that by some unknown procedure, he had created, or rather, summoned into existence, a book that would allow Monty to summon spirits of the dead and also to return, himself, after his own demise. The unaccountable part is that Monty then said that the visitor produced this book, which did certainly appear to be a volume written by James himself. Monty did not say to what extent he was able to minutely examine the volume to see its provenance and "authenticity" if I can use the word, for the visitor was not willing to let the book alone with him for any time, and according to Monty, peremptorily took it up again after only the briefest examinations by James.

"I think by this point Monty had had enough, for he asked his curious visitor to leave, behaviour which was alien to this unfailingly polite gentleman. Whether



he had been disturbed by what the man had said because it triggered some hidden, subconscious fear, or there was something else that resonated in his mind, my grandfather said that this business preyed heavily upon Monty. Clearly, he was in no position to offer any sort of explanation to James, and advised him that this former student was probably suffering from some form of mental delusion. But my grandfather had the clearest impression that, against all the odds, Monty believed, or had become convinced about the veracity of the strange business.

“It seems that after the evening when Monty told my grandfather of these events, he often brooded upon the question over further hitherto convivial bachelor evenings of friendship. Henceforth, Monty was not really the same cheerful man that my grandfather had come to know, and love in his own way, I presume. It certainly seemed that the claim about the existence of this book had disturbed and distressed him in some way that seemed unaccountable to my grandfather, especially as there was no other evidence to suggest that this former student was indeed anything but in need of psychiatric help.

“I think that after Monty’s death two years later or so, my grandfather had, on reflection, wished that he had taken the trouble to find out a little more about this mysterious business, for he thought that the worry that it created had somehow hastened Monty’s end. But you know how life has so many different threads all pulling in differing ways, and while this apparent decline in Monty was going on, there were very many other claims on my grandfather’s attention and the case did not scream out for the attention and thought that was subsequently given it.

“Amongst Monty’s effects which the executors of his will had to deal with after his death was a sealed letter for my grandfather. The contents asked my grandfather to take and destroy a copy of a volume of his stories, which was located in a desk drawer. On no account should my grandfather read the contents of the book, but just ensure as a matter of first priority that it was burnt, and the ashes of the volume scattered in hallowed ground. It perhaps comes as little surprise to you when I say that the title was the same as this volume on the table before us now. My grandfather showed this letter to one of the executors, who opened the desk drawers, and no copy of the volume was located. When all of his books and papers were removed, my grandfather carefully went through each item to locate the said book, for he was a conscientious man, and although he did not fully understand why this rather curious request should be made, he was determined to do so, for the sake of the friendship he had towards the hale fellow who had left a large hole in his life, and that of all those who knew him. But the volume was simply not to be found. There are various possibilities to explain why it was not amongst Monty’s possessions – but whatever the reason, some form of senility was not considered by anyone who knew Monty in his final days as a possible cause. He was alert and bright, and thus my grandfather concluded that James had come to be in possession of the volume, which had already been taken or misplaced before he had an opportunity to retrieve it.

“In the weeks and months following his death, my grandfather had a very strong sense that James was still around him in some way. He knew full well that

bereavement could make the grief-stricken feel strongly a sense of the departed one's presence or existence; that one can hear them, or perhaps even see a glimpse out of the corner of one's eye. But this seemed different; there was a tangible existence, which engendered a conviction about the survival of Monty's consciousness; noises, voices, a sense of a presence – they were all there, and he was not the only member of the school staff who felt that something unaccountable was about.

“Such a strong impression did these events leave on my grandfather that he wrote a full account of them. I do believe that he had considered publication, and there had been a large number of such books written, many of them execrable, that often were the result of the loss of loved sons and brothers in The Great War. But, I think that in the end he did not wish to create any sort of sensation which would have invited all sorts of undesirable spiritualists and unbalanced ghost-hunters to track down and raise the spirit of his great friend.

“There was no sign of this book, and neither was there any paper-trail of its publication. He would have put it all down to errant nonsense; except that he was convinced it wasn't just gibberish. As I grew up and he fostered a love of books, literature and learning in me – he spoke often about his friendship with M.R. James. I read Monty's supernatural stories and admired greatly his skill in writing about such unlikely subjects. My grandfather also spoke to me about the feelings Monty had about this visitor and the mysterious book, and I also read his own account of it, after his death thirty years ago now.”

Professor Harker stopped speaking and the two of them sat in silence for some time, while Martin tried to make sense of the story he had just heard. He eventually spoke.

“So, the clear implication is that I have found the only known copy of this book that was once owned by M.R. James himself, and which is supposed to have some spooky background.”

“Yes, that's the long and the short of it.”

“It sounds incredible, doesn't it?”

“I agree, most unlikely. But there it is”

And both men looked at the innocent-looking volume on the table between them.

Martin then began to tell Professor Harker some of the unaccountable events that he now associated with bringing the book into the house – his inability to recall or record details of the stories in the book, and then, and more ominously, the footsteps and other odd noises that he now heard in the house while alone in the evening.

“I did begin to wonder if I might not be going a little soft in the head, but from what I've just heard from you, it seems there could be another explanation”.

Again, they both looked at the volume. Martin wishing then that Professor Harker would volunteer to take the book, but as soon as he considered this, the jealous pride of possession overwhelmed other feelings and he knew that he could not let the book out of his sight.

“I don’t think I can let you have the book, well just yet anyway”, he said.

“No, no, I understand that, but I don’t think its doing you a great deal of good,” said Professor Harker. “In the long run you may be best off returning it to the bookshop in Barchester. I’ll go now, and I want to look again through my grandfather’s papers, just to see if there is anything else about this matter I may have forgotten, or not spotted, now that I have seen the evidence of the existence of this book. I’ll be in touch when I’ve done this and we can talk further”.

“Yes, thank-you. And thank-you for coming today.”

Martin needed to be alone to reflect upon all that he had heard, and think some more about what he should do. When he had seen Professor Harker out, he could not help but wonder if in some outrageous way, the possession and reading of this volume had somehow liberated the latent spirit of M.R. James into his world. The prospect of taking this any further filled him with dread, while at the same time, he knew it was an experience that he had never had before and would never probably come close to having again.

Professor Harker’s journal

8th November

I spoke to Martin Adams again today. His mental condition seems to be deteriorating and I do feel that some form of psychiatric intervention will be necessary, unless he shows an improvement. Again, I tried to persuade him that surrendering the book would help his overall outlook and help him to restart his life again (or reset, as the current terminology is I believe) ; he is obsessed by the book and responds quite forcefully to any such suggestion that he give it up. On each occasion that I have visited him, his condition worsens. Naturally, I feel a sense of responsibility for telling him my grandfather’s story, but I was not aware of how literally he would take the tale and apply it to himself and his circumstances.

Part of Daisy’s verbal account of a visit to Martin’s house.

“Jeez what a fucking mess. That bloke always gave me the creeps, and I was right. He smells really rank and he looks at you weird like. He just didn’t want me there and I wasn’t going to hang around there I can tell you. I was well glad to get out. There’s something seriously wrong with that messed up creep.”

Letter from Head of Personnel, Caitlin Delany, to Martin Adams (excerpt)

.....As you have not provided a suitable medical certificate to explain your absence from work, we hereby give you five working day’s notice to provide such a certificate, otherwise, we will have no alternative but to terminate your contract of employment with us. This is a step which we would regret having to take, but as you have stopped responding to our attempts to communicate with you, we are left with little other alternative. Moreover, when members of staff have previously spoken to you, you have been rude and uncooperative.....

Professor Harker's journal

22nd November

Martin has now stopped responding to my emails. It is a great nuisance, but I think I have no alternative but to go and see if he is at home, and try and speak to him there. Depending on how he seems, I may well have to seek some medical intervention for him. My conscience troubles me.

26th November

This morning I drove over to see young Adams, as I had not been able to contact him for over a week now. There was no answer to my ringing of the doorbell, or knocking on the door. I went around to the back via the side entrance, knocked there and when I tried the door to the kitchen, was surprised to find it unlocked. The house was a mess; unwashed plates piled up in the sink, a stale, almost rancid smell permeated the place. But no sign of Martin. I looked in all the rooms, and he was not there. I did look for the book, but I could not find it; I searched in the places where you would expect to find a book, but nothing. I telephoned the police, and they asked me whether I wished to formally report (using the split infinitive) Martin as a missing person, and/or whether I had evidence or suspected that he had come to actual harm. When I tried to explain the circumstances about his absence and that I was worried about his welfare, they did not seem terribly interested, or indeed, helpful.

28th November

Today I drove over to Barchester, to find out if I could, a little more about this mysterious bookshop. Mysterious is indeed the word, for I could not find it. I had noted the location when Martin first described in the email where the bookshop was, and was also puzzled, as, knowing Barchester fairly well, I am sure that I had not noted an antiquarian bookshop there before. Sure enough, I tramped through the streets and alleys by the cathedral, and I could not locate it, nor could I see any evidence of where it might have been, had it been closed down in the interim. Which is possible. I'm not sure what to think now.

I have been thinking long and hard about my grandfather's story about M.R. James, and reading again through his papers. He was puzzled how it was that James had been so disturbed by this visitor who would surely just have seemed to be a crackpot of some form. But the letter to my grandfather did strongly suggest that a version of this book existed at some point, and James had a copy, unless he had either lost control of his senses, or was fabricating – neither of which appear to be likely explanations.

And while Martin did appear to be a bit of an oddball - many bibliophiles like him, living alone and living for his books, can appear highly unconventional to the rest of society – I assess when I first met him that he was mentally sound.

And then the evidence of the book itself, which I saw and held; it did look legitimate.

Extract from a Facebook message Daisy writes to her best friend Emily

Well, Uncle Eddie says I can take over at work from Martin, as it looks like he's not gonna come back any time soon. No great loss!!!! But it's really odd how I keep thinking about that weirdo. It's like sort of that he's now always around me. And I had such a totally creepy dream last night about him. He was doing things to me, you know. And then he started to hit me real hard with one of books he was always going on about , and in the dream it really fuckin well hurt. And the odd thing is, I've got some bad bruises on me body today and I sort of felt like I'd been interfered with, you know what I mean. Fucking crazy or what!!!!!!?????

It is extraordinary that I have now indisputable evidence of the existence of human consciousness after death. This is simply true, a fact that cannot be gainsaid. But there is a terrible, terrible sense of complete loneliness, and I do not know how I can ever get back to where I should be. But maybe this is now where I have to be. This state of abeyance is infinite, utterly infinite and there is nothing whatsoever that I can do about it.

The prospect is appalling.

DRAWING ABOVE THE BREATH

— *Charles Wilkinson*

ELLIS the Inventor's watch was embedded in his wrist, its face an osseous white, the strap the colour of flesh. He'd planned to wear it for a trial period and then roll out production, but died before his plan could be put into effect: this version of events is current in the licensed premises of our town. In the next valley, our neighbours tell all who will listen that many such time-pieces were surgically fitted. To this day, the wearers can be spotted by their long white sleeves, which they refuse to roll up even in the hottest weather, as well as their punctuality, an uncharacteristic trait in this part of the country.

I put down my pen and glance up from the table in the hotel where I am staying. The sea mist, which has already obscured the beach, places grey hands on the promenade; soon it will haul its obscurities higher, up to the level of the window. Yesterday's chance meeting has impelled me to begin a narrative of the events that happened in the small town on the Welsh Marches. Yet already I am reminded of other fogs: the contradictions and mysteries that have occluded all previous attempts to give a clear account of what occurred at that time.

I have an office on the industrial estate, where Ellis the Inventor's grandson Ceri owns a factory. Although he has always been as close and unsociable man as you'll find in our county, he inherited the family ingenuity and desire to be of practical assistance to the elderly. His firm designs and makes stair lifts, mobility aids, walking frames and many other such devices. Since the incident, which has yet to be adequately explained, the manager has assumed charge.

Over the last ten years, the estate has expanded to include concerns very different from the light engineering and technology companies that were the first to set up business on this site. We have an architect who specialises in timber-framed buildings, an accountant, a vet, a bicycle shop, a second-hand book seller and an array of alternative therapists – specialists in reiki, Indian head massage, reflexologists, Hopi ear-candling and osteopaths, alongside purveyors of well-being and weavers of woolly jumpers. There is a craft shop and a community café that serves organic food as well as local rumours.

'And what exactly is it that the Keifryns do?' I asked Tim Delvey, a dealer in reference books, periodicals and rare first editions.

We were seated on either side of a cafeteria of Columbian coffee. Tim was a heavily built man with silver hair, a smooth red face and habitual scowl. Outside, the hedges, the rowan trees and the eco-friendly units, which had recently been built on the estate, were grey shapes about to merge in thickening November mist.

'Another food fad, from what I've heard.'

'Are they dieticians?'

'No, apparently not. No one seems to be precisely sure what they're peddling.'

The Keifryns had leased a part of Unit 14 a year before. They were a lean and strikingly tall couple, both well over six foot. On the rare occasions they were glimpsed walking around the estate, their height gave them the advantage of never having to turn away to avoid eye contact. A resolutely unsocial couple, they stared straight ahead, as though their gazes were fastened on some point beyond the phenomenal world.

‘I wonder if they sell much. They certainly don’t go in for advertising; they haven’t even bothered to put up a sign on their door.’

‘You know that green hoarding with nothing on it apart from a white arrow. I think that’s theirs.’

‘I can’t say I’ve seen it.’

‘Well, I admit it’s not conspicuous. I think there’s some psychic snobbery attached: if you’re the sort of person with whom we’re meant to do business you’ll find us without the need for mere words.’

‘But how do you know it is theirs.’

‘Ah, that’s no mystery. I saw Keifryn checking that it was still securely attached the day after the storm damage.’

The mist’s white fur was on the windows. Delvey and I were the only customers. For a minute, we sat there, not speaking. Was he, as I was, thinking that with visibility diminishing it was time to cut short the afternoon’s work and go home? He lived a way out of town, and at the end of a narrow, un-metalled road, a remote place even in fine weather. It was the weekend.

‘And Ceri?’

‘As I said yesterday, they’ll know more if he regains consciousness.’

We made our perfunctory farewells and gave a promise to meet at some point soon.

I put down my pen and read through what I have written. Have I begun at the wrong place? Possibly so. Yet it seems clarity can only come in the process of writing; the solution, however, tentative, must be mine, for I will not be able to ask Ceri or Tim Delvey; at least not for a very long time.

*

About six months before my conversation in the café with Tim, I discovered that most of the desirable property in the town was being bought up by nonagenarians new to the area. In spite of the rain and a west wind honed on the edge of the mountains, we’ve always plumed ourselves on living in a healthy spot; we’ve a fair number of home-grown ninety-year olds to prove it. Far from the stresses of the cities, we relish our remoteness: the wooded foothills; the bright summer fields, various in green and yellow, so far from the homogeneous plains with the shorn hedgerows of big agriculture. We love the small shops, owned by the same families for generations; the familiar names in the hill farms and primary school. It was no surprise a good proportion of us lived to a great age. Yet those in their nineties who were not in care homes were often infirm. Deaf or partially sighted, they were users of mobility scooters and walking frames, and when they counted out change they did so slowly and with trembling hands.

The new nonagenarians were different, almost a distinct race. In contrast to the native born, their movements, if not amounting to athleticism, were easy and fluid; they walked with an erect carriage and unaided. Although content to proceed at a leisurely pace, when confronted by a flight of steps, such as those leading up to the Town Hall or the Library, they jogged up, not deigning to use the handrails. But it was not only their mobility that marked them out; they dressed unusually for our part of the world. Disdaining the battered tweed and flat caps of the farmers and the tracksuits of the young, the men wore brightly coloured corduroy trousers, salmon pink or rusty orange; gingham or Viyella shirts; handmade shoes of gleaming brown leather and v-jumpers, draped nonchalantly over the shoulder in hot weather. The women favoured immaculate trouser suits or well-pressed jeans, blue Guernseys and a Hermes scarf. Though they were to be seen peering into the windows of the town's two estate agents, the incomers avoided our public houses, cafés and restaurants.

When I told Ceri Ellis I thought some national newspaper or magazine must have mentioned our town as a prime spot to retire to, he shook his head but said nothing, for although a man long in love with his own opinions he was parsimonious in matters of information. 'There's been no such invasion from off in the next valley,' I added.

At first, he would not be drawn, but a week later when the air had the limpid wet shine of a morning between frontal systems, the sky an uneasy blue, I chanced upon Ceri coming out of the more upmarket of the estate agents. His pale lean features and expression of perpetual, thin-lipped suspicion gave him the manner of one nursing his own secrets while being ever ready to pry into the affairs of others. As he looked from side to side before crossing the street, he seemed to be watching for more than the oncoming traffic.

'Hello, Ceri,' I said breezily although I knew he had no time for my banter. 'Thinking of selling up and starting a new life in Patagonia without the missus?'

He moved towards me, inclining his head confidentially. 'Not likely. If you really want to know what I've been doing, I'll tell you. With no prevarications whatsoever! Checking up, and not before time, I can tell you.'

In spite of the profession of candour, he did not add to this at once, but glanced around and then back at me, his grey-green eyes narrowing with circumspection. Then perhaps because I did not reply, his doubts seemed to disappear; he leant forward slightly. 'The matter of which you spoke the other day. Food for thought, it was. Food for thought.'

'Oh?' It took me a moment to comprehend that he could only be referring to the incomers.

'And so I've been asking around, see. Finding out what adds up and what doesn't. And I tell you one thing that may surprise you.' He paused and nodded. 'Not one of these people from off is a day under ninety-two. Now what do you think to that?'

'I'd say they look a lot younger than that. Definitely.'

'Now why are they all here?'

'It's an affordable place to retire,' I volunteered.

He shook his head, almost violently. 'Nothing to do with it. They're absolutely loaded, they are. Do want to know what it is?'

'Very well.

'They're clients of the Keifryns.'

'Really? I've not seen so much as one of them up on the estate.'

'That doesn't mean the Keifryns don't visit them.'

A group of youths lumbered past us, their hoodies tugged tight over their heads in spite of what passed for fine weather. There was no work for them in the town, nor indeed anywhere nearby.

'No, I suppose not. But what is the Keifryns' line of business?'

'There's many that are asking that very question.'

'Well, do you know?'

'I've my suspicions. But verification is what I after.'

'They never have any deliveries, as far I know.'

'I've said enough. You'll not get another word out of me until I have verification. Absolute verification.'

Ceri drew himself up, his features composed into a credible simulation of probity.

I watched him, his back straight for the first few yards before he resumed his habitual stoop and slink.

*

While our town may well be a fine neighbourhood for retirement, no one would maintain it's the place for young people to make to a future for themselves. Not since the murders. Nine months before the arrival of the nonagenarians, the first of the bodies, a young man's, was found on the meadow down by the stream. The allotments, which are where the police believe the attack began, are nearby. It's an easy walk to the town, but not within earshot of the nearest house. Although the official cause of death was loss of blood, there were signs the victims had been tortured first, quite possibly at another location. There were also deep wounds above the mouth and on the forehead. Three weeks later, a girl in her late teens was found with identical injuries in a disused factory. One youth vanished and has still not been found. There were three more fatalities within the next three weeks, all in circumstances that made it clear they had fallen to the same killers. Despite an investigation in which the police were assisted by an outside force, no arrests were made. A wealth of forensic evidence lead nowhere.

After what was to be the final death to date, although we'd no inkling of an end to the sequence at the time, I paid Delvey a visit at his stockroom on the estate. The second-hand book trade had been slack for some months and he'd



taken to having a sandwich in his backroom rather than eat in the café. As soon as I opened the door, I was met by the must of foxed volumes mingling with a heavy fragrance of Moroccan coffee and cigarillo smoke. Delvey was seated at the back, in front of him a plate, a mug and bottle of cheap wine on an upturned crate. An open roll-top desk was covered by an iceberg of invoices and old catalogues. Although he had moved his most valuable stock to his home, every shelf was packed so solid with books that there was not an inch left over to slide in a poet's slimmest pamphlet.

With a sweep of his arm, Delvey brushed a heap of old newspapers and sweaters off a stool and I sat down. On the wooden chair next to him were books on mythology and paganism.

'Ah, you branching out into new territory? I never had you down as a dealer in the occult.'

'There's always been a market for such stuff. The number of buyers may be small but there are a lot titles that were only printed in very limited editions. If you can pick up the right ones, you only have to find two aficionados to push the price right up. But to tell the truth, I've been doing a little reading. There's something ritualistic about these murders that rings all kinds of bell.'

'Really - what?'

'It's not just the positioning of the marks on the body. Though they're interesting enough. It's the loss of blood.'

'There have been motorcyclists in the area, I'm told. Hell's Angels. All the victims had a criminal record of some sort. Perhaps it's a drug deal debacle.'

'The victims were very much on the margins of society, but what is most relevant about them is their youth. You know that in the earliest times the blood was regarded the engine of the soul. To drain someone of their blood was to deprive them of their very essence.'

It was unlike Delvey to be so fanciful. 'And so your point is?'

He picked up the book on the top of the pile. 'At least part of the answer may be in this book of Frazer's - or one very like it. Apparently what's puzzling the police is this: although the cause of death in all cases was loss of blood, there was very little of it at the crime scenes. And so I have a question rather than a point: what happened to the rest of it?'

*

On the morning of the incident there were few signs of the fog that became too frequent a meteorological feature of the first half of November. Although the visibility in the High Street was good, the hard line of the ridgeway above the town had blurred; the pines on the foothills were only just perceptible through a tissue of mist. By eleven o'clock even a cold Welsh sun should surely have burnt away the last moisture lingering in the air. Yet at one o'clock, when I was on my way to the café, the gathering haze had erased the mountains to the west; the winter branches of birches were streaks of silver dissolving in grey acidity.

I had just reached the path to the café when Ceri Ellis drew level with me. I had not heard him coming. Something in the atmosphere must have muffled the sound of his approach.

‘Inspecting the premises, that what I’m about to do?’ he said.

‘What?’

‘Unit 14. I’m the landlord. Am I or am I not within my rights?’

I had forgotten Ceri was part of a consortium that had developed part of the estate. As if to emphasize his responsibilities, he took out a large bunch of keys.’

‘Do the Keifryns know you’re coming?’

‘They do not. And as it happens, I’m paying them a visit when they are not there. A state of affairs for which they’re entirely responsible. I’ve made several attempts to make an appointment, but they will not have it. Always some excuse. Some reason why it just happens to be inconvenient.’

‘Are they behind with the rent?’

‘No, they are not. But the issue is, as has been made perfectly plain to them, should I have the right to know what kind of trade is being conducted on the premises? I am a part owner, am I not?’

‘But surely they must have given you some indication what they planned to do when they signed the lease.’

‘They did. And very vague it was too.’

Thinking back on our conversation that afternoon, I can only surmise that Ceri had an intimation of danger. It was unlike him to confide in me. Later it emerged he had told no one at the factory of his impending visit. Perhaps on seeing me he thought it wise to make sure that one person knew where he was headed.

By a quarter to five, November dark was mixed with drear fog. I had locked the door to my office and was making my way home when I heard the sound of voices, indistinct but sufficiently audible for me to detect a cadence of concern, the rhythms of anxiety. At first I could see no one through the murk, but as I drew closer three shapes resolved themselves into two figures crouching over a third. It took me a moment to realize they were on the verge outside Unit 14.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘It’s Mr Ellis,’ said a man, turning towards. The voice was familiar. Once I was near enough I recognised the factory manager and the receptionist. ‘He’s had some sort of turn, he has. A nasty one too by the look of it. His eyes are open but he’s not speaking.’

‘A stroke?’

‘Perhaps. But I’m no medical man.’

‘Have you phoned for an ambulance?’

‘Yes. I wanted to speak to him about an order and when there was no sign of him we went looking. He was sitting up when we found him, but not saying anything. Not a word.’

The woman was supporting the back of his head. I bent down to put my hand on his shoulder. 'Ceri?' I said, 'what happened?' It was then that he began to cry, a strangely high-pitched sound for a grown man, almost like one newly born, wailing at his banishment from a warm world.

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'You do realise they're murderers.'

'Who?'

'The Keifryns, of course,' said Delvey, lighting the portable gas heater.

The fog had been blown away by a bitter easterly. We were sitting in his office. The volumes on mythology and had been joined by several on Celtic folklore.

'Ceri is not dead yet. And even if he went into Unit 14, there's no proof the Keifryns were there; certainly he thought they were out.'

'I'm not referring to Ceri. Although we can be pretty sure they are responsible for his condition as well. No, I'm talking about the young people.'

'But what motive could the Keifryns have? Unless it's sexual.'

'It all becomes clearer once one knows the nature of their business. They trade in blood products. Powdered plasma. Two of the ninety-year-olds were in yesterday. Customers. I overheard their conversation when they thought I was out of earshot, here in the back.'

'But what use are those powders to anyone who doesn't want a blood transfusion.'

'It has been treated. The restorative properties of this powder are really quite remarkable, they said. One of them claimed to have taken a grain too many of the powder and to have had a vision of tiny red clocks drifting down onto the bed of a pale yellow sea. When he swam through an underwater storm to reach the still deep water at the bottom, he saw how the clocks were collecting at the bottom, lying on the white sand or clustered like barnacles on the spars of a wreck. The clock hands were going backwards, but very slowly.'

'What exactly was it that Ellis the Inventor came up with? Perhaps this powder is connected to the myth of the watch embedded in the wrist. And Ceri? Have you any news.'

'I went to see him. He's in no imminent physical danger, but what his mental condition will be if he regains consciousness is an open question. The scans say that the activity of his brain is not consistent with that of a fully grown adult. The cause of his condition is not yet known.'

'Then how can you be sure the Keifryns are responsible?'

'I can't. But I hope to have the proof shortly. The manager has lent me these.'

From his jacket pocket, Delvey drew out the keys I'd seen on the afternoon of Ceri's visit to Unit 14.

Although I visited Tim regularly after his circumstances changed, I will not be able to converse with him properly for several years and perhaps never again as an equal.

When I return to the borders, I'll rewrite the events related here, but in sequential order. Will a pattern hiding in my fractured narrative reveal itself? At the moment, I have no more than mysteries. The sea mist worsens, coagulating on the window pane, as if for a second it will become more than fog: a solid substance sealing me in the Hotel with my ragbag of tragedies and riddles.

The Keifryns have cleared out their rooms on the estate, leaving no clues, only empty spaces. Tim Delvey and Ceri Ellis have regained consciousness, but are hardly capable of speech: a few words, an infantile gabble, lacking even an intimation of grammatical lucidity. The doctors tell us they have the cognitive development of children not yet turned two years of age. One specialist maintains there is no reason why they should not in time re-acquire the power of language; another asserts that progress will be slow and limited. Will Tim ever be capable of telling me what left him on all fours in a field behind the estate, foam on his lips, and not a syllable of his former self on his tongue?

At night, I dream of the blood cells separating in the serum like red clocks in an eternal yellow ocean. Tim Delvey was right to seek a part of the solution in the realm of legend, where the residue of fact resides with folk magic.

Yesterday, while sitting on a bench on the promenade, I fell into conversation with a local man, unmarried, recently retired and with the lonely garrulity of one missing his employment. When I told him where I lived, he mentioned that not long before he had hired a youth who hailed from my town on the borders. The lad had only stuck at the task for a month.

'I was wanting a gardener,' he said, 'and he was referred to me by the church. He was in terrible state: wounds on his face - one on his forehead; another just above his mouth. Both of them only just healed. When I asked him how he came by them, he clammed up. Weeks it was before I got the story out of him. Even then there wasn't much sense to be made of it. He'd no work in Wales and when he tried to get some money by selling blood to some people a mate had told about he'd been violently assaulted.'

'Did he describe his attackers?'

'Not really. He said they'd seemed normal enough at first, apart from being very tall. After that his story became confused. Something about him realising they were trying to bleed him dry - and then an escape from an old factory. He couldn't go to the police as he'd a bad record. Anyway, all he wanted to do was to put as much distance between himself and the two of them as possible. Said he sensed they weren't finished with him. There was something hidden in their wrists, he said. Now what could he have possibly meant by that?'

'Did he know their names?'

'No, I'm not sure he even remembered them. But the whole experience affected him very badly. Every time he came over to my place he looked more and more frightened. Then he vanished without a word. What was especially strange was that on the afternoon he was due to help me a white arrow was painted on my lawn. Later I checked with the church. They said he decided to move on.'

Somewhere safer. Now I'm not superstitious, but when I lived up north we associated those marks on his face with 'drawing above the breath'.

'Sorry?'

'That's when you want to deprive a witch of her power: you cut her above the mouth and the bridge of the nose.'

'And do you gain her strength?'

'Not that I'm aware.'

I have been to the church, but they were unable to add to the man's tale. Now I have no more to relate, though my story is unfinished: less complete than the fragment of an ancient text discovered on a scroll in a cave. It is late and dusk dissolves the mist without lending clarity to the view. I can offer only speculation: the theme is the transference of youth to age; the theft of vitality. Is this why old men walk with such vigour in our town's streets, the young blood coursing through their veins? In every cell, a clock has been switched back, but not too far, lest dotage becomes not a second infancy but the return of the first, the child's babble, the hands trembling in space, not yet able to measure a new world's dangerous light.

PENANCE

— *Lee Todd Lacks*

ON the third Saturday of Lent, Sister Claire McKenna arrived at the office of the Reverend Mother Martha Clancy, promptly at half past six, as she had done every Saturday evening for nearly three years. "What have you done this week, Sister Claire?" the Reverend Mother asked. For the first year or so, the confessions came easy to the young novice, but after a while, they had to be contrived.

From the time she was young, Claire had taken pleasure in being spanked, first by her widowed mother, then by the nuns at school. The Ursulines who taught at Str. Angela's struck a delicate balance between compassion and severity, a balance which Claire found most alluring. One day, during her sophomore year, Claire had given sweet Sister Helen cause to keep her after class, yet again, for a dozen with the strap. Having tended Claire's bottom to their mutual satisfaction, Sister Helen looked up at the clock, and noticed that she was late for an appointment with the Reverend Mother, at which point, she suddenly became alarmed. Without waiting for Claire to inquire, the middle-aged nun confided in her young pupil, "Let's just say that I won't be sitting comfortably for the next week or so." Sighing ruefully, she then left the classroom in haste. Claire could hardly believe what she had heard. The thought of Sister Helen having her ample backside paddled by the Reverend Mother seemed inconceivable, and yet, inexplicably arousing. At that moment, Claire realized that she wanted to join the Ursuline Order.

There's never been a student at St. Angela's who has graduated without visiting the Reverend Mother's office at least once, and during her thirty-seven-year tenure as abbess, Mother Martha had chastened the bared bottoms of nearly every one of the nuns, from novices younger than Claire, to the eldest sisters of the convent.

The Reverend Mother knew what motivated Claire to be such an eager penitent. In fact, she had known for quite some time. Loathe as she was to admit it, Mother Martha had enabled Claire's self-indulgence because she derived a commensurate satisfaction from strapping, paddling, and caning her. Though she knew that it was sinful to take pleasure in Claire's pain, the Reverend Mother persisted in doing so, thereby abetting Claire's sin. Tonight, however, she was determined to put an end to it, for Claire's sake, as well as her own.

Claire approached the desk of the abbess, stopping just a few inches short. All too familiar with the chastening ritual, Claire proceeded to unfasten the black woolen belt which secured her habit, and handed it to Mother Martha. She then removed her scapular, folding the apron neatly before placing it upon the Reverend Mother's desk. Next, she reached down to the floor and grasped the hem of her white tunic, raising it well above her waist, till it draped over her back.

Then, she turned up her long black underskirt, thereby revealing the opaque woolen stockings and voluminous cotton bloomers customarily worn by members of the Order. Finally, she took down her bloomers, placing them upon the desk, next to her scapular.

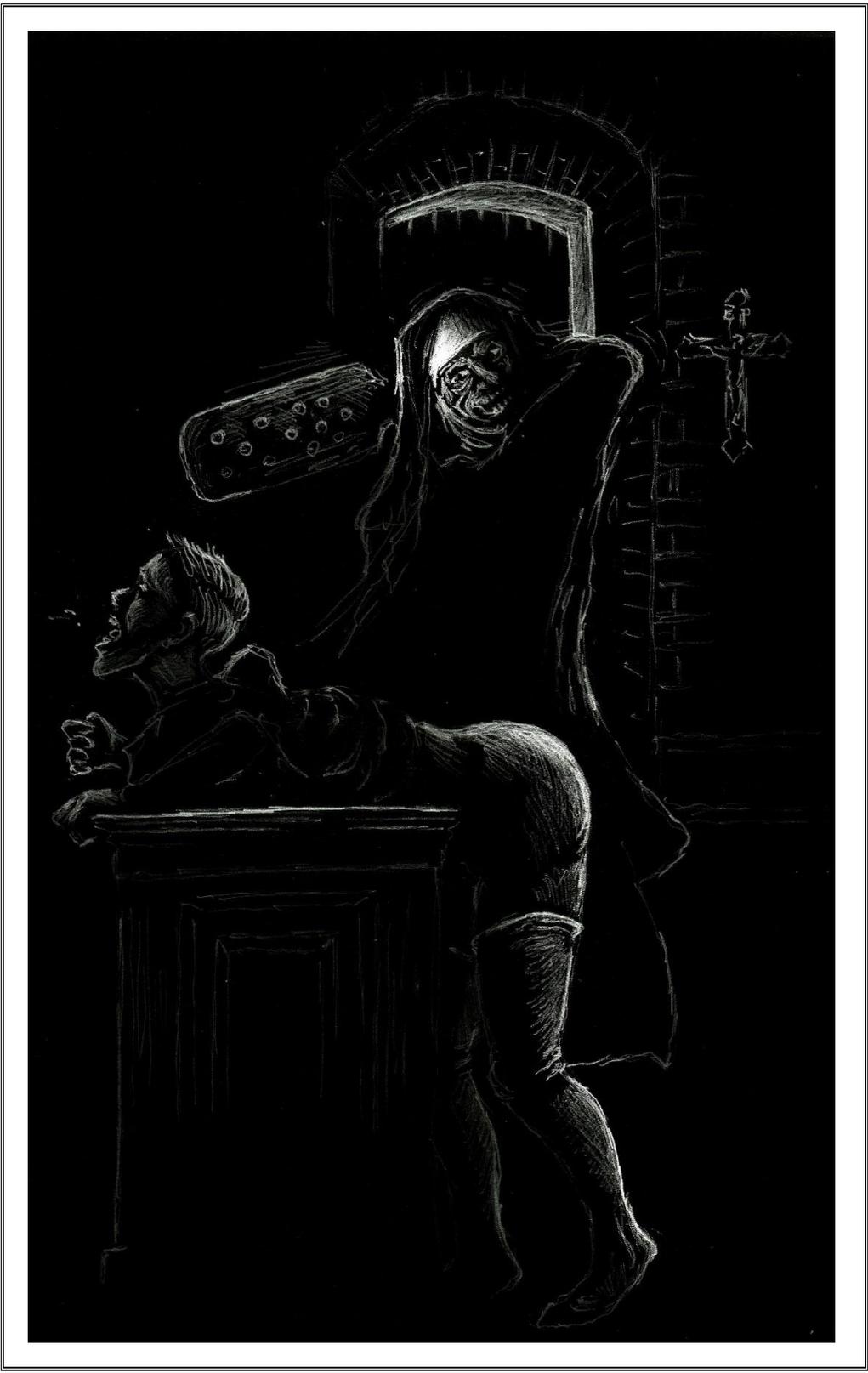
Claire could feel her excitement growing as she presented her bare bottom to Mother Martha. While she had never been able to explain her longing for the proverbial rod of correction, she knew that it awakened her nether regions in unspeakably impure ways. Claire could barely suppress her enthusiasm, as she waited for Mother Martha to pronounce her penance. Mother Martha held herself accountable for the piety of her female charges. To this end, she regarded the administering of corporal punishment as being one of her most sacred duties, a duty which she had faithfully discharged for nearly four decades. "Twenty-two with the paddle, one for each day remaining in Lent." Claire gasped. Accustomed as she was to the paddle's wicked sting, the Reverend Mother's pronouncement seemed frighteningly severe. "Oh, my God! Twenty-two?!" the young novice fretted. For the first time in a long while, the solemnity in Claire's voice seemed wholly genuine, as she uttered the obligatory refrain, "Yes, Reverend Mother."

Bending sharply at the waist, Claire reached out and grabbed the oaken edge of Mother Martha's desk, once again marveling at the myriad indentations formed by countless fingers, desperately struggling to maintain their grip. For Claire understood that the urge to let go often seemed irresistible. However, the consequence of having to restart the count served as a most effective deterrent. While Claire savored the Reverend Mother's attention, she dared not test her limits by letting go intentionally.

Moments later, the young novice heard a resounding thwack, accompanied by a sudden, searing pain, as the Reverend Mother put the sturdy maple plank to her backside. The sting of the first two or three strokes never ceased to amaze her. With each successive stroke, Claire's cries grew more fervent.

"Unnnnnnoooooohhhhhh!" While cognizant of her acute discomfort, Claire began to notice herself becoming highly aroused. Upon receiving the twelfth stroke, her whole body shook in an effort to throw off the pain. Mother Martha knew that Claire was nearing her threshold for punishment, and yet, she felt obligated to rid the young novice of her craving.

"Uuunnnnnnoooooohhhhhh!" Claire wailed, as the fourteenth stroke lit into her. Just then, Claire become aware of a forbidden sensation welling up inside her. Dread mixed with shame, as she realized what was happening. Her all-consuming pain, awful as it seemed, was being transformed into that most carnal expression of femininity. Try as she might to keep the wave from breaking, Claire's rapturous outbursts shook her to the core. As the seventeenth stroke seared her tenderest parts, Claire could feel every muscle below her waist tensing in anticipation of the impending release. Recognizing Claire's condition, Mother Martha swung the paddle with even greater force. The sound of its impact echoed loudly within the close confines of her office. That very same moment, Claire let go a piercing shriek, which quickly morphed into something much more primal. Mortified by her



body's inability to repress itself, Claire felt it rush past the point of no return before she finally broke down. The Reverend Mother stayed her paddle for just a moment, as she watched the young novice undergo her catharsis. Though she did her best to seem appalled by Claire's lack of inhibition, Mother Martha couldn't help but feel similarly aroused. Steeling her resolve, the abbess exacted the remainder of Claire's penance.

Just then, the young novice regained enough composure to cry out. "Mea culpa! Mea culpa! Mea maxima culpa!" The Reverend Mother's voice turned icy, "What have you done, Sister Claire?" "Oh, Reverend Mother! I'm so sorry!" "What have you done?!" repeated Mother Martha, struggling to sound condemnatory. "Oh, Reverend Mother!" Claire pleaded, her voice dissolving in tears.

Mother Martha brought the paddle down upon Claire's frightfully distended bottom once more. "Unnnnoooooohhhh!!! Mea culpa! Mea culpa! Mea maxima culpa!!" she pleaded. "Say it again, Sister Claire!" Mother Martha demanded. "Mea culpa! Mea culpa! Mea maxima culpa!" "Again!!"shouted the abbess. "Let this wickedness out of you!" Sister Claire did as she was told, veritably bursting with pain and shame. "Mea culpa! Mea culpa! Mea maxima culpa!!"

The paddle found its mark for the twentieth time. Suddenly, in spite of her dire distress, Claire became aware of the Mother Superior's strident voice calling out with hers. "Mea culpa! Mea culpa! Mea maxima culpa!!" The Reverend Mother delivered yet another stroke, once again professing her guilt. Raising the paddle for the final time, Mother Martha swung with a zeal that astonished even her. Claire screamed, as the dreadful plank caught her full upon that very sensitive region just above her stocking tops. This time, however, she did not hear the Reverend Mother repenting in unison.

"Mea culpa! Mea culpa! Mea maxima culpa!!"cried the young novice, choking on the words. Moments later, Claire was startled by what sounded like a bellow through clenched teeth. Mother Martha had succumbed to her own womanhood. Not daring to look back, Claire listened in disbelief, as the Reverend Mother Martha Clancy came completely undone. "Oh, God! Oh, God!! AAAAGGHHUUUNNNN!"

Claire suddenly realized that she wasn't the only one sobbing. The Reverend Mother's fall from grace only led Claire to feel even more ashamed. Defying every convention, young Sister Claire reflexively stood up and let her underskirt and tunic down, so as to maintain some semblance of decency, before turning to face the Reverend Mother. Realizing that Claire had borne witness to her abject humiliation, Mother Martha accepted full accountability for her role in the young novice's folly. "Please forgive me, my child. I have let you go astray for these many months, solely to indulge my own impure urges. Please forgive me!"

Though her bottom was throbbing, Claire rushed over to embrace her beloved Mother Superior. "No, Reverend Mother! Only I should be seeking forgiveness. I willfully exploited your duty to correct me, because I craved the penance. It was a terribly wicked thing for me to do, and I'm so, so sorry!"

“Oh, Sister Claire. I’ve known your reason for seeking absolution ever since you first started coming to my office, and yet, I did nothing to deter you. The sin is mine as much as it is yours. Now, I’m afraid we both must accept the consequences of our wrongdoing.” “How, Reverend Mother?” Claire inquired. Mother Martha let out a deep sigh. “By paying a penance that will seem wholly disagreeable to us both, I’m afraid.” “What will be our penance, Mother Superior?” Claire asked, not wanting to know the answer. The Reverend Mother paused before responding, “Starting tonight, and for the next twenty-two nights, you will administer correction to me, as I have done to you, during Evening Services, just prior to the Act of Contrition.....in front of the entire convent.”

Claire gasped in horror. “Oh, no! Please Reverend Mother! I could never...cause you suffering...Oh, please! Don’t make me do this!” Mother Martha’s voice became firm. “You can, and you shall, Sister Claire. The time has come for us both to relearn the divine purpose of punishment!” Claire resumed her sobbing. “Now, put your bloomers back on, and bring the paddle. Come along. We mustn’t be late for Evening Services.” With that, Mother Martha proceeded to exit her office, with Claire following closely, if ever so reluctantly, behind. Stepping outside of the vestibule, both women began their sorrowful march towards the chapel.

IN STORE

— *Patricia Evans*

IT'S 4 o'clock in the morning, the time when they say most people die. In a convenience store, it's pretty creepy, the empty time. The night owls have decided it's time to go to sleep and it's too soon for the larks to drop by on their way to an early start.

Time to begin the rounds. I check to make sure that the beer cooler, humming away is fully stocked. I look at the best before dates on the packets of greasy pastries and see that they're all good for another couple of days. Then I prowl up and down the quiet aisles, making sure the stock is neatly set out on the shelves. I wonder if there are any magazines I've missed reading but don't find any. There's a video camera near the front desk and I mug in front of it. I can see my face in the monitor, a young guy, short dark hair, a face you could see on any street. I pull a few more faces and then get bored. I circle the store again and stop to look at the For Sale items left over from Halloween. Same old, same old – except that underneath the ragged pink fairy wings and broken witches' hats, I see a devil's mask. I don't recall seeing that in the stock before but maybe one of the other employees brought it in as a special order. I pick it up. It's bright red, with a hooked nose, an open mouth with fanged teeth, and horns. It's rubbery and limp in my hands; when I pull it over my head, it clings to my face as stretched as plastic wrap. I adjust it so I can see through the eyeholes, and move in front of the video camera so I can see my image on the monitor. It looks pretty scary especially when I growl through the mouth opening, distorting the mask and making the horns nod. At first I laugh at myself in the monitor, but within a few seconds I start to feel like I'm trapped in the mask. I can't breathe, the eyeholes seem to have closed up, my heart is somersaulting in my chest, like I'm going to die. When I try to pull the mask off, it feels like it has melted into my skin, as if it has become a part of me. I force my thumbs under the mask's edge and claw it away from my face. There is a sucking sound as I pull it off. As fast as I can I toss the mask into the trash can, then look at myself in the monitor. I look fine – as far as I can tell, I still have all the skin on my face. I tell myself it was just a panic attack. No need to be frightened of a dumb rubber mask.

I go for another stroll through the aisles and pray for someone to come in to relieve the boredom. As I pass the monitor I look up at it. The picture is crazy grainy. It looks like there are two of me, one head superimposed over the other, but slightly out of alignment. One of the heads moves forward over the shoulder of the other, as if trying to lean out of the monitor and look around. The video camera is old, but I haven't seen the picture this screwed up before. I reach up and move the monitor around a bit, which does clear the picture, but it's still the pits. I must be sleep deprived. Working graveyard shift can do funny things to your head.

Bored. That's what I am. I look out of the store window and see nothing but darkness and rain, not even a headlight from a passing car. It's like I've fallen out of the world into a black void. Then I remember that my dad had given me a sudoku book. I can work on that until the next customer comes in.

Turns out I'm lousy at sudoku, and after a few minutes, I give up. As I push the book to one side, I notice a movement in the monitor, and it's not me pushing a book to one side. The image is as grainy and double as it was before, but I can see me, or someone very like me, swinging his head from side to side, stretching his neck, pulling on his fingers like he's feeling his way around a body that's not his own. I look down at my own hands which are not pulling on their fingers. Instead, they are lying quietly on the counter; one is still holding the pen. What the fuck is going on here, I wonder. I look all round the store but don't see anyone else in there with me. Whose hands are those on the monitor, then? I look at the monitor again, and although the picture is still grainy, I can see that it shows me, looking scared. As I reach up to shake the monitor, I hear the shop door open. Thank God, a customer, someone to talk to.

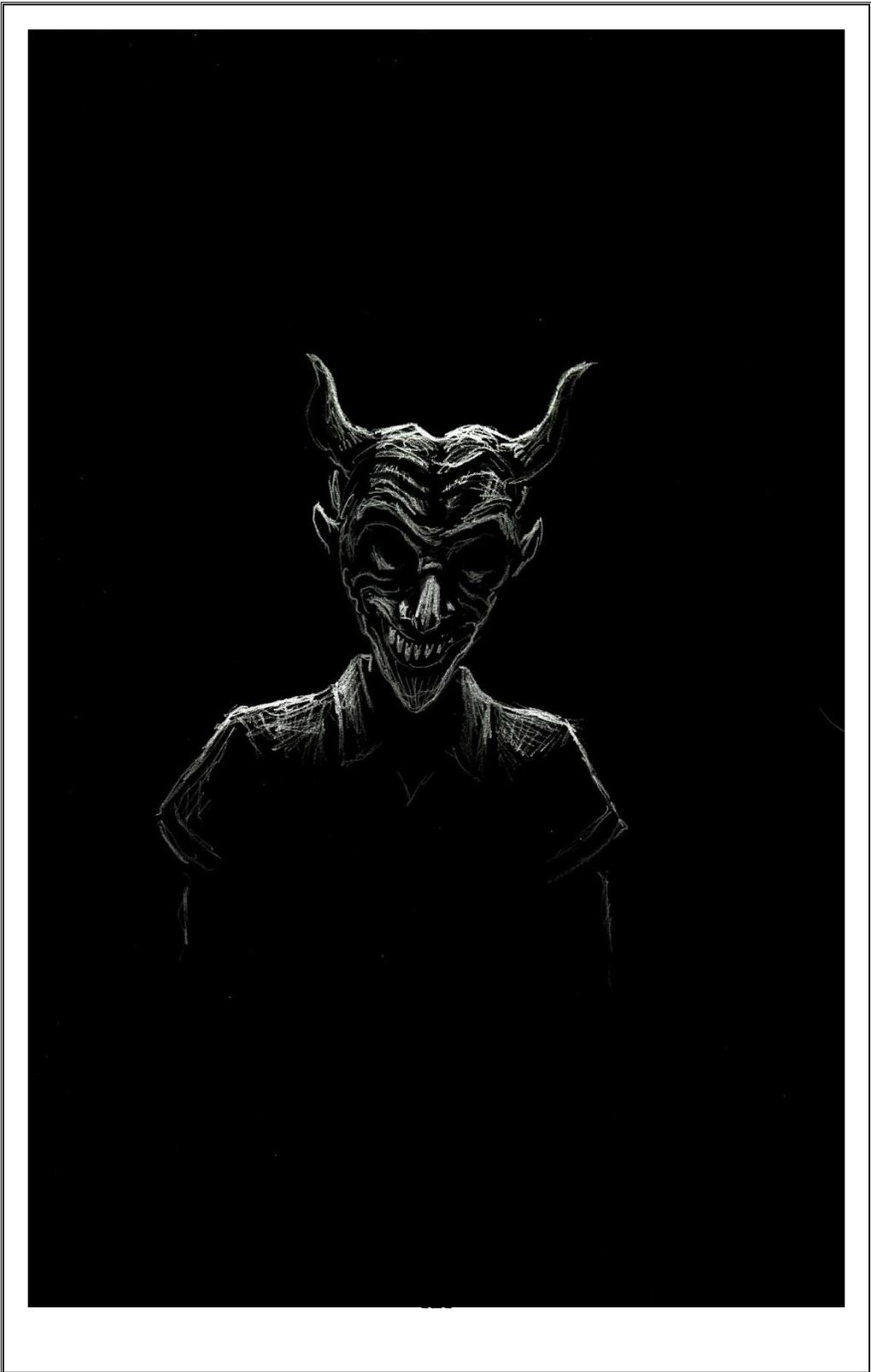
The customer buys a soda and some cigarettes, then, as people usually do, looks up at the monitor to admire himself. He shakes his head.

'Hey, kid, that monitor of yours need some work. Its resolution is shot. That doesn't look like me at all. I don't have a big nose.' He touches his snub nose and grins, then pays. As he leaves, I check the monitor. This time, all looks fine.

Five customers later, the sky outside is lightening. It's nearly the end of my shift, and there's a slowdown for a while. I'm so tired that I'm falling asleep on my feet, so to keep myself awake, I tidy up around the cash register, then decide to take a paper towel to use on any dust there might be on that screen. I look up at the monitor. Looking back at me is my face, but not me. The features are all off somehow, blurred, the eyes not level, the nose too sharp, the lips dark grey. It scares me and I jump back. As I do so, I see the face and upper body lean out of the screen towards me. My belly lurches in an attack of the bubble guts, and I run out from behind the counter, trying to escape. I look behind me. The figure is expanding out of the screen, hanging over the edge, slowly creeping like a mudslide towards the counter.

Just as I think I might die from terror, the store door opens. It's a young woman, about twenty, very short and slender. She doesn't seem to notice anything strange going on, but just walks normally to the counter, where a few seconds before I had seen the thing in the monitor, although there's no sign of it now. I look round to see if I can see anything, but there's nothing. The woman asks for a pack of Rothman's, then looks at me and asks, "Are you okay?" I take a few breaths and nod "yes", and remember that I forgot to load up the shelves from a carton of the cigarettes I have in the storeroom. There's another monitor in the storeroom, and after I've located the carton of cigarettes, I check it to make sure the woman isn't helping herself to a candy bar or two from the counter.

On the screen, as flickering and snowy as the one at the counter, I see the woman spread out across the counter, struggling and thrashing. She's being



strangled, by a man, who's lying across her, his hands tight around her throat. It's a young guy, with short hair. I pull at the storeroom door, but it's jammed tight shut. I can't open it, no matter how much I try. I struggle with the door handle, and then look up at the monitor. The man strangling the woman turns his head towards the video camera. I scream in fear, when I realize it's me I'm seeing, murdering her. No, that can't be right. It can't be me. I'm here, not there. It's not me, it's not me. Then, with the force and terror of a tsunami hitting the shore, I know, I know, I understand that it's the not me I saw earlier. Somehow, he's escaped from the monitor. What the fuck's happening? Am I crazy?

It can't be happening, something can't have come out of the monitor like that. Can it? My heart is running so fast that I think it will burst out of my chest. Fear is pouring through my body, making my legs tremble so much that they give out and I stumble, banging my head on the ground. I look at the monitor again. The not me is caressing the body; as if he knows I am watching, he turns and looks directly into the camera and smiles, a mocking smile, so full of malevolence that my gut heaves and I throw up from fear.

My hands are slippery with fear when I try to open the door again, but this time, the handle turns. I lurch down the aisle to the counter. When I get there, there is no sign of the not me. I turn round and round, panicking. Christ, were did he go? Is he hiding behind the counter or in one of the aisles? Did he go back into the monitor? I don't know where that thought came from but it seems real. There is only the body of the woman. I put my arms round her and try and lift her up. As I do so, two policemen, regular morning customers for bitter coffee and slimy donuts, come through the door. They stand still and calmly look over the scene. I guess they must have seen a lot of violence and dead bodies, because they figure out the situation fast. One of them pulls me away from the body.

Come on son, leave her alone. She's dead now. How did this happen?"

"The thing in the monitor did it," I say.

The police officers exchange glances. "Sure kid," says one. "Come with me, out to the car."

From the corner of my eye, I see the devil mask in the trash bin. The eyes and mouth seem to be smiling.

SHARK'S ISLAND

— *David Levell*

The following manuscript was discovered amongst the personal papers of Joseph Lamie, merchant, of Sydney, in the colony of New South Wales, after his decease in the year 1859.

OF the small number of men who witnessed the remarkable events I am about to unfold, I am surely the last one still living. I am certainly the only one with sufficient education to preserve with pen and ink the detail of our ghastly adventure.

I shall not expound upon the circumstances that led to my conviction and transportation to Australia half a century ago. Let the veil of shame shroud that chapter of my life! Even my dear departed wife and children had no inkling of the unfortunate beginnings that marred my early progress. It is only now that I, being alone and with my span of years upon this earth at their end, have resolved to record a singular experience from that era for posterity. I hold little hope that such record will be prove beneficial; indeed I can scarcely dare to hope that one reader in a hundred – should it find so many – will not dismiss it as the product of a mischievous disposition or fevered brain. Yet I am resolute; set the tale down I will, and what comes of it after I go to my rest is neither here nor there.

The events of this narrative took place on a small island, featureless and foreboding, somewhere off the northern coast of Van Diemen's Land. Never mind how I came to be there. Suffice it to say that I had the good fortune to break free from the bonds of penal servitude in Van Diemen's Land, and needing somewhere obscure to preserve my freedom, joined several of my fellows in setting up residence on that bleak rock, which we had chanced upon in our stolen cutter. Windblown, thickly scrubbed and snake-infested, it was barely fit for habitation, but we were in no position to be particular about where we made camp. Our new home appeared situated beyond the easy reach of our penal masters, and was without doubt a fine residence for seabirds and seals, and so there we resolved to make our living sealing, fishing and mutton-birding.

The weather was bad on the island, so bad that it was a common joke amongst us that God was trying to wash us from its surface and cleanse its shores. But the sealing was good and I was determined to stay, even resisting offers of enlistment with the rare visiting sealer, though I never missed the chance to barter some skins. They must have known we were runaways, but sealers ship all kinds in their crews, and scorn to sail so far just to play the policeman. Over time our population fluctuated, some shipping out on sealers, some deserting, and others arriving in the manner of our first arrival.

My tiny hut or wigwam, tumble-down and much beaten about by the elements, was sheltered from the worst of the wind by a bald rise of ground. Other huts were scattered about nearby, forming a makeshift village. I was perhaps the only islander with reading and writing, and in truth was close to an angel compared to most of my fellows, my only crime against England being the signing of a note. Living beside me were some of the worst villains a man could meet outside a road gang. Our chief was Redeye, a ferocious ex-sailor, who split his black wife's head with an axe – tired of her he was and so into the sea with her – and the next season he was back with a fresh girl, again a captive taken from a tribe of Van Diemen's Land during a rare provisioning excursion abroad. Redeye put her to work skinning and cooking and sewing our fishing nets, and the timid lass proved such a fine worker that he often lamented not having taken her sisters, too, an omission due only to a lack of food for the journey at the time.

It happened, while strolling along the beach one morning, that I spied in a lagoon half empty with the running out of the tide, the body of a man hideously mangled. He appeared as if someone had gone to work on him with an axe; his limbs and guts were a fearful mess and lay spread about the remnant of his trunk, which was festooned with feasting crabs.

The corpse was that of Tobias Miles, a resident of our isle these last three summers, and for all I knew without an enemy in the world. A summit was called, but no one would admit the deed. Redeye cursed the murderer for his cowardice in refusing to come forward and solve the mystery, but as yet it was a matter of passing concern to us. We lived without laws; like the buccaneers of old we were outside authority's grasp and content to live every man for himself. We reasoned it could only be a private grievance between Miles and his assailant, and as there was no one to carry the grievance further, no one clamoured to apprehend the killer. Men who batter and flay seals for their daily bread are none too squeamish, and violence amongst us was not uncommon. A private quarrel it must have been, and a private matter it would remain. Miles had no bosom friend to swear vengeance. He was hastily buried where he lay on the beach, and we returned to our huts, thinking the affair was at its end.

How wrong we were.

A week or two later great clouds rolled in, bringing a driving rain that fell steadily for days. One night during this deluge there came a great screaming commotion from the darkness. I awoke with a start and snatched up my cutlass as the din died away.

Hurrying to the source of the disturbance, I found several of my compatriots already milling about the dunes, one with a lantern in hand. Sprawled over a great tussock of grass was the body of Richard Greene, who had been heard shouting and cursing in the rain by several of our company a short time previously. It must have been his death cry that awakened me. I pushed my way forward to observe the body, and found he had been done for fiendishly, with a great chunk hewn from his middle and smaller wounds besides. This second murder put us in a state of considerable worry, as it was now clear that a killer was in our midst who

seemed to delight in striking not only with extreme brutality, but without the least cause or provocation.

Thomas Barnet ventured that perhaps a strange animal had come ashore, but there were no tracks in the sand or other indication that this was the case. Redeye, who had been skulking uncharacteristically at the edges of the gathering, came forward at this suggestion and replied that there was either a traitor within our number, or else an enemy lay concealed somewhere in the interior of the island. The supposition was sensible, so we resolved to regroup at dawn, draw up search parties and root out our bloodthirsty foe if he was there to be found.

Our search was as tedious as it was fruitless. We left no cave, bush or bird's nest unexamined. The island was only a few square miles, easily traversed in a day, and we gave it a most thorough looking over without finding a single clue to the mystery. It seemed that the murderer was among our number. All the while it was bitter with cold and the rain fell punishingly upon us.

That evening I was surprised in my hut by Redeye, wild with fury. He burst inside and held a cocked pistol to my head.

'I'll blow your brains out this instant, damn you, Joseph Lamie!' he cried, 'Tell me what quarter of the island you searched!'

Though expecting to be shot stone-dead that instant, I was determined the rogue would not see me buckle. I kept my cool and, with difficulty, endeavoured to satisfy him that I had been nowhere near his hut.

His eyes rained daggers upon me as he weighed my yarn against that of the others. His enquiry made little sense to me; he appeared distracted beyond reason and struggled to assess my account. With my continued existence dependant upon his caprice, the announcement that I had spoken truly was to my boundless relief. Then he burst into a great sob, and told me the reason for his intrusion.

After the search party concluded, he had returned to his quarters to find Black Mary, his beloved Vandemonian bride, butchered horribly in the same manner as Miles and Greene. How the old pirate wept for the woman who hated him so! He had used her foully, dragging her from her loved ones to this life of miserable hardship. Perhaps he only mourned the opportunity to murder her himself. At any rate he was now determined to seek out and destroy the killer of his happiness. Unfortunately there were no indications as to the murderer's movements – no tracks, no trail of blood, nothing to point us in any direction. Some of us suspected that Redeye himself was the killer; certainly he had a reputation for cruelty and bloodshed unmatched by any man on the isle.

There followed a night of anger and dread, of accusation and counter accusation. Our company came close to losing all sanity in mutual terror and suspicion. Nobody slept that night, nor trusted their neighbours. Also that night there was the burial of Mrs Redeye to attend to. One decision was agreed upon: never to venture abroad in gangs of less than three men, so the murderer (if indeed he was among us) would never find himself alone with a sole companion he might cosily overpower. Needless to state we all went about heavily armed and carefully watching the fellows with us. And the poor women were destroyed with

terror. They snatched up their half-caste babies and whatever weapons they could muster, and barricaded themselves in a single hut, where they huddled together and would admit no one until the murderer was apprehended. Such was the morale of the men that none bothered to object to this insurrection.

The very next day, while pulling in the fishing nets with two companions, Barnet and Rogers, I discovered caught in our trap a huge and monstrous shark. It had been wounded by the netting, which twisted tightly around its body, and was thrashing violently in a vain bid for freedom. I waded into the shallows beside the monster and fetched it several sharp blows with my club. To my utter astonishment the shark screamed in pain, a fact of no great import unless you appreciate that this sound was without doubt human. My companions and I fell back in astonishment, much affrighted, and wondered whether we should abandon the haul, but curiosity overcame us and we crept forward to reinvestigate.

All the while the shark churned about in the tide. We watched it for several minutes, and when it finally appeared to weaken we dragged it fully from the water and saw – it was three sober men that witnessed this – that our shark was no shark at all but a man. Miserable and half-drowned, the fellow lay tangled in the net in place of the wounded shark, still carrying the bruises I had served up to the shark only moments before.

Again we fell back in fear and confusion. The man in the net sobbed and moaned, and begged us to release him.

‘Help me, for pity,’ he pleaded, ‘Don’t kill me! Do ye not know me?’

He repeated the words several times over as we crept forward. Then, for the first time his face was visible through locks of greasy tangled hair and beard.

‘It’s King!’ we cried as one.

King had formerly lived amongst us, but disappeared many months back while out fishing. Whether he left of his own accord or met with some accident we did not know. We were not in the habit of asking too much after other men’s affairs. Every man nursed a dark history and it was not wise to talk loosely. If he had absconded or got himself drowned it was no business of mine, although the loss of the canoe that went with him was sorely regretted at the time.

The return of King caused a commotion in our settlement, for as soon as we fetched him back to the huts a crowd mustered with the intention of interviewing him closely. King failed to heed our chatter. He sat shivering under a kangaroo blanket, white as a dead fish and not half as healthy. Neither threats nor rough handling could induce him to speak. It was some time before he had strength to tell us of his adventures. Eventually, in a dull and weary voice, he related the disastrous proceedings of his last fishing excursion. Not only had an unexpected current swept him beyond sight and reach of our island home, but at the very summit of his despair he experienced the horror of having his canoe rammed with great violence by a shark of outlandish proportions. The monster toppled him into the sea and held him fast in its gaping mouth. King was naturally put in great fear of his life, expecting to perish in the jaws of his captor, but instead of devouring

him, or even piercing his flesh with its terrible teeth – and here the tale took on the full force of its horrible absurdity – the creature addressed him in English:

‘There is one chance for you,’ the shark said, ‘Do you wish it, or shall I eat you now?’

Half-crazed with fear though he was, King kept presence of mind to ask for his chance. The shark replied that he must forsake the land forever and swap places with him. Tired of life in the sea, this monstrous fish wished to emigrate and start his depredations afresh on the dry land. To accomplish his desire he needed to find a land dweller willing to take his place in the sea. A man, reasoned the shark, was the ideal candidate, being both the highest and most deadly of all God’s creatures.

Having no real choice in the matter, King readily assented to the shark’s demands and was released. The shark righted the capsized boat, leapt into it and was seen no more. At this instant, poor King found himself changed into a mighty shark. These last few months he had spent cruising beneath the waves, chasing fish for his supper, and he had no idea he was in the vicinity of his former haunts when he had the misfortune to be caught up in our nets.

Naturally, King’s tale was not easily swallowed, but neither was my own account of his body turning from shark to man. We were mad with fear, or dreaming, or drunk, according to the others. As for King, he was a damned rogue and certainly the killer in our midst.

‘Do you swear you were sober when you first saw this wretch he was no man, but a shark?’ Redeye asked me.

‘By all the saints, he was nothing but a shark, and I have not swallowed a drop all day,’ I replied, fixing his one bloodshot eye with a steadfast glance. His question was no less than a deadly accusation. What little grog we had in our remote settlement was strictly rationed by mutual consent; to plunder it was a capital offence without any possibility of commutation.

The old pirate grunted, but gave no indication whether he believed me.

Then one man, Benson, turned on King and said, ‘So, you turn shark and back again – maybe you come creeping ashore on the rainy nights!’

‘Aye,’ said another. ‘When the land is as wet as the sea!’

The general idea then became to execute the half-drowned King on the spot. Talk turned on how best to do this, what means might be employed to prolong his death agonies, and whether protocol should extend to obtaining his confession first. But I had been thinking through the problem, as a book-learned man might do, and addressed the gathering thus:

‘If we are to believe one part of his story, we’d best believe the other parts. It is only sensible. Did he not say that he swapped places with the shark? And did he not say that the shark took on human shape and rowed to shore somewhere? Think on it. Is it not possible that this creature rowed to our shore and has lived amongst us ever since poor King’s departure?’

Jem the Native snorted his disapproval. ‘I believe not a hundredth part of the story! Joe Lamie swears he saw these things happen, but I did not see them. All I

see is that King has been caught hiding on the beach, hiding where Greene and Toby Miles lay butchered.'

'I vouch for Lamie, but I say we've netted our enemy,' Barnet said, brandishing a knife in King's face.

'Shark or man,' King growled, 'I have washed ashore today and know naught of these killings.'

'If the shark has landed here, then only King will know his face,' I said.

Then Redeye, bless his soul – I presume he had one – clapped me on the back and took up my case.

'Joe Lamie is as true as steel. Listen to him speak wisdom. The killer is amongst us. Kill King and we may never find him.'

Redeye stepped forward and grabbed a lock of King's greasy hair quick as lightning, jerking his face upwards.

'Look about you, sharp now,' he said. 'Do you spy the shark in this company? Do you spy his face, his man-skin disguise?'

King coughed and spluttered as if he could not breathe.

'Damn you, wretch!' Redeye cried, as he shook King's head ferociously. 'Speak before I wring your neck!'

'I did not see his face,' King gasped. 'I cannot recognise him.'

'Then there's no proof!' howled the young man Cranny. 'He can't explain himself. Kill him now! Kill him and see if the slaughter stops.'

'I might have claimed I saw your face in the shark, Jonathan Cranny, had it taken my fancy,' King protested. 'If I was guilty then surely I would take my chance to shift blame onto another.'

The logic was unassailable; Redeye flung King roughly aside. Cranny, still aflame, stepped forward with a fishing knife raised. King moved to fend him off with a feeble movement of his forearm.

'Think, I tell you!' I cried, stepping sharply between them. 'There's no evidence King did the killings – no evidence he returned here before today. I saw today a thing I would never have believed, and so I say anything is possible. We must think!'

'Silence!' roared Redeye. 'Bugger your lawyer's babble, Lamie. King, what say you to save your wretched carcass before we skin you like a seal?'

An uneasy pause followed, in which the only noise was the wind whipping our ears and the lonely surf behind us.

'When I was taken from the water I regained my true self,' King said slowly. 'So, I'm wondering would this demon fellow turn shark again if put back into the sea?'

'Shut up!' cried Cranny, 'Madman's talk won't save you!'

'Skin him like seal,' muttered Benson, to general assent.

However, to my mind, and the minds of my two companions who had witnessed King's transformation, King's idea carried a certain weird conviction.

'If a man can turn to shark before my eyes, then I'll wager shark can turn to man,' Barnet mused aloud.

‘Here’s an idea,’ I said, and all eyes turned to me. ‘Trial by water. Take every man who came to the island after King left our company, and put him into the sea. Then we’ll soon see whether this business is nonsense.’

Redeye seize upon my proposal. ‘No man could object! An innocent man will be no worse the wear for a ducking.’ He laughed cruelly in King’s face. ‘And if no man proves shark I shall wear your skin this winter.’

Then followed a heated debate concerning who was eligible for the trial by water. It was finally settled, after much argument and head-scratching, that three men – Horan, Maguire and Benson – had arrived after King’s disappearance in the canoe. All were wandering vagabonds who paddled singly to us in small boats from another sealing island. One or two of their boats – no-one could remember whose – had broken up in the surf at the time of arrival. If the shark walked amongst us as a man, it could only be one of them. The unhappy trio was immediately escorted, at the point of swords and muskets, to a nearby lagoon, where Redeye decided our court would be declared open.

Horan, Maguire and Benson were compelled to lie down on the sand with their hands and feet fully stretched. Each was threatened with instant death should they move before commanded to do so. Redeye strode up and down like a ragged sergeant on parade, his bloodshot eye glaring with a keen appreciation of the outlandish trial he was about to preside over.

‘Take up Darby Horan!’ he ordered, and four men each gripped a limb of the particular wretch, heaving him upwards and transporting him to the lagoon’s edge, where they swung the unfortunate Mr Horan to and fro before flinging him deep into the murky water. All the while he bore his trial sullenly, not uttering a sound. We peered after him as he splashed in the shallows, struggling to gain a foothold, and every man saw that Horan was unchanged. He rose from the lagoon, removed his shirt, wrung it, and sat down dejectedly. If he was relieved at his discharge he gave no sign of it.

Redeye then pointed to the next man, Jacky Maguire, who was panting with barely suppressed fear. ‘Mr Maguire, now to see if a devil can be rinsed from you!’

Maguire was lifted bodily in the same manner and carried to the lagoon. Unlike stoic Horan, he protested vigorously, and struggled so much he was dropped to the ground.

‘The Devil take you all!’ he roared, ‘I’ve no part in the killings!’

Suspicion of his guilt was heightened by his warbling, which was otherwise ignored. His struggles were in vain and he too was cast into the lagoon. In a few moments he emerged, spluttering, cursing and looking like a drowned rat, but human all the same.

Redeye then turned his murderous glare to King. ‘This trial had better prove a true test, or it’s the flaying knives for you.’

Suddenly there was a cry of alarm. In the few seconds in which we were diverted by Redeye’s dire warning to the nervous King, our third man slipped away and was fleeing for his life along the dunes.

‘Take him!’ the cry went up. ‘Wing the bugger!’



We took off in desperate pursuit. Being closest to the miscreant, and an accomplished marksman, I am sure it was my shot which brought him down. The ball struck him in the left shoulder and spun him like a child's top before he fell into a heap, screaming and bellowing oaths like a madman possessed.

Soon we were upon him, and the whole party, without bothering to attend to the niceties of escorting the prisoner back to the courtroom, hauled the desperate Mr Benson aloft and ran him into the surf. The gore from his wounded arm flowed freely and spattered our faces like an unholy baptism of blood. All the while Benson twitched and struggled to break our grip on him.

'Into the sea!' we cried. 'Into the sea!'

At this he let out a blood-chilling howl such as have never heard and hope shall never hear again, not even in the cauldrons of hell should my late conversion not win my unworthy redemption. It filled the air and pained our ears. My spine shivered at the sound of what could have been the Devil himself in our arms. He maintained his rage and thrashed his good arm wildly as we pitched him into the surf at our feet – we were now knee deep in the tide – and drew our weapons as he floundered in the water.

Now comes perhaps the least credible part of my tale. But it is the plain truth that before the eyes of a dozen men Benson then became – transfigured into – a huge white-bellied shark, fifteen feet long, with teeth like knives and coal-black eyes. Luckily the creature seemed dazed by the sudden recovery of its shark-skin. The terrible panic that then seized our brains disarmed all sense of restraint, for we turned on that fish – otherwise Mr Benson – with the ferocity of mad dogs. Screaming our bloodlust to the skies, we cut him to pieces with our knives, our cutlasses, our tomahawks, with every ball of shot and even our bare hands, until the tide ran red with gore. Finally he ceased to thrash his death agony and we left his entrails to the seagulls.

King took a particular glee in the extermination. He remained at the site of the butchery long after the rest of us had retired to the sand dunes, where we slumped exhausted and sickened. King kept on kicking and trampling the bloodied hunks torn from the beached carcass, all the while loudly bemoaning the inhuman exile in the awful depths of the ocean that he had suffered at the shark's whim. He had been a most unwilling fish and felt a sharper need for revenge than the rest of us.

When finally King rejoined us, for some time he kept quite still. No one spoke, as if the savagery of our vengeance had shocked even the most black-hearted of our company. The boldest of our womenfolk now came creeping towards us from the trail to the village, trembling, knowing the murderer had been apprehended and dealt swift and bloody justice. King then rose, mumbled something perfectly unintelligible, and took several steps forward to face the open sea.

Now I felt myself overcome with a terrible, unaccountable urge. I thought of the blood spilt and the misfortune which had reigned since King entered the pact with the shark – or whatever it really was – and it occurred to me that as his

discoverer I had a duty to put things right. King's bare and bloody back formed a target not to be resisted. There was also the odd way that he looked out to sea which filled me with a strange dread and loathing. It was, on reflection, an unnerving familiarity about his manner, as if he silently acknowledged the continuance of some hideous bond with the watery element.

I felt at that instant a strong feeling that he was, in some manner, communicating with the sea, the nursery of our strange foe and all our consequent fear and misery. I can think of no other way to express it. No matter. The others were too tired or too surprised to stop me – or perhaps to join me. It was over in a matter of seconds. A few careful steps and I was behind him. He failed to hear my approach above the breaking tide, caught in his unearthly reverie. A sharp whack with my tomahawk and his corpse tumbled into the surf. I had cleft his crown in half like a bloody split log, and the foam from his Master's tide washed his brains about my ankles.

Even Redeye himself was never more astonished. Every man leapt to his feet. 'Why did you do that?' he demanded, as the weapons of a dozen men bristled around me. I remained calm. Though in fear of my life, I knew I could convince them I had good cause. 'Think on it!' I told my comrades firmly. 'Will none of you use your heads? What else might this poor cursed fellow bring out of the sea? What else?'

THE KING OF SILENT PASSING

— *Glenn James*

YOU never know if he has passed this way because he leaves no footprints in the snow, or so my old grandfather always told us wickedly, on nights when a billion white flecks danced around the streetlamps in the road like moths around a candle. If he does leave any marks to be seen they are never his own footprints. Have you ever seen the prints of a single cat, which has walked down a quiet road and left its tracks, through a blanket of undisturbed virgin snow? Or a bird, or a fox? That is his step, alone in the quiet of the night, leaving no sign of his own tracks and leaving only the print of creatures which wander unseen. His bare feet kiss above the snows and leave no impression of their own in the shifting surface, the crisp shroud unmolested by any physical weight at all. It is said he can walk up through the falling snowflakes, up into the sky, ascending them like a staircase, to stalk within the clouds.

As children we scratched the frost away from the landing window at bedtime, and shivered at the clean, smooth surface of the falling white blanket outside, unmolested by any embossing feet, certain that he had passed unseen when we were not looking. But dared ourselves to peek, half fearing we would catch a glimpse of him by accident when we dared to look, with beating hearts in the dark at the top of the stairs, straining our eyes through the crazily frosted glass. We never even thought to question our grandfather's word. There was an awesome old-world truth to his storytelling, an almost old testament authority, and we took his tale as Gospel.

The story stayed with us well beyond childhood, and the memory of Grandfathers wicked, knowing wink, and tap of his finger to the side of his nose when we looked outside at the falling snow at night. And despite the changes and developing cynicism that comes with age, we carried that belief in our hearts as we grew to adulthood, and went out to see the world for ourselves. Like the Christ who walked on water, we knew, the King of Silent Passing, Lord of the Blizzard and the Frost, walks above his elements and sinks not upon the earth. He is seldom seen, and for good reason. Eyes turn naturally aside when he journeys past. Every creature instinctively knows his shade and looks away, and wise children watch the wall when he is near, for his cruel eye will not stand to be met. Doing so invites a shivering death from creeping insidious cold, as pitiless eyes quench the heat from your blood, and strike your memory of his passing from the living world. So those who have seen him have done so by accident, and quietly keep the knowledge secret. Anyone with sense enough to see know that those who would walk unregarded make sure that they do so without interference.

We questioned and we pleaded, as children do when told of fiends, cannibals, and murderers, about this walker of the snows, but Grandfather would only smile

and shake his head, and tap a finger at the side of his nose again. I never told the others, but more than once I saw him looking out at the billowing snow as if meeting the eye of someone watching him, and his face when he looked away was deeply inscrutable. I did not care to meet his eye, as it was a frightening glance, I would feel suddenly cold.

Grandfather's tale made a deep impression on me as a person. Throughout my childhood I yearned for snow in the winter time, and longed to glimpse the walker of the drifts. I lingered outside after dark when it was snowing, dragging my feet on the way home, and standing with my eyes closed and a blissful smile as the snow fell and tickled my upturned face. I love the amber reflection of the lights of a city on a sky laden with countless billions of falling snowflakes, and the odd silence which shrouds a city besieged by winter. The streets are a whole different place after dark, with barely a soul abroad, and the only vehicles moving are those with little choice, passing as sedately as the procession of a head of state with that unmistakable crunch of ice crystals.

I would roam the quieter side streets and alleys, the paths through parks and along canals, the only human being abroad. I drank in the beauty of the snow falling through the stark white halo of street lamps in quiet walks, along the backs of houses, beside the heavily laden Hawthorne bushes and railings alongside the allotments, when I felt like the only person in the world. And in a sense I was, because in the dead of winter, and the dead of night, the streets belong to the King of Silent Passing.

It was on one of these bewitching nights as I strolled alone, clumsily crunching through the fresh white carpet, that I resolved to meet him.

Not an easy quest when the object of your hunt is deadly and vindictively private. You might as well decide to meet the man in the moon, but the idea grew on me all the time. I thought of little else on my late night meanderings.

Then one night as I was walking, lost in thought in the glorious twilight under a generous moon, someone called out to me. It was a voice that knew the lesser-loved kindred of the human race, cracked as a broken organ pipe, but retaining all its beauty. It was cheerful, resigned, and not a little wry with private reflections of its own. A throaty cough made it unmistakable.

"You won't find an answer on the pavement, my friend! There's nothing there but dew, the leavings of dogs, and fag ends...." It was then I realised I was passing Old Cogitating.

That made me smile. I could just make out a hunched figure sitting in the darkness, who beckoned me over with a throaty laugh and a cheerful wave of welcome. No-one knew his name, but everyone called him Old Cogitating, because if asked what he was what he was doing sitting there that's all he would say, with a huge grin, "Cogitatin!"

Cogitating had a broken body and a soaring mind, and no home but a little porch, where he lived on the steps at the back of the tiny museum in Cannon Hill Park. For a couple of years he lived there, in all weathers, never moving and surrounded by all his worldly goods in a huge heap of bin liners, filled with this

and that and more food than you can possibly imagine, as the good people of Edgbaston looked after Cogitating and made sure he wanted for nothing. If you stopped to speak to him in the evening people emerged from Range Rovers and Daimlers, coming and going, some with a thermos of soup, or some warm chicken drumsticks, perhaps even a Sunday dinner on a plastic plate, and he was so comfortably fed that often as not he was turning meals away. I saw so many people stop and bring him something one Christmas night when we were chatting that we had to keep breaking off our conversation, and laughed about the interruptions. He was well loved.

But he was broken. Cogitating was so strong he survived a crippling coach crash, making it out alive after 18 months on an intensive care ward, but when he left the hospital there was nothing left in the world for him anymore. He was the only survivor of 18 and the deaths of all his comrades weighed hard on his soul, as he was their driver. Something drifted his feet through the park, and when he had sat down on the steps of the museum, he did not move again for 3 years. His wrinkled little face grinned out at you from amongst a tangle of beard and a balaclava helmet, and his mind danced with a lofty education, and the memories of travels all over the world. Everyone loved him, and I was no exception.

That mischievous grin beamed at me out of the night, "Off on one of your excursions into fairyland again, eh? I always know when you're in a world of your own, chin down on your chest like that, and searching the ground without lookin...."

I grinned back. We had often spoken about ghosts and elementals, when I was wandering past in the darker watches of the night, and Cogitating knew me well. But I had never told him about my quest. In fact I'd never told anyone, and that's why what he said then really startled me.

The sky was crystal clear, and the stars particularly lovely, but on looking up he frowned; "There's a touch of snow in the air tonight, can you feel it? Its walloped Scotland already, and it always hits us next, you know. Said to be bad." Instinctively he huddled inside his donkey jacket, and it was then he lowered his voice, and with a curious significance which jerked my eyes away from the heavens and back around towards him, he added, "You know, I wouldn't go looking if I was you...."

There is no light at the back of the museum, but there was an odd look in his eyes even in the darkness, something quite meaningful. I could see it as clear as day.

"What do you mean by that?" I was so startled I snapped, much more sharply than I intended.

Even in the shadows I saw him smile, and nod knowingly. He tapped the side of his nose, just like my grandfather used to, and that really rattled me. "Thought as much, my friend, thought as much..... I notice a lot of things, you know, a lot of things, you would be surprised..... I can read a hundred stories a day, watching people walking past here; I don't need no library ticket. Furtive lovers having affairs, only holding hands when they think they're well out of sight, or the sneaky

ones, in denial, heading for the water closet, or the lost and lonely deep in thought, I see it every day. Now you, YOU for instance, I only ever see you like this when there's said to be snow in the air, trudging about like the Wandering Jew." He paused and gave me a very direct look, which I really did now find far too knowing and uncomfortable. But then he smiled again, "Look.... I know how curious you are about ... otherworldly things, but I have... an idea that you are planning to go looking for one who doesn't want to be found. That's not a good idea, my friend. Take it from me, that's not a good idea at all. Don't do it, eh? Just stay in the warm where you're safe...."

We looked at each other for an odd moment, our eyes locked together, but I blinked first. That made him laugh, "That's a good boy, that's it. Better safe than sorry, eh?"

I had not said a single word about what was in my mind, but he was so shrewd, so observant, he seemed to know what I was thinking about without my saying anything at all. Some people can read through bone you would think. I was too taken aback to do anything other than admit it. I couldn't see any point in denying anything, so I just shrugged it off. "Well, you know.... I just wanted to see what he looks like, that's all...."

"Well don't!" Cogitating pulled his old sleeping bags up around himself. "It's bad enough if you see him by accident, never mind deliberately looking...."

I did not mean to be so eager in my response, but a lifetime of pondering on a phantom came out in one rush of words, "You mean he can be seen? It is possible to see him then? Do you mean to say you have seen him yourself...."

"I mean to say it's a good idea to have the sense to avoid seeing what you shouldn't see." You could have knocked nails into his words, the oh-so-tangible warning. It obviously wasn't a pleasant thought for the man either. "I know what I'm talking about, and you quite clearly don't! You shouldn't go prying...." Shifting haughtily in his sleeping bags, Cogitatin fixed me with a look, and almost stood up.

I have never seen him stand up, he was a fixture on those little stairs. But he almost did it, and in the effort he stumbled badly, and I actually had to help him sit down. It was obviously quite painful for the poor man, and he pushed me away with a lot of gruff complaints. It took him a minute or two to regain his composure, and when he did, he was quite emotional, "To notice what you shouldn't be looking for, it's always been a curse of mine. I always HAVE too look, don't I!" There was savage self recrimination in his voice, and not a little fear, I thought. "To look when you see a sudden movement, and look and stare..... How do you think I wound up here, in the bridal suite of the Savoy? Did I ever mention there was snow in the air when we crashed?"

"No, you didn't actually--"

"Ah well... There we are." He had a thousand yard stare. "Too much curiosity, it's always been my trouble. There's snow in the air tonight, and I shouldn't wonder that I do it again, I can't help myself. It's a good night to pay a social call on an old acquaintance. And he knows I can't move."

I stared at him silently, trying to frame a question or put this into context, but he just smiled. "Let's just say I think I shall have a visitor this evening, someone I spoke too very late one night when I was in Prague, before the accident. I've always hoped I'd never speak to him again, because I can assure you, after I did and he turned to look at me.... Well, they found me unconscious, dead to the world and half collapsed into a snowdrift. I was in bed with pneumonia for weeks, and I've never felt warm since..... I have never seen a face like that.... I can see it now, never forgotten it...." Cogitating shook himself. "Never forgotten his face. Very deep snows they have there, REAL winters. You call this cold! You don't know the meaning of the word! I've avoided snow ever since. Been lucky with the weather the last few years, too. But I don't think I will be tonight. No, not tonight. It's not a night to be outside.... Ah, well... You'd best be on your way, go on, get out of it. Can't a man have five minutes peace....."

His manner had changed, and I couldn't get another word out of him except for his insisting that I shouldn't persist, and all he would say was "Don't go looking. Get back indoors."

To say that I was troubled is an understatement, but he would not say another word, and even pretended to go to sleep until I took the hint and went on my way.

There was snow in the air that night, and the irony of the fact is that I never saw a flake of it falling.

I don't sleep well at the best of times, but I was so disturbed by our conversation that I took one of my grandmother's sleeping pills and went to bed. It knocked me out like a mallet, and I was flat out until well into the following afternoon.

While I was asleep during the darkest hours of the night, a weather front blew in, and we had the heaviest snow we have seen in Birmingham for over ten years, real blizzard conditions. For our region this was pretty significant weather, with snow well over two feet thick in places where the wind could blow unfettered, and where it really was able to drift the snow reached piles five feet high, like mini ski ramps. Then the temperature dropped like a stone, and a bitter North wind came in. Foxes were found dead in the alley ways from the cold, and ducks and geese were frozen to the lakes in the parks. Even I did not venture out when I woke up, and for two days I was muzzy-headed with exhaustion and a lassitude which even now I can't explain. For a week I drifted in and out of a dreamlike, exhausted state, taunted by a dream that I was walking through the snow, trying to catch someone, someone tall and indistinct who I couldn't quite see clearly. He was always somewhat ahead of me and try as I might I could not catch up with him, and every so often I went pass Old Cogitatin sitting on his step, a brittle frost etching his frail shape against the door, and all he did was smile and point after the disappearing figure who was vanishing into the night. My mother swears I had a fever, and that I called out constantly when it had me in its grip, but she could not remember what I was saying. I remember staring frantically at the temperature knob on the

radiator, and constantly trying to open the windows, but everything else is just a blur.

When I finally came out of it I sat there in bed, half listening to the radio, and half watching the falling snow which was brushing again against the window. The Coldest winter in x number of years, they said yet again. They always say that, don't they? I listened through the national news without any real interest, but when the Midland News came on, a story hit me very hard, harder than I might have supposed, in a report on the death of a local man.

I learned then that the cold weather had visited my poor, strange friend in his pitiful sanctuary on the steps, and taken his fragile life in his sleep, when the snow lay thick across his huddled body. There was an appeal from the city coroner for anyone who knew anything about him, and I helped with what little I knew. All the muscles in his legs had wasted away, and he would have been unable to move and find shelter. The City Coroner claimed that he had seen bodies taken from the River Thames in better condition than this unlucky lost soul. It is also recorded that he said that in death the late gentleman had the most incredible smile on his face, almost as if he had died greeting an old friend.

They say someone comes to fetch you when the time has come. I had deep and chilling suspicions about who had been his guide.

I couldn't get it out of my head, it really played on my mind. I know what he had been hinting at when I last spoke to him that night, he had really seen something. And he was convinced, privately that he would see that something again, that he would look into the face of The King of Silent Passing once more. And so it would seem he had. But why him? Why did he have to see that unknowable face, to stare into those night walking eyes which knew all places in the world, and stepped where men avoided due to the cold and the bitter frosts? Why him? Was the last thing he had seen recorded on those dead eyes, like the reflection in a mirror, unnoticed by anyone else? The phantom I had wanted to see my whole life? I had to see if it was true, that the King of Silent Passing was real, not some unkind joke by the adults to keep us in at night during the worst days of the winter.

There was still snow falling now, but there were rumours of a thaw. Who knows when we might have any significant snowfall again, it had been years since we had such a bad winter. It might be ten years before we saw anything so bad again. I couldn't wait that long. I had to see if it was true.

Now it came to it, I realized that I knew what to do. I had thought about it so often over the years, and now that a determination had taken hold it seemed so logical, so obvious, almost as if it has been written on the panes of the window when I was scratching at the frost as a boy.

Whenever any snowfall began to thaw there was one place I could think of where it lingered for weeks and weeks, sheltered by the shadows from a nearby building. Would not such a being perhaps visit this last outpost of his grip on a frozen world, when the thaw was destroying his dominion, before retreating at last to colder climes for another year?

I did not tell anyone I was going out, and pinched my brother's coat from his wardrobe rather than go through the lounge to get my own when I had been so ill. It didn't matter to me that it was late at night and dark, that it was said to be the coldest night of the year, or that my hand trembled under me as I rested it on the banisters going downstairs and my legs almost failed me. The taxi was waiting when I made my way quietly outside, and the driver gave me an odd look as I carefully slid into the back, but he said nothing.

There would be a short walk along the canal towpath from where he dropped me, but he said nothing when I gave him a ten pound tip. He asked me no questions and I told him nothing about my intentions. I said nothing during the whole journey.

Snow was falling as I made my way in the darkness along the canal, slipping slightly where earlier thaws had frozen into black ice, and been covered by the treacherous disguise of subsequent layers of powdery snow. I cut my knee badly on the concrete edging by the frozen waters, but I didn't let it slow me down.

I knew there would be a price to all of this, there would be cost. I knew I would have to abase myself before this Pagan being, to try and show myself worthy of his presence, if I really did want to see him. I tried not to think about it as I stumbled and skidded along.

When I reached my destination there was absolutely no-one around, and it was a peculiar stretch of walk along the canal; a queer sloping path around the sharp corner of a factory, falling away from a swing bridge across the silent glassy waters. A single lamp post cut through the night, the only artificial light in sight within a good fifteen minutes walk in any direction, and there, in that deserted place, as tiny white clusters danced and weaved around the halo of amber light from the lamp, I removed all my clothes. I stripped completely, down even to my bare feet, and shaking with far more than the mere cold of the night I looked into the rawness of the elements and called out to the King of Silent Passing. I summoned him, I cried out to him. I opened my lungs and my heart and begged to make his acquaintance.

I never doubted for a moment that I would receive an answer, for I heard my grandfathers warnings in my heart, saw the secret fear in his eyes when he looked out into a night of blues and stark icy greys, and I thought of my lost friend lying cold from more now that the mere exposure which is said to have killed him.

I did not have to wait long, and I was not disappointed, although a fear clutched at my heart for the briefest moment that I was stupendously wrong, and the sound of a police car in the distance threatened to punch ordinary reality through into the depths of the moment.

For that second I doubted and I feared, cold biting at every pore and working its killing teeth deep into my body. But then, before the doubt took hold, he came along quite suddenly.



It was a gentle movement which changed everything, a natural shift in the air. A wind caught the falling multitude of snowflakes and whipped them around, causing a wave effect, where the snow is almost blown like breakers reaching the shore. And then, as if parting a curtain, a figure seemed to reach out from behind and pull the falling wall of flakes aside and step through to stand before me.

I fell back against the wall, my elbows hitting the stone. Casually he had parted the elements like someone casually pulling aside a net curtain, and the falling snow had dropped back into place behind him with a disturbingly fabric-like movement, a fluid motion, which sent a sickness through my bones at this nonchalant brush aside to nature.

I've speculated on how the lord of the snows would look from the earliest age, but nothing prepared me for the shock of He who strode across on that cold, clear night. I couldn't help myself, and I stared at his feet, stared at his feet to see if it was true what my grandfather always said; and my soul was blanched by the fact that it was. Though walking towards me with casual, easy steps, I could see he walked upon the snows as light as a feather, his great feet not so much as disturbing a flake of snow from beneath or around him. And in his wake, impossible in his wake, were the tiny, well defined footprints of a bird. The tiny, well defined footprints of a sparrow or a robin, imbedded in the snow, and left behind whenever he lifted one of this great, shaggy haired feet.

Shaggy feet, of a massive size, with huge rounded toes. Standing twice my height in the light of the streetlamp, I thought he was clothed in a great fur coat or cloak. But when I dared to raise my eyes and look at him, I saw that it was no fur he was wearing but his own.

Like a walker of the remote woods all over the world, I saw the living reality of a Wildman; A Sasquatch, or a Yeti, call it what you will, but it was still a man. Long white hair grew all over his body, and he stood calmly, looking at me with penetrating serious eyes the colour of ice in the sunlight, his head cocked to one side, and a look on his face almost of amusement. I cannot speak about his face. I couldn't meet his eyes for long, I don't think anyone could. They were too penetrating and intelligent.

The King was wearing regalia. Around his temples he wore a kind of magpie crown, a cluttered thing twisted together from bent wire, and sticking up from it all around his head was a mad collection of odds and ends; Spark plugs, a snapped piece of car Ariel, and at least two broken screwdrivers. A slim dolls leg stuck up vertically towards the back of his head, still wearing a tiny red shoe, and there were lost keys jammed into it all the way around, and bits of lost jewellery, broken watches, and bits of lost cutlery wound around the wire rim, bent to bind it together as if they were as soft as rubber.

A belt of trailing power cables was platted around his waist, in places still trailing three pin plugs or bent jacks.

I felt the fear come upon me.

I had seen him, I had called him out and seen him, and I was seized with fear of this silent, ancient elemental being, this god of the snows, and then I Really,

truly felt the bitter cold of the night around me for the first time, felt my stupid want of clothing and shoes. And I fell to my knees before him, fell on my knees in the snow shivering with fear, with my arms outstretched and my head bowed, falling on his mercy, at the back of the Sulphur Refining Plant, on Lifford Lane, in the corner of the car park.

For a long moment, I stared at the ground, stared at the snow beneath me, and waited, not daring to look up. I didn't expect to live, and they say that death comes gradually at first, as he changes the temperature of your blood and internal organs, then speeds up faster and faster, until you are dead before you have stopped breathing. I cannot say. In as much as I dared to raise my eyes, all I could see was the pile of cleared snow in the corner of the car park. This tiny mountain would be my last sight in the world of consciousness and feelings.

But a lone finger tapped me, first on one shoulder and then the other, like a King touching the shoulders of a kneeling man with a sword, like a monarch making a man into a knight. Although it felt curiously ceremonial he said nothing, but when I looked up he was walking away, and I was still alive.

Incredibly still alive, and it was then I noticed that I could not feel the cold anymore.

I must be dead, I thought, I must be a ghost or hallucinating from hypothermia. But as I looked after him, he looked over his shoulder, just once, looked right at me with those frozen ice crystal eyes, and with one great hand he beckoned that I should follow.

Somehow I got to my feet, and when I stood, he pointed to the ground, as if indicating that I should walk in his footprints, like good King Wenceslaus in the Christmas Carol. I looked at the ground, and saw that the only tracks he left were those of a mouse. I stared at these and then looked up at him, and that was when I heard him laugh for the first time, and he waved to me to follow him again. I did as I was asked, and when I did, I realised not only that I myself was walking above the surface of the snow, but that I also was leaving only tiny tracks like a bird, like a sparrow or a robin. I tried to stamp my feet, but I could not make any impression on the surface of the snow whatsoever, no matter what I did, and all that I left were these tiny footprints. I heard him laugh again, a not unpleasant sound, and this time, unable to hold back my curiosity any longer, I ran after him.

It has been an unusual apprenticeship. I did not expect to live, never mind thrive after looking him in the eye. But sometimes there is something much more unexpected behind a legend, and it's perhaps better to accept them when they are revealed. I could not have imagined anything that the King of Silent passing might want or require from the human race, but I never would have guessed, in a hundred years, that this Silent Knight might need a Squire.

FIN

HAIRY TOES

— *Matthew Banks*

[*Author's note: The following account is based on fact.
Only the names have been changed to protect those that were involved.*]

PITTER patter, pitter patter, pitter patter. Wet feet running a long rain drenched streets. Running after me. I can't run any faster if I tried, and I know I'm going to die. How could I've been so stupid as to deny the fact, HE exists. My father warned me not to be sceptical, but at fifteen you're rebellious and obnoxious. Ah, there's my tenement block. I'm going to make it. YES !!! Up, up I run. Up soaking stone stairs. My breath is running out, I have a stitch in my side, and my heart is coming out of my mouth. There's my door. Shit, where's my bloody key? (I took my door key out of my pocket, and inserted it into the lock, and turned it. The door opened, and I slammed it shut.) "Is that you, Steven?" "Yes, Dad." "Where've ya been ! It's late." "Just with Jimmy Jones and the gang," I replied. "Not gotten into any trouble have ya?"

"No Da."

"Get ready for bed," came the grumpy voice back. "Yes Dad."

I went into the small cramped bathroom, closing the door behind me, darted across to the toilet and vomited. I've never felt so ill in my life. Flecks of red, orange and black danced around my eyes and my head swam. How had this started? At school! A dare! My friends Jimmy Jones, Sally Burns, Phil Rogers, Mark Woods and a couple of others, including myself, all met after school, as arranged, during lunchtime. We went over to the old derelict Borley cemetery. Overgrown, vandalised and neglected. It would make a suitable location for a horror film! Drunks and druggies now use the old church for shelter, doing whatever it is that they do. They rarely approached us kids that use it as a dare ... as a rite of passage. Mark Woods brought some booze with him, and we drank that. Sally Burns suggested that we try out her mother's Ouija board that she had taken. For a laugh, everyone agreed, except me, who said no. I hadn't drunk enough and I was getting a bad feeling, as though we were being watched. They then all went around me, in a circle, calling me a poof, a coward, and that I was the sort to believe in "Hairy Toes." So I gave in. They knew I would. We sat around in a circle and Sally took the Ouija board out of her school bag - then a glass. We put our hands on the glass - well the tips of our fingers, and then held hands with the others. Then, while the others hummed, Sally spoke her gentle Scottish accent almost seducing the air around her. "Is there anyone there?" The glass didn't move. "Is there anyone there?" she repeated. The glass jittered to the "Yes" position, and we each looked at each other suspiciously. "Who are you?" No reply. "When did you die?" The glass moved, slowly. It spelt out 1604. Then 1724, 1834, and finally

1914. I shivered, involuntary. Again we all looked at each other. A little scared, I think. "Do you have a message to give?" "Believe." "Believe in what?" "Believe in me." Edgily, we all looked at each other. None of us were smiling now. Fear mixed with curiosity filled my friends' eyes. Sally continued. "Who are you?" Silence. "I repeat, who are you?" Silence. Then the glass started to move, slowly. First to the letter 'H' then to the 'A' then to the 'I'. Finally it spelt out 'Hairy Toes'. I jumped up, rage mixed with fear. "I dunnee believe in Hairy Toes. He does'nee exist. O.K.," I shouted. The glass shot off the board, and exploded into a trillion tiny pieces, against a nearby headstone. Sally screamed, and they all jumped up. "Ya idiot," said Rogers, pushing me. "Sod ya. Ya were mucking about," I replied, pushing him back. "I did'nee." Then each and every one denied moving the glass. I didn't believe them. "I want to go home," whimpered Sally, and began to cry. "I'll take ya home," I replied, putting my arm around her, not only to comfort, but to protect her. The sky became dark. Thunder roared and it began to rain. I was sure that I saw someone trotting towards the church and wondered if they'd been watching us. We each took off in the direction of home. Sally left the Ouija board in the graveyard. Looking back, I was sure I saw something hunched over the Ouija board as it appeared to be illuminated by a green light! If any of the others' wanted it, they were welcome to it, but I certainly wasn't going to get it back for Sally or her Mother. Sally and I walked to her house. It was strange, but now that we were away from the others and the graveyard, we felt safe, like the whole thing hadn't happened. Her home was a small semi, which needed repairing in places. "My Ma won't be back 'till later. Wanna come in?" "Why?" Sally shuffled her feet and looked around nervously. Then she looked me straight in the eye and simply said "I don't want to be alone. I'm scared. Please stay with me until me Ma comes back." "O.K. then. I'll stay." I didn't blame her, only the porch light was on and it was so dim that it was pointless being on. The rest of the house was in complete darkness. She opened the front door and we went in, turning the lights on in each room before entering. Sally made us a sandwich, we watched some television, she showed me her room; and we listened to some music and chilled out, entertaining each other. Her mother didn't come in until gone 11pm, giving me time to get dressed. When she came in, I left. Sally said she'd see me tomorrow at school and kissed me good night at the door. The storm had passed and it was only drizzling as I made my way home. As I turned into Church Street, I heard the pitter patter of feet on stone. "Who's there?" I called out. No reply was forthcoming, so I started to jog. Then I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. The pitter patter was right behind me and I knew that if I turned round, I would see something so horrid - I'd die. I ran. Fear and panic took control. I prayed like I've never prayed before. "Please God, let me get home safely." I turned into George Street, past the old school, and into Mayfair Road. Only four blocks to home - and I could still hear pitter patter of the feet chasing after me. Is there no escape! How did the bloody rhyme go! Ah, I remember:

Hairy Toes, Hairy Toes Everything He does know
Hairy Toes, Hairy Toes



Respect your Mum and Dad Make them happy, not mad or sad

And for Him, don't you cry And for Him, don't you deny For if you do, you'll surely die And everyone knows Hairy Toes, Hairy Toes Damn! I'd denied that He existed. I'd shouted it out loud and clear. I stumbled, but didn't fall. "I'm sorry," I shouted, "I believe, I believe." Then a horse-like voice echoed around the houses, "Too late," followed by a mocking laugh and the pitter patter. I wet myself. The drizzle turned into rain. I finally turned into White Square and into blackness. The gas light had gone out. Pitter patter, pitter patter - it was getting closer. I ran on, sweat poured down my face and I wanted to be sick. Finally I saw my block and ran up the steps, three at a time. Then I ran along a short corridor, up some more stairs, which were bathed in light, along a second corridor, and into my flat. Safe! BANG! BANG! I jumped. "How long ya gonna be in there?" "I'll be out in a moment, Da..." "Hurry up, I want the loo." I opened the bathroom door, and let Dad go in. "Are ya alright, son?" "Yeah, just a little tired" I lied. "Ya dunnee look too well. Go to ya bed." "Yes Da."

Dad patted me kindly on the head. As I passed the front door, to go into my bedroom, I heard a low scraping whining sound. It sent a shiver down my spine. I turned round, Dad was watching me, a strange expression on his face. He turned and went into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. I went into my room, turning on the light before entering. My bedroom window was open. I rushed over and closed it. "Da, did ya open my window," I called "No, I didnee!" came the reply.

Nervously, I looked around my room. There was no sign of anything out of the ordinary. I checked in the wardrobe and under the bed. Nothing. Satisfied, I stripped and got into bed, careful not to turn out the light. I scolded myself for being so stupid as to believe that my friends hadn't deliberately set out to scare me. But in the end we'd all scared each other. I laughed quietly to myself. School had been rubbish, my friends scared me and themselves, Sally took me... Then I scared myself all over again over something that doesn't exist, a fairy tale to scare children into behaving ... No such thing as Hairy Toes...

...I must have fallen asleep, for when I awoke, it was pitch black. Dad must've come in and turned the light off. Probably complaining about the wasting of electricity, we can ill afford to pay. Then I heard a shuffling sound at the end of my bed. I became ridged with fear. I couldn't move a muscle. Then I saw, rising out of the darkness, a shape that I couldn't distinguish very well. It looked like a tall, very hairy man. It turned around, and two green eyes pierced through the blackness, like twin lighthouses. "Hairy Toes," it whispered in a cold harsh voice. A scream built up inside my throat, but wouldn't release itself. "Hairy Toes," it whispered again. "Hairy Toes is here." Slowly, the blankets which covered me, were pulled down over my body, leaving me naked, exposed. "Hairy Toes oh Hairy Toes," it whispered. Something touched my foot. At the same time my scream released itself, I felt a searing pain in my foot.

I awoke in hospital. Dad later told me that he had burst into my bedroom and found me in a dead faint, blood splattered everywhere, and by the window, a large

footprint of four toes and a stump. My friends, Jimmy Jones, Mark Woods, Phil Rogers, and Sally Burns were all in the same hospital as me, with the same injury. We all had our big toe on our right foot missing. It had been torn off. We never spoke to each other again. A couple of months later, Sally Burns and her Mother moved away. It was rumoured that she was pregnant. Jimmy Jones and Mark Woods were found in the Old Borley church, bloodless and their eyes missing. I still see Phil Rogers, but we just pass each other like ships in the night and do not acknowledge the other. As for me, I work hard at school now, no late nights out. I keep myself to myself and before bed, I pray. And the bedroom light is kept on all night and the window is barred.

AN IDLE DREAM, QUITE GONE NOW

— *Glendon McDorman*

FIFTEEN years ago we held a funeral for Prof. Binford. This morning, he died.

It began about a month ago, at the start of term, when the evenings were still warm, and the sky was sometimes blue, and students and faculty alike could hardly contain the eagerness with which they greeted the return to regularity. Early one morning, the third or fourth day of the term, the groundskeeper entered the chapel and found a mound of cutlery covering the altar. Everyone assumed that it was a prank or some sort of initiation to one of the dining societies, and while I must admit that it did strike me as a bit sacrilegious, it seemed harmless enough. But, as you will imagine, Prof. Sleatham found nothing amusing about it, and he very badly attempted to carry out an investigation. He must have questioned every woman in the college twice, but when no one admitted to having anything to do with it he gave up and turned instead to haranguing the students from the lectern. "This conduct is expected from pubescent boys," he scolded them, "but is not becoming of either a lady or a young scholar, and certainly not of someone who is both." I'm sure he thought his speech was the pinnacle of erudition, but no one took him seriously, and the students continue to mock the phrase, even after all that has happened. He has changed much from that terrifying embodiment of discipline we knew, and when I see him now, I can scarcely believe that we were once so frightened of him. This business went on for only a few days, and when it was over the term began in earnest. Really, the whole affair was quite silly to everyone except for Prof. Sleatham, and if I didn't know how this sad tale ends, I wouldn't even have connected the episode to the horrifying events that followed.

It was perhaps not quite a week later when the murder occurred. Well, murder is what we called it then. I know better now – but I'm getting ahead of myself. The University tried to keep the affair confined within the Walls, but of course that effort was doomed from the start, and you will have read about this in the newspapers. It was a week-end, and a pair of students had stayed until last call at the Silver Prince at Claytemple. I don't know what they were doing so far from the Hall, and it doesn't matter except that it meant they came back alone very late – the porter didn't even see them come in, and was probably asleep. The poor man was fired, of course, though whether he was awake or asleep or whether there had been an army of porters wouldn't have made any difference. According to Mary, as they were passing the chapel, they heard a crackle, like a stack of wood suddenly igniting and then right in front of them there was a man. He vanished as suddenly as he had appeared, and then Mary, too startled even to move, saw that Jane had fallen to the ground. I will spare you any of the gruesome details (the newspapers didn't!), but when the porter arrived with a light it became obvious that Jane had been stabbed and, unable to speak, she died within minutes.

Jane wasn't especially interested in science, and as a Third Year, she was studying Ancient literature, but in her first year I had been one of her tutors. She was bright and energetic and engaged. She did a very good paper on the theory of comets in the philosophical poetry of Carus, which I read over again in the days after her death. So much potential, all of it gone now, and to no end. Well, the University Police came and discovered nothing. There was no physical evidence except for Jane's blood and the wound from which it came. There was simply no indication that anyone had been in the portico except for Jane and Mary, and after carrying out a series of interviews with everyone in the college and then throughout the whole University they simply gave up and issued a statement suggesting that students should try harder not to get murdered. Jane's father is an important solicitor at some firm of important solicitors, and he attempted to bring in a private detective, but Vice-Chancellor Plompter wouldn't allow it. This is when Jane's father went to the newspapers, at which point the Metropolitan Police demanded entry to the University in order to carry out their own investigation. Again the Vice-Chancellor refused, and the Metropolitan Police came up with a suspect, an escaped prisoner, and insisted that the Charter only granted immunity in purely internal matters.

This was a tense time for everyone. The whole University was engaged in an internal debate about whether a centuries-old charter should really govern the policies of an institution in the modern world. You will agree, I think, that this is a valid discussion, but of course the matter was really just an attempt to politely express frustration that the administration was more interested in its own survival than a girl's murder and the potential threat to the community. Faculty and students alike were divided on the issue, and among the students in particular the question took on a measure of debate about the value of the peerage. There was a fight in the Exham dining hall that would have resulted in a duel had not another student informed the college. It was at this point that the Duke of Ilchester decided to intervene in his capacity as Chancellor, and the Commissioner quickly backed down in the face of a public fight with the Savior of the Empire. But behind the scenes some compromise was reached, and the private detective was brought in after all. He was an exceedingly charming man, and I don't doubt that if someone had been hiding information, he would have discovered it. He stayed on for about a week, finding nothing of course, but I think doing a great deal to repair the reputation and mental state of Mary, both of which had been deeply bruised by the University Police.

During this time something strange began to happen in my rooms. One evening after a late night at high table, I came back home and could not open my door. The key worked fine and the knob turned, but it simply would not budge. It took two porters several minutes, but eventually they were able to force the door open enough to permit me to slip through and see what was the matter. Every single book – hundreds of them – had been removed from the shelves and stacked neatly against the door. Another prank, I thought, though I couldn't imagine how

anyone had managed to pull it off, as the only other exit was one of the two windows that led nowhere but straight down to the quad seven stories below.

Of course, I should have been angry at such an invasion of my privacy, but these weren't my books – they were Prof. Binford's. Since I took over his rooms when I came back to the Hall, I had never touched his books, or used his desk, or even just stood there and looked at the office. Once the damage from the accident had been repaired, I set up an office of my own in the laboratory, and for fifteen years this room where we once spent so many hours has been nothing more than a dark hallway through which I hurry to reach my bed. But now here were his books in front of me, demanding my attention and forcing me to light a candle on his desk. I'm certain the sudden appearance of sentiment was, in part at least, the product of too much after-dinner brandy, but I dismissed the porters and set about returning the books to their proper place, remembering those happy years. I wish you had been there with me.

There is no need to tell you that I slept neither well enough nor long enough that night, and so the next evening I retired early. In the middle of the night, I awoke as if it was morning, though it could scarcely have been later than two. As I lay there weighing the virtues of forced sleep or putting the quiet hours to some productive purpose, I began to feel as if I was no longer alone. There was no fear or dread or sense of danger. It wasn't at all like one of those childhood moments when you awake in the night with the certainty that something malicious is under your bed, but rather it was like one of those childhood moments when you've woken after an hour or so of sleep and can sense that your father has finally come home and is in the kitchen speaking to your mother and you want to get up and embrace him. I took that feeling as an encouragement to give up on sleeping, and I began to look forward to sneaking down to the kitchens to put on some coffee without waking the rest of the college. As I was hovering at my door, making sure that I had with me everything I would want for the day, I glanced at the window and saw there the silhouetted head of a man who must have been seated at the desk. I was startled, and I'm embarrassed to say that I shrieked. He stood up, and I saw that he wasn't so much a man as a black figure in the shape of a man without any visible features, like a shadow given substance. And then there was a crackle and a low hiss and he was just gone.

I should have gone into the stairwell right then. I was at the door, there was a threat in my rooms, and I should have gone out. But I didn't. My first instinct wasn't to flee from the danger, but to see it, to classify it, to understand it. Just as I was fumbling around with a candle, I heard a door open and shut, and the heavy footsteps and even heavier breathing of Prof. Curtis as he tried to bound up the stairs. Mercifully, he had a candle with him, and together we looked around the rooms, first to make sure the intruder was really gone, and then to see if he had left behind any evidence. We found only one thing: the word HELP carved into the desk.

Naturally, the investigation was on again, but, again, nothing positive came of it. Save for the inscription, there was no evidence that anyone besides me had been

in my rooms that evening. No one said anything to me directly, but I was aware that people thought I had fabricated the whole episode, and the word “hysteria” was bandied about when people thought I wasn’t listening. Yet, I had only to endure this for two days, when once more the chapel became the focus of this strange business.

Just before tea, a gigantic thud followed by a piercing shriek reached the ears of everyone in the Hall. I stopped what I was doing in the lab and looked around at the post-graduates who had also paused in their tasks. The sound came again, and then a third time. By the time we reached the quad almost everyone else was already there, hovering around the entrance to the chapel. The iron doors were dented and the ornate embossments that decorated them had been smoothed away, as if someone had taken a battering ram to them. While we stood there transfixed, it happened again. We all watched the doors cave further inward, and we covered our ears against the grating of metal as the hinges tried to hold on. At first, it did appear that something was striking the doors, but as I stepped closer it became clear (to me, at least) that something was tugging at them from the inside. The bell in the steeple began to ring, at first slowly, and then faster and faster until noise and echo elided into one painful cacophony. After a few more seconds, the doors were ripped from their hinges and they flew into the church and smashed against the altar, where they clung like nails to a magnet. The bell kept clanging, and then it slowed and then the doors collapsed to the chapel floor and everything went silent.

I expected Prof. Sleatham to close the college on the spot, but instead he commanded everyone to go about their business as if nothing had happened. How he thought anyone could do that, I do not know, but I decided that “normal business” included some hours spent with my students over pints at the Bitter Huntsman and left the Hall immediately. We took it as a given that the altar had become highly magnetized, and while none of our explanations as to how such a thing could happen were in any way satisfactory, it was nonetheless a relief to speculate about the cause. When I returned to my rooms, I found all of Prof. Binford’s books strewn about on the floor, mostly opened, some upturned, as if someone had been hastily searching for something. They were piled high, and I was faced with the option of picking up or stepping on them to get into the bedroom. The sight of the mess wearied me, and not for the first time I wished I kept a cot in the laboratory. It occurred to me to alert the University Police or Prof. Sleatham or even just a porter, but what I really wanted was to go to sleep and awake in the morning to discover that all of it had been a dream. But this is when I found the key to the whole affair.

Presumably on the assumption that no one would ever wish to consult the book, Prof. Binford had hollowed out his copy of Waterhouse’s Principles of Analytical Calculation and made a place suitable for securing his private journal. When I removed the little book from its hiding place I felt immediately connected to it, and I remembered seeing it resting on the corner of his desk. My desk, now. For the first time, I actually sat in his chair and looked at the room from his

perspective. Somehow it seemed right, but at the same time I felt as if I were getting away with something. I am sitting there now, Beth, as I write to you about these things. That night, I stayed awake almost until sunrise, reading through his journal, and in the end finally able to formulate a hypothesis.

I am certain that you will have already guessed the source of this strange haunting, but if you have not, it will all become clear to you now. It began during our second year, at that magnetism conference the Society hosted. No doubt, you recall as vividly as I do the poor reception of Prof. Binford's paper and the unnecessarily harsh rebuttal that Fisher gave in his comment. At the time, I too was unconvinced by his arguments for treating light, electricity, and magnetism as different manifestations of a single phenomenon, but I could not believe that other scientists could behave so brutally. He bore it so graciously and with so much dignity. Do you remember how he took us aside afterward and told us that when we had professorships of our own, we would have to make a choice about how to treat our colleagues? I think about that conversation often, and it has become almost like a bit of scripture upon which I reflect when I am fighting my own instincts to berate a colleague. I remember expecting that he would divert all of our efforts toward proving his suppositions correct, but instead he simply announced that the Academy had spoken and that therefore we should work on some other problem. And that was that.

Except that it wasn't. This journal records his continued work on the project, in secret so that he would avoid the type of serious criticism that might jeopardize his position. During our last year of study, he merely tinkered with formulae, but when we were gone and he did not take on any more students, he began a series of practical experiments. The work is excellent, Beth, and quite sound. I will show it to you next month, and then we can decide what to do with it. But that's another matter entirely. There was some sort of mishap early on, and Prof. Binford's investigation into the matter led, ultimately, to the accident fifteen years ago, his own death, and to the death of Jane Caxton.

It began when an unexpected power surge caused an overload in an electrical-field generator he was using. He records that a stepladder he had left in the middle of the field vanished from sight and then returned a few seconds later. "Blinked out" is how he describes it in the journal. It took him months to recreate the power surge, but when he did, he became able to make objects disappear for several minutes at a time. He proceeded quite scientifically from this point, and the journal is full of detailed records of everything he put into the field, how long each object "blinked out," and whether anything at all was different when the objects returned. Moreover, he has nearly endless pages speculating about the nature of the phenomenon, ranging from the impact of the electrical field on the behavior of light waves to some brief alteration of the passage of time. When he couldn't be alone in the laboratory, he devoted his time to expanding his theoretical model to include time, and even began to question the nature of light. There are some notes regarding the construction of a device that might allow one to perceive light as a physical property, and I think we will want to follow up on that.

At night, when he had solitary access to the laboratory, Prof. Binford continued to expose objects to the field. Eventually, one returned slightly altered. The bottom of the wooden crate was now stained reddish-brown, as if it had been sitting in mud for the hour it had been gone. His journal at this point overflows with excitement, and an almost childish impatience as he was forced to wait several days before he could begin again. This next time, the crate came back covered in the reddish-brown mud, and with three symmetrical claw marks on one side. At this point, he put aside all of his work on light and time, and assumed that the objects were being moved across space to another location, that he had accidentally discovered a means of transporting objects over great distances instantaneously – a sort of matter transmitter. At this point, he began to spend his days on long walks in search of the reddish-brown mud, first only in the University quarter, and then throughout the City. Eventually he found an alley in Clearchurch that he thought must surely be the place – it had reddish-brown soil that turned muddy when exposed to water, and seemed also to house a number of stray cats. He hired a pair of local boys to look out for his next crate and to mark it with an X when they saw it. But none of his crates ever returned with their mark, and they insisted that, although they had stayed up very late looking for crates, they never saw any.

You can guess what the next step was. Prof. Binford determined to transmit himself through the field. When I read this, I immediately jumped to the conclusion that this had caused the accident, but I was wrong. He successfully transmitted himself seven times before the accident destroyed the laboratory, and on his last three journeys he was gone for over a month. Much of the journal is an account of his expeditions, and if I hadn't seen for myself, I would have thought this the record of a brilliant man's descent into madness. I present for you here some of the early entries so you can observe the same evidence that I have. You will want to read the other accounts next month.

January 13, 1834 10:37:21 PM

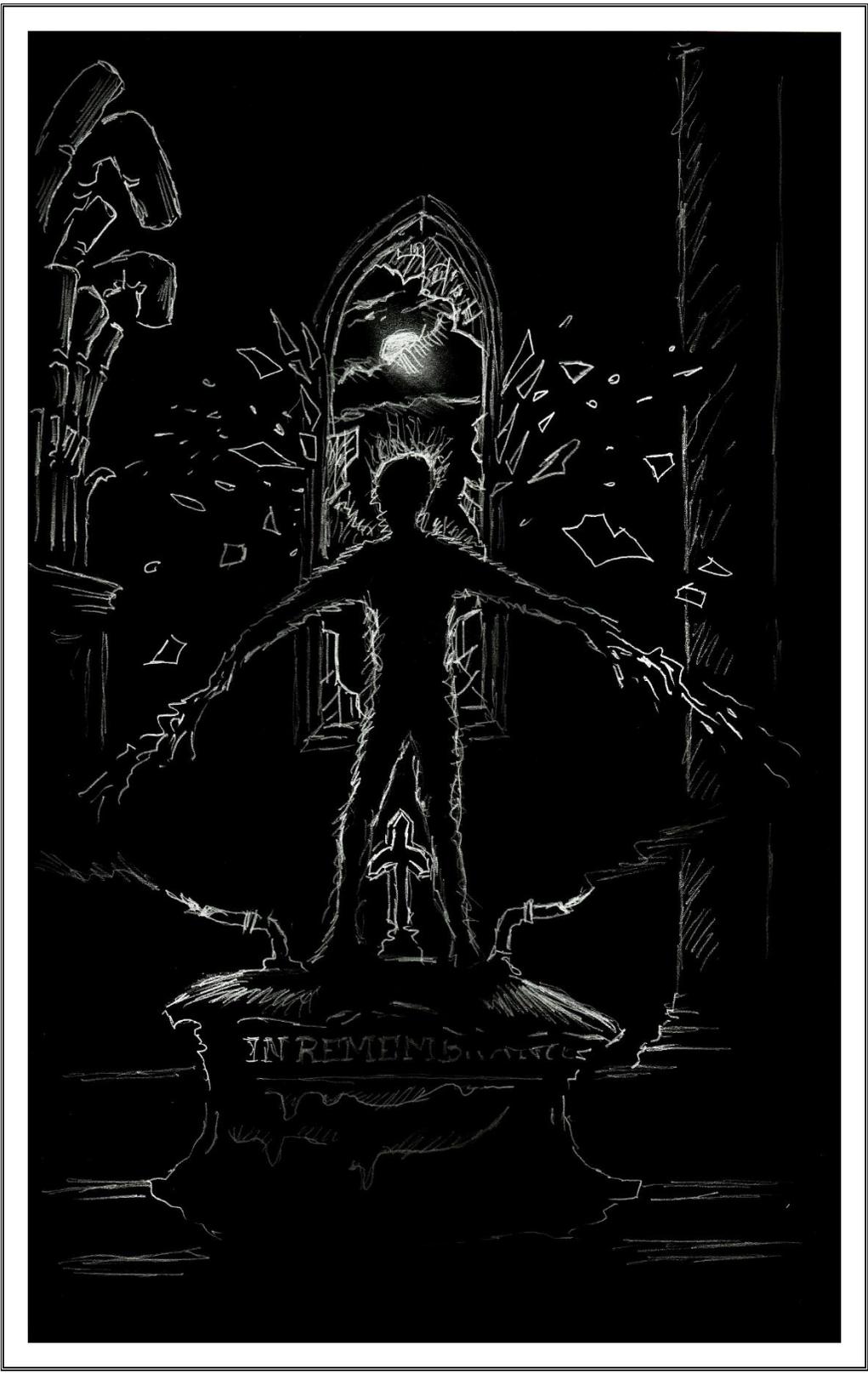
Return: 10:38:29 PM

My first trip through the field. The process of transmission is unpleasant, almost painful. Every part of my being felt as if it were burning from the inside, and all around me was a blue lightning that almost blinded me. It is hard to say how long that process lasted, but since I was gone for only a little more than a minute, it must have been merely a matter of seconds each way. It seemed much longer. When the lights and the pain stopped, I found myself outside at night in a featureless landscape. Below me was dirt or hard sand, above me a sky full of stars – but they were all wrong. Supposition: I must have traveled to some remote location in the southern hemisphere.

January 16, 1834 11:02:33 PM

Return: January 17, 1834 03:17:54 AM

Four hours! Alas, four tedious hours, as the wasteland seems to stretch infinitely in all directions. Yet, much excitement, for I brought with me another



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journal in which to transcribe the constellations, and I have now checked them against Mr. Webb's Southern Star Atlas and they do not match. Wherever I have traveled, it is not on this world. I will travel again in a few days, and this time I will return with samples of the soil and atmosphere.

January 28, 1834 08:42:29 PM

Return: February 7, 1834 06:51:18 AM

Over a week this time, and again I returned to the chapel instead of the laboratory. And the process of solidification is taking even longer – nearly ten minutes now. Several experiments have borne fruit, though mostly of a bitter sort. It is certain now that I am not appearing in precisely the same location each time, but at seemingly random points within a square mile, or something close to it. Everything I brought with me returned at the same time as I did or slightly earlier, even the items I buried. It does not appear to be possible to create a stockpile of tools and supplies, and I will have to bring everything I need each time. At least it is always warm.

The source of all our current trouble was suddenly obvious to me, as it will be to you. For fifteen years, Prof. Binford had been at this other place (whatever that might mean), and somehow was now in the process of returning. Setting aside my panic, I approached the problem as clinically as possible, but I was not able to come to any conclusions that would be helpful in fully returning Prof. Bindford to us. But before I allowed myself a few hours of sleep, I determined not to make the fatal mistake of attempting anything further alone. I have no doubt that we could have assembled a team of researchers to bring him home safely, if only I had found his journal sooner.

I awoke the next morning to the sound of the chapel bell. At first, I thought it was happening again, but the noise was rhythmic, jut the morning bell, so I determined to ignore it. As I tried to return to sleep, I realized it was a Summoning, and I hurried out of bed, made a bad show of descending the stairs while trying to put on shoes, and joined the rest of the college in the chapel. The doors had been removed since the episode on the previous day, but the altar remained, badly damaged from the impact. Prof. Sleatham addressed us from the lectern. As is his custom, he went on for far too long before coming to the point, but he was about to announce the temporary closure of the college when the lectern began to lose its shape. It started with, or at least was most obvious with, the beak of the eagle, which slowly liquefied and drooped toward the floor. The clock near the organ pipes behaved similarly, and soon every piece of metal in the chapel began to liquefy and twist and bend. There was something quietly horrifying about watching common objects lose their form, but we were all transfixed – until we were snapped out of it by the sudden shattering of the windows. For a few seconds, time paused, and shards of colored glass hung in the air, and then, just as suddenly, the passage of time resumed, and the glass rained onto the floor. There was a horrible crackling, like being on top of a mountain in

the middle of a summer storm, and then a deafening burst like thunder and a figure appeared atop the altar.

Now there was a general panic, and everyone rushed to get out of the chapel. I won't say that I was unafraid, but because I now knew what was happening, even if I didn't understand it, I was able to remain calm, and I saw Prof. Binford stretch out his hand and smile and then collapse. When the chapel had cleared I hurried to the altar. He was alive and awake, but only barely. "Esther," he muttered. It was a question. He was surprised to see me, or perhaps he wasn't sure if that was really my name. I took his hand and tried to reassure him, but blood began to trickle from his ears and his nose, and then from his eyes. "It is not for us," he told me, and then he stopped breathing.

For a few hours very late last night, I thought he was going to return to us, I thought we were going to get him back, but it was all a cruel joke. Something of this will be in the newspapers soon, but I wanted you to hear the full story from me. If I hurry now, I can post this today, so I will save any further comments for when you arrive. I was already looking forward to seeing you, of course, but now more than ever.

Give my love to Eric and the boys.

❖ ABOUT THE EDITOR ❖

M. Grant Kellermeyer

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

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

