

THE BEAST WILL VISIT IN THE NIGHT

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

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

— GERMAN PROVERB —

“WHAT’S an ‘unmish’?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s culture.”

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

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

“I just think it’s a damn waste of time to go to college to talk about the kind of shit that college was made to knock out of peoples’ heads.”

Thomas angrily flicked his cigarette into a bucket filled with sand and pulled a new one of his shirt pocket.

"I mean," he said while he fumbled with the lighter, "I'm only a year younger than you and I only took one semester at Ball State before I came back here and got the job at the mill, but I'd almost say that one semester did me more good than your four years."

Mark smirked drily and crossed his leg over his knee.

"I should have been careful about bringing it up around you. I'm just saying that – true or not – studying superstitions can shed light on the human condition. Not saying that everyone needs to get born again or have the Ten Commandments hanging on their walls. This isn't even a mainstream religious story. It's got pagan roots."

"Bullshit. The Amish wouldn't keep pagan superstitions around."

Mark's face hardened a little and he peered uncomfortably at the ground at the base of the streetlamp. He moved his hand casually (almost as if he hoped Thomas wouldn't notice) to block the bright light from the bulb. Something had seemed to stir behind the pole, low to the ground, but it was just a cat slowly moving towards something on the ground – something smaller and slower.

"These Amish do. The Amish in Adams County aren't like the ones on TV or in those drugstore books. Their strange people. They come from the Swiss mountains where there wasn't a lot of law and order during the Middle Ages. In this same class I read a book on the witch trials during the 17th century and it talked about how most of the worst trials were directed at these lonely, rural communities in the mountainous of Europe: the Alps, the Carpathians, the Pyrenees, the Scottish highlands. People took longer to take to orthodoxy Christianity there, and pagan beliefs blended with Catholicism and made these weird hybrids. Well the Amish who live in this area come from the Alps, not Bavaria, and they don't even speak the same language as other Amish. It's a Swiss folk kind of German that isn't even close to Pennsylvania Dutch – not by Amish standards, anyway. So yeah, the Amish around here have some strange notions."

Thomas's forehead was still stiff and his eyes glowered under his eyebrows.

"Whatever," he said after taking another long pull and letting the smoke dissolve into the steamy night air. "I don't want to get into this with you tonight. Not after you just got back from school."

Mark peered into his cup, tapped the bottom, set it down, and stood up, walking across the porch to a small cooler. He dug through the ice and pulled out two Long Island ice teas, handing one to Thomas and opening the other before sitting down.

"I know what your feelings are about me getting a degree in theology."

"An oxymoron if you've ever said one."

"I'm a curious person."

"But what's there to be curious about? It's like getting a degree in fairy tales."

"People study those too."

"But they don't think they're real, man."

"I don't know what I think is real, I just enjoy learning about what other people think."

"Well, you know I think it's a waste of time and brain cells, but there's no point in reminding you."

"No."

"No. So tell me about the Unmensch and get that bottle of Jack before we forget that its here."

Mark nodded and reached under his chair where the bottle sat, unopened. He poured them each a finger into plastic cups and they slowly swallowed the whiskey before returning to the Long Islands. It was getting close to eleven, and the heat of dead sun was radiating vicariously from the pavement, sidewalks, and house siding. A barely perceptible chill had begun in the soil, coming up between the grass blades, and manifesting in a bank of dim vapor that hung three inches above the ground.

"Well, like I was saying, the Amish who were roofing with me told me about it, and I looked it up in the library at school later and found out more. It's an unlucky thing to see, a kind of Black Shuck."

"What?"

"Uh, it's a British demon hound. A huge dog with blazing eyes that foretells your death when you see it. It's what inspired Conan Doyle to write *Hound of the Baskervilles*. The legend in the beginning of the book is real, it's just tweaked to work with the plot."

"Okay."

"Well, the Unmensch isn't the same as Black Shuck. It doesn't just appear to people randomly. It's supposed to start to follow them a long time before it shows up. And it's not an enormous hound; it's

coyote. A small, black coyote with dead white eyes – sightless, white eyes that glow like two pearl buttons in candlelight. Well, the idea is that it attaches itself to people who it has a sympathy with.”

“A sympathy?”

“Yeah... uh, people it sees itself in. People who are *unmenschlich* themselves. People who are somehow disconnected from the people – the community, the culture – around them. People – outcasts or rebels – who haven’t or can’t plug into the general stream of humanity.”

“And it starts showing up to them?”

“Supposedly.”

“Then what?”

“They die. Somehow it overtakes them. The idea is that it’s inside them to begin with – or that they’re inside it – and that it’s not so much a haunting as a recognition. Sometimes they commit suicide or drink themselves to death or get into fights with groups of violent men. In the Middle Ages a lot of times they would just wander off to the woods and never come back. Some of the more modern urban legends have them overdosing or driving off the road at night. Anyway, *that’s* what I was thinking of when you asked me what was making me nervous on the walk back from the restaurant.”

“Good lord. You have to be shitting me. You thought you saw a ghost dog?”

Mark smiled and stretched his bare feet towards the street and the streetlight.

“It’s not a ghost – it’s a devil – and it’s not a dog – it’s a coyote.”

“Even stupider. On both accounts. Whatever man. You know we’ll always be buds —”

“Have been for sixteen years.”

“—But I just never thought that one of us would actually get out of this shitty town, actually go to college, and end up being somehow backwards and superstitious for it. I mean, I don’t think college is the only place to get an education: look at me, I mean, I still live here, still drink here, still work here, and I’m still a critically thinking, libertarian, atheist. But you go off to a good, liberal state school in fucking New York, and you’re the one who comes back talking about ghost dogs. I’ll be damned if I get you, man. But... we’ll always be buds.”

Mark smiled to himself and nodded.

“I’m glad for that.”

Mark had finished his iced tea and was pouring both of them two fingers of whiskey. That should probably be the last of it, because Thomas had to walk home and they could save the rest of the bottle for next weekend. He swilled his cup and took a slow sip, looking half-anxiously under the streetlight. But nothing was there. Probably he hadn’t seen anything following them on the way back from the rib joint, but his mind had been active all night. It was close to the end for this friendship; he could feel it. He had felt it before. This was the dry rot that grew worse with every passing summer. It had taken one summer before he had stopped hearing from Tanner and Stephen and Ty, two summers before he had outgrown Luke and Carter, and now he felt the gulf widening between him and his oldest friend. There were three or four others from his hometown that he still saw, but not with Thomas – Thomas had never liked them – and it was just one more chink in the growing chasm between them. It was as if he felt that when Thomas inevitably walked off of his porch, down his sidewalk, and into the thick night air, he would be swallowed forever by space.

Thomas was about to light his fifth cigarette when he suddenly dropped the zippo with a loud start. The lighter clattered to the porch with a clang, the wick still flaming. Mark darted over and picked it up before a fire started, and looked up at his friend. His eyes went to his hands, where he expected to see a blister forming from a burn, but it was his face that seemed to communicate a more accurate story: his eyes were pinched in a kind of furious shock, and his teeth were set in resistant fear. Something behind Mark had startled him. Mark’s own stomach now tightened. But it was such a silly thought. And why should he – just as fervent a believer in science and reason as Thomas – be concerned by what his friend had seen looming over his shoulder?

“What was it? What did you see?”

“Fuck, man. Nothing. Whiskey in my head. Just some kid moving around in a weird way across the street, I guess. Some kind of sick kid.”

“Why?” Mark asked, his voice croaking. “Why ‘sick’? What do you mean?”

“Just the way he was moving. It had to be a *he*. Some sick, perverted kid. Shouldn’t be moving like that. Fucking weird, man.”

Now Mark was wondering if mixing the whiskey with the iced teas had put him in this jittery state of mind, but he didn’t want Thomas to see him startled by what was likely a strange play of the shadows from the streetlight. If Thomas realized how truly nervous this had made him, their friendship was almost certain to end then and there – the last strand of respect would snap and another old friend would walk away from him. But there was something about Thomas’s reaction that made him feel slightly less self-conscious: his eyes were still scouring the dark street running perpendicular to the one in front of them, and Mark wondered if his own fear might be forgiven – maybe even shared. But before he could ask Thomas anything else, his friend slung back his whiskey, successfully lit a new cigarette, and started for the sidewalk.

“Hey man, I gotta be getting back; it’s pretty late considering I got tomorrow, so I’m gonna split here if you don’t mind.”

“No problem, buddy. Uh, do you want to come over next Friday? I was thinking about burning those moving boxes in the fire pit and having a couple people over.”

Thomas stopped without turning around. The cigarette bobbed as he talked, sending blue mushrooms into the black air where they shone in the street light.

“Who’re you thinking?”

“I don’t know. I’ll tell you when I get an idea. Let me know if you think any of your work friends would like to come.”

Thomas stood quietly for a moment, then nodded and stuffed his hands in his pockets, making his way down the sidewalk, across the street, under the streetlamp, and then beyond it as he faded into the darkness, transmuting into a shadow. The fireflies had all since disappeared, and all Mark could see of Thomas was the ember end of his cigarette, like a single, red firefly, slowly fading down the street, blinking in regular spasms of dull light until it finally had gone too far by itself and was engulfed in nothingness.



Mark went to bed that night and awoke early in the morning, his pillow drenched in sweat, his sleep crowded with nightmares. The light coming through the window was ashy pink, and he decided against trying to go back to sleep. He showered, dressed, and spent the morning applying to research jobs and writing articles for the half a dozen blogs that he worked for. When the day warmed into noon he went to work at the Alpine Rose – his town’s sole coffee shop – and when noon faded to evening, he folded his apron and began what he feared would be another lonely walk home.

But it wasn’t lonely. The summer air was pregnant with the perfume of flower beds, sparkling with bird calls, and even the purple afterglow of twilight seemed to have more in common with the faded warmth of day than the hastening gloom of night. He walked home lazily, passing a former teacher here, a high school acquaintance there, waving cheerily to each other and exchanging kind words. It was not the sort of evening that he had expected, almost as if a series of filters had been lifted from his eyes, revealing a world of warmth and connection where he had anticipated one of cold loneliness. He returned to his room, answered emails, read the news, listened to some music, and fell asleep.

It wasn’t until four in the morning when he woke up. He knew immediately that he was not alone, and instinctively turned his head towards the far corner of his room – behind his right shoulder – where he saw the curled shape of a human being. It was bent over itself in a strange manner – freakish, unnecessary, awkwardly – almost as if it had been placed in a dehydrator and – sucked dry of moisture – curled into a hollow husk. Its black hair and beard framed the white skin of its face, but the hollows of its eyes stood out even more starkly: empty and dead. Then why did it move? What animated its weightless legs and bony arms? With weak, fragile motions, it started from the dusk and walked towards the window on the other side of Mark’s bed. The white flesh now glowed in the moonlight – unwholesome and mottled, unpleasant to remember or describe. It seemed to be the shape of a small man who had grown even smaller through the natural loss of his body fluids – a dried raisin hovering over Mark’s bed, stretching out his arms which cracked and creaked like old leather being stretched out of a familiar shape. While the murky sockets forbade any recognizable expression, the bearded face seemed to wrinkle into a pleading grin – emphasized by the reaching fingers (the skin around which had hardened and dried into a transparent crust). But before

Mark could accept or reject the supplication (and he later shivered at the thought of what reaction either response would have warranted), the face twisted spasmodically as if suddenly possessed by a new wearer, and the tangle of limbs fell to the floor where the figure scuttled around on all fours, welping eagerly like a wild dog. Something fundamental seemed to change about the shape, and he watched with revulsion as it backed away from him with newfound flexibility. On the floor he could only see the white skin of the bearded face (now invigorated with a horrified expression), but could tell by its movements that it was backing away from him like an obedient dog, across the room, and out the door into the hallway. All he could see in the darkness, though, was the white mask of horror slowly – slowly – being dragged, sucked into the darkness of the hallway, receding as if falling irretrievably down the shaft of a bottomless well.

Mark would later not be able to remember if he fell back asleep, if he had ever woken up (was it a dream or a memory?) for it, or if he had stayed awake until dawn. He had the impression of this experience branded into his consciousness, but had no memory of the proceeding four hours: only when he arrived at the Alpine Rose to open at eight did he seem to return to his own mind, and he wasn't sure if he should be horrified, confused, angry, or forewarned. What had happened was a mystery, but it seemed to mean something to the deep, hidden organ of his spirit, and he reacted to it not as if it were a nightmare or a narrow escape from a horror, but as if a friend had whispered in his ear a warning. His nerves were steady and alert; his vestigial animal soul prickled with paranoid sensitivity. And then the morning passed into noon, the noon passed into evening, and the night brought him a long and delicious sleep – uninterrupted and (so far as he knew) unaccompanied.

The days faded into the nights and the nights grew into days, and an entire week passed before Mark had a reason to remember his nocturnal visitor. He spent the mornings and afternoons working at the Alpine Rose, and spent the middays and evenings writing and applying for work. During his lunch break on Friday he heard back from a museum in Louisville that was interested in hiring him as a researcher and guide. The pay was not tremendously impressive, but it came with insurance and the possibility of advancement if he was willing to work hard and commit himself to their mission. It was a coup for an underemployed theology major living with his parents, and he quickly agreed to an interview the following Monday. He cheerily returned to work at three, and came home to Thomas on his porch at nine o'clock. The days were getting longer, and the sky was still a vivid mélange of plum, pink, and scarlet, with the heavy blues of night steadily coming in from the east like a gathering storm.

"It's good to see you, man!"

Thomas's face was somehow more pinched and gaunt than it had been at their last parting. He seemed anxious and out of place.

"Who all's coming?"

"To what?"

"Your fire."

"Oh damn. I completely forgot about that."

"You still down?"

"Well, I might actually need those moving boxes still, but my dad cut down some dead limbs from the silver maple out back, and we can use those."

"Moving boxes?"

"That's what I was going to burn before. But I think I might be getting a job in Louisville."

Thomas's eyes seemed to grow narrower.

"Being a priest?"

"The degree is in theology, but that doesn't make me ordained. No, as a researcher for a museum."

"Like the Creation Museum?"

"No, man. I'm not like that, you know. I might be more interested in the non-material part of the human experience, but that doesn't mean I think fossils are a trick or that evolution is a deep state conspiracy. No, it's like a history museum. They liked my research background and I'm going to interview with them on Monday. I'll help them catalogue documents and transcribe letters if I get it."

Thomas seemed to be restraining a glare. He looked off into the eastern sky, then quickly turned to the ground.

"I'm not working at the mill no more."

"Why?"

“Lay-offs.”

“Oh. Shit, man. Sorry.”

“It’s fine. I think Jenny can get me a job at the bar. They need work there. Everyone needs work around here.”

“That is true.”

“Yeah. Everyone’s hiring, just not the mill or the factories out of town. I could go back to Subway, too.”

“Or the Alpine Rose if I get the Louisville job – I’ll tell Glenda that they should consider you before they post it.”

Thomas looked up at him with a snake-like glare, like a sentry at the Alamo watching a casual visitor pack up and ride off to five week stay at a health resort in the Catskills.

“I’ll be fine. We doing this fire?”

Mark nodded and went inside for a lighter and newspaper. The backyard faced the very outskirts of the town: a few houses’ lights peered through the dusk, but behind them stretched a relatively unbroken field of corn girded in by rows of monstrous, shaggy trees in the distance. A shallow pit in the middle of the yard was ringed with large stones dug up by farmers and thrown in the ditches. Mark’s dad had carefully turned them into a tidy ring, and over time their inside-facing portions had grown black with soot while the outside-facing halves still gleamed in shades of rose and amber.

Mark made a pile of newspaper balls in the bottom of the charred pit, leaned a dozen or so twigs and sticks in a teepee around the pile, and steadied five foot-long sections of the maple branch in a larger teepee around the whole. While Thomas watched quietly from a lawn chair, he lit the paper and watched the flickering tails of flame turn into a snapping fire. Mark reached beside him and picked up the week-old bottle of whiskey – still three-fourths full – and handed the bottle to his friend while he settled into the chair beside him. The two watched the flames solemnly, each keeping an eye to the darkness the prowled about them. High in the purple sky above them was Venus, lonely and isolated in the as-yet starless sky – drifting like a solitary firefly fading into colorless space.

“You could go back to school, you know?”

The question came out of the silence like an uninvited guest.

“I’m still paying off the debt from the semester I took.”

“But that was two years ago.”

“I didn’t make a lot at the mill. I won’t make more at the bar.”

“You can get scholarships.”

“And do what?”

“Study science. Study physics.”

“Listen, I like watching YouTube videos about science, but I’m terrible at math and I don’t like writing papers. No. It’s a hobby, not a career. I’ll be fine.”

“It’d be kind of fitting if you had your degree in physics and I had mine in metaphysics. You know I alw—”

“Have you ever thought that you like that stuff because you can afford to wonder about things that aren’t material? That’s all I have. Maybe when I have a job sitting on my ass all day I’ll get bored enough to wonder about the afterlife and the spirit world and ghost dogs, but until then I’m just worried about paying my rent and not getting my truck repoed. Maybe that’s why I’m the atheist and you’re wasting your time thinking about nonexistent universe outside this one. Besides which, maybe that’s the last thing I want to worry about.”

Mark shifted in his chair and looked over at his friend. That last comment croaked in his voice, and in the firelight he saw that his eyes were large and shining, like a deer who can hear the hounds afield.

“What do you mean? Hell?”

“Or something like it. Maybe not hell-the-place, but hell-the-experience.”

“Experience...”

“Yeah. Like maybe it’s not a thing you go to after you die if you’ve been bad. Maybe it’s a thing that lives in you and eats you up and sleeps in your bed and follows you to work. Maybe it’s not a punishment. Maybe it’s a condition.”

“What, like a sickness?”

“Like an infection.”

His eyes were no longer on the fire; they looked beyond the fire, and his voice came from the side of his mouth, now, as if his attention was divided between Mark and something on the other side of the fire, something moving back and forth – slowly and intentionally, like a lion guarding its meal.

Mark grabbed the whiskey and took a long gulp of it, hoping to relax his nerves and maybe bring the light of humor into his twilight mind. But it didn't seem to help.

“What do you keep looking—”

And then suddenly he thought he saw it: small, oddly proportioned, hybrid, dwarfish, misshapen... But no. No, no. It was maybe a cat chasing prey. Maybe. No, it was nothing. Just the morphing shadows of the fire moving erratically in the breeze. He looked off to the side: there were no fireflies in the grass and no stars in the sky; the night was deep and black and it reigned unchecked.

“I wish you would maybe consider moving from here. Maybe go to Fort Wayne or Indy. Find something bigger and better to do with your time. I think—”

Thomas's voice came out of the side of his mouth in a dull whisper.

“What did you say that Thing was called, again? That Amish legend?”

“The Unmensch?”

“Yeah, the *Unmensch*... What did you say that means – in English?”

Mark looked around them and was surprised at how dark it had gotten. The streetlamps at either end of the street seemed domed in brown glass, and the lights of the neighbors houses all seemed to be off, snuffed. Something moved behind them, something small and light. The cat, he thought. Something with four legs, something low to the ground.

“It, uh, it literally means ‘unhuman,’ but you could call it ‘beast’ or ‘monster’ or ‘creature.’”

“What did you say you preferred? You preferred something.”

“I think I said ‘abhuman’ was a good translation. Or ‘anti-human.’”

There didn't seem to be grasshoppers in the trees or frogs in the fields. The wooshing, snapping voice of the fire was the only company that Mark felt in his soul.

“It is part of the spirit, you think?”

“It's an urban legend.”

“What do you think?”

“I think it's a superstition. Cultures come up with these narratives to explain a psychological state or a part of the human experience. They invent an idol or a god or Santa Claus to help illustrate a chapter in the human condition that they can't explain.”

“What if they didn't invent them,” said Thomas.

“What the fuck do you mean?”

“What if they've seen them? What if they dreamed about them? What if they are part spiritual and part material – a combination of the two worlds?”

The fire seemed to flare and grow whiter. Mark struggled to see anything outside of it: it was so bright and white and the darkness was so exclusive and opaque.

“You don't believe in a spiritual world.”

“You do.”

“I'm curious about it. I haven't ever experienced it. I'm just a student, not a damn shaman.”

“What if the Unmensch is part of both worlds? What if it can live in them simultaneously? Not like a ghost or a burglar, but something in between.”

“What? A burgling ghost?”

Mark had expected his words to knock sense into his friend, maybe even bring out a chuckle, like the stupidity of hearing Thomas reference his interest in ‘ghost dogs’ – diluting Black Shuck and the Unmensch to two stupid, silly words. But Thomas turned to him and his eyes fluttered with shock and fear.

“Yes. Yes. A burgling ghost. A thing that can break into your room and break into your head at the same time. Yes...”

His eyes bulged piteously from his white, gaunt face, and the rims of his eyelids gleamed red from what could have been sleepless nights, habitual crying, or a combination of the two. Mark suddenly recognized the great vulnerability of his friend and felt an electric fusing of his own spirit and body: the pain and isolation of his soul now converted into physical agony as his hands shook and tears started to seep from his eyes.

“What’s happening to you? How can I help? I want to help. Don’t shut me out, man. What can I do?”

But at that moment, the tallest log collapsed with a crash, and took the smaller logs with it in a sudden shower of orange beads. In the momentary darkness before the fire recovered its breath, Mark saw something dark and angular sitting on the other side of the fire – something that had been perfectly covered by the lapping wedge of flame before its collapse. In the brief seconds before the fire rose again, in the red glare of the embers, he saw a gaunt black dog sitting authoritatively on its skeletal haunches. The shaggy fur hung over its emaciated form in mossy tatters, and its lower jaw laid on its lean chest, as if held to the upper skull by only a few strips of muscle, giving the impression that the animal was either screaming or laughing; but its dead, white eyes – like two clouded pearls – gave no sign of its true emotion as they glowed wildly in the flash of the falling logs. In the span of a second it seemed to melt into the dark, without making a motion of its ragged head.

“God! That dog has to have rabies! Fuck, man, let’s go inside and get my dad’s rifle. Someone needs to shoot the face off of that dog.”

But Thomas didn’t respond to his friend’s shock. He seemed to have been staring through fire into those pearly eyes the entire time.

“It’s not a dog. Dogs don’t have tails like that or ears like that. It’s a coyote.”

“But it was black. Coyotes are greyish brown. There aren’t any such things as—”

He suddenly felt the full force of what he was about to say and stopped his words.

“It was a freak. A disgusting freak. Sometimes they breed with dogs. A black lab bred with a coyote. It should be crushed or put to death. It’s eyes—”

Mark stopped again. Thomas was staring into the distance, towards the streetlamp – beyond the streetlamp and into the shadows. His eyes were wide and unmoving, pleading even, as if he were conducting a mute negotiation with something across the street in the shadows.

“I’m sorry I ever brought up the Unmensch. You’re right. This is a material world and there is no sense in even discussing superstitions. Not even to joke about them. Why should we sit here and talk about whether purple dragons exist when there’s no proof of them. You were right. Let’s stick to science from now on. I’m glad that job is with a museum and not a seminary; a career in facts and reason will be good for me. I’ve been living in a purely speculative world and it’s rubbed off on you. I can see that I’ve had a bad impact on you this week and I’m sorry about that. Let’s go inside. I’ll get that rifle in case that – that dog comes here again, but let’s go inside and watch TV.”

Thomas’s unblinking eyes welled over, and he stood up unsteadily. The brown glow of the streetlamp did little to cut through the dense murk behind it. No light, Mark thought with a shiver, could illuminate its secrets.

Thomas didn’t seem to hear him, though, because he slowly rose from his lawn chair and took a wobbly step away from the fire.

“Hey, man! Where are you going?”

His eyes were fixed on the darkness on the other side of the streetlight, which suddenly seemed to take on the role of a border marker – a checkpoint between two worlds.

“I should go home. I’ve had too much to drink and I need to apply to jobs in the morning.”

“Don’t go.”

“I have to.”

Something furious and impatient was boiling inside of Mark. He resented Thomas’s weakness, his lack of spirit, lack of imagination, lack of will.

“Damn you, you don’t.”

“I do.”

“You don’t have to do anything.”

“It’s not outside of me. It’s part of me. It is me. I see myself. It’s not an infection; it’s a cancer. It’s not an invasion; it’s a rebellion.”

“What the hell does any of that mean? Stop walking away, man.”

“The fire is almost dead.”

Mark turned and saw that the street light was indeed the only remaining source of light around them: the red, molten glow of the expiring embers were growing duller by the moment. The cornfields were now

indistinguishable from the cloudy night sky. Dead, black space bloomed and yawned around them, impossible to measure or understand or cull. What the hell was making everything seem so dark?

“You can come inside with me and stay the night.”

“I don’t feel too good. I want to go home.”

“You’re not going home... You’re going to *That*.”

“I don’t know what you mean. I need to go. I need to. I can’t stay anymore. I can’t be here anymore.”

“Why can’t you just come inside for a few minutes? Have some ginger ale and crackers if you aren’t feeling so hot.”

Thomas’s unblinking eyes followed something’s movements in the distance: crossing back and forth, back and forth, then seeming to sit still – perhaps in the middle of the sidewalk that he was now standing on: the sidewalk that led across the street and into the distance.

“I don’t have anything left to do here. I should go home instead.”

Mark squinted into the opaque murk into which his friend seemed destined to be enfolded. Was something sitting there, waiting? Was it just the fire hydrant on the curb? Was this an excuse or was it a change in attitude – a shift from aimlessness to responsibility that he should support? It didn’t seem to matter, because Thomas didn’t wait for a response or a parting gesture: he floated off down the sidewalk, limping towards the intersection with a steady, measured pace – like a man being marched to the writ of his execution. He passed under the large, paternal trees that sheltered Mark’s family home, momentarily disappearing in their shadows, before emerging at intervals into the pools of gloomy light that poured between their twisted boughs. Mark felt two impulses struggling within him: one, human and gentle, which longed to rush down the sidewalk and drag Thomas inside by the arm – to touch, keep, and protect his fading friend – and another, animal and self-interested, which breathed a sigh of relief at the departure of this plagued companion: it exulted in his retreat in the same way that Mark’s ancestors had beaten their leprous companions away from their food and fire, thrown out the weak members of their camps, and chased away the maimed comrades whom they knew would only slow them down and attract predators. A part of this vestigial selfishness sighed in relief at Thomas’s departure, but the human spirit in him watched with awe and regret as he passed under the streetlight on the corner and faded into the black space behind it like a necklace dropped into a still pond, where it could be watched sinking through increasing curtains of darkness until it was impossible to see and impossible to recover.

When Thomas had finally been swallowed into the dusk, nothing could be seen from where he had faded. Nothing except for two pinpricks of dull, white light – the dead, marbled glow of reflected moonlight, perhaps, or of two sickly fireflies hovering side by side. With a sudden, almost immediate turn however, the two lights were doused, leaving nothing but space: illimitable, featureless, and unknown.

OR

Mark had intended to visit his friend the following morning, but was prevented by a high temperature. Maybe Thomas hadn’t been making excuses: there seemed to have been a powerful contagion in the air that night, and Mark was bedridden all weekend, sleeping fitfully for two days before his fever broke and he felt well enough to stand and move around. But it was the day of his interview now, and he had a four hour drive to Louisville. He was able to move it forward from the morning to the afternoon, but there was no time to check on his friend other than to report his sickness and to check on Thomas’s condition through a few brief texts. The interview was at two, and by the time it was over – after having gone predictably well – he was feeling healthy enough to explore what seemed to be his new city. By the time he arrived at his hotel room later that night, he found a missed call from the museum, offering him the job. He quickly became drunk with the excitement of the next stage in his life that he didn’t notice Thomas’s text asking him to call as soon as he could. When he did finally see it, he was in the middle of apartment hunting, and assumed that the need had probably passed (it being two days since the text had been sent), and after a week, his parents drove down with all his clothes and luggage in their van. He wouldn’t return to his hometown until Christmas, and even then it was a short evening spent at home before the entire family decamped for his grandparents’ farm in Ohio where they spent Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and Boxing Day. He drove back to Louisville from Dayton, and didn’t see his parents’ home again until Easter.

He was reminded of Thomas abruptly when his parents gloomily mentioned that he was a missing person; that he had apparently been evicted from his apartment sometime around Halloween because of a drug habit that proved impossible for the landlord to tolerate; that he had been arrested twice that autumn; that he had been released from jail sometime in January, and that he hadn't been heard of or seen since then. Thomas's mom had been dead for years, and his dad – an alcoholic veteran drawing social security – was barely more settled than his son, so what little search there was for him hadn't been particularly spirited: indeed, it was more of a general awareness that if someone should see him, they should tell him that he was being looked for. Other than that, no one was worrying too much about a 23 year old opioid addict who had chosen to step outside of the town's social parameters. It was as if he had walked beyond the city limits and had been erased from the collective consciousness of the people who had watched him grow up. It was as if he had broken some unspoken code and been banished from the memories of his neighbors and classmates. The shunning spirit of the Old Order Amish still lurked in the DNA of the town's Mennonites, and while they drove cars, wore shorts, and had internet connections, their souls were quick to shun and slow to forgive the weak members of their parish. The "search" continued in their words, but their hearts had long ago delivered him to his demons as a sacrifice for their community's greater good: eject the sinner, shun the outsider, watch the borders, and repel the invaders.



The winter that year was unusually cold and vicious, even for northern Indiana. Heavy frosts kept the ground flinty well into April, and the farmers grumbled about it to anyone who had the patience to listen. Finally, three weeks after Easter, the temperatures rose above forty degrees, and the spring sun thawed the icy soil, breathing life into the grey earth and hope into the farmers' tired hearts. It was about a week after the tractors took to the fields with their tillers that one Amish man – Ernest Eicher, who had paused his team of horses to move a heavy rock out of their way – noticed a revolting smell coming from the culvert under his driveway. The earth was drenched – black and heavy with rain – and the scorching sun drew the moisture into the air which was thick and pungent. Eicher's shirt clung to his skin and his red face streamed with perspiration as he urged the horses on, cutting through the dead earth like a surgeon at a postmortem. The stench hung in the steam, which seemed to magnify its range and pungency, and the howling whirr of flies hadn't escaped his notice. Removing his sweat-bleached hat, he reined in the horses and took a hesitant step towards the stench. Something was rustling in the shadows there: he stopped his breath with a jolt when a pair of black birds suddenly shot out of the darkness – wings smacking like crumbled paper – and disappeared into the twisted oak whose shadow blanketed the ditch from the sun. He followed their flight and felt his brain reel: the tree was bristling with wings – black with ravens. They looked watchful, impatient, and hungry.

Eicher called his sons, Levi and Jacob, to tend to the horses and keep an eye on him as he descended into the ditch from where the odor was emanating. They barely kept an eye on the horses, all the time watching their father, while breathing out of their mouths. When Ernest returned, his face was grey and his beard dripped with traces of vomit. They sent his daughter, Rosemary, with the speedy two-wheeled cart, to town where she summoned the police and the ambulance.

The remains had been chillingly preserved by the winter weather, but the spring thaw had begun its work, and the jellied eyes had been quickly eaten out by peckish crows. What remained was the emaciated, bent corpse of a bearded man with deathly white skin – tight and membranous over the jutting bones. He didn't carry an ID, and while he sported a black beard, the Amish assured the police that none of their number had been missing. This and the presence of a mustache on his mummified lip assured the authorities that he was an Englisher. After a short interview, Ernest returned to tilling his field, but he didn't leave the scene of the discovery behind him: a week later word was spreading from one Swiss-German homestead to another that Ernest had seen something when he descended into the ditch and peered into the dusky culvert. He had, they said, seen a coyote crouching beside the corpse, peering into its hollow sockets. This, naturally, was no strange sight: a coyote could be expected, as a carrion scavenger, to take interest in a putrefied body. What was disturbing was its princely, authoritative attitude – thoughtful rather than eager, calm rather than ravenous – and its black pelt. It was a black, Ernest said, that made the shadow around it seem blazing with light, a black that consumed and refused to give back. He – the corpse

– Ernest supposed, must have been under the power of the Unmensch. The body was never claimed, although some suspected it might be the body of the boy who had gone missing in January (but his father had died over Easter weekend, and there were no other relatives to take interest in his recovery). So the vagrant was buried in the Potter’s Field of the Mennonite Cemetery under a small stone with three numbers on it (numbers I have forgotten).

Even though Mark never heard about the rumors that swirled around the Amish gatherings, or the burial of the vagrant, he still thought from time to time about the night that Thomas dissolved from sight – how he had walked into the murk and disappeared. He had been seen many times since then, of course – had his fingerprints and mugshot taken – but for Mark that was the last sight he had had of his friend before he followed whatever thing inside of him led him to whatever place he ended up. Where was he now? Panhandling in Fort Wayne; tending bar in Toldeo; going to a community college in Terre Haute; driving down a ribbon of highway in Nebraska; standing in a soup kitchen in Kalamazoo? Mark knew that only one fate could be real – all the others were imaginings, but one of them – maybe one that he hadn’t thought of – was real, and could not be changed. He thought of the haggard phantom that pleaded to him in the moonlight; but then he thought better of pondering this vision, and he tried to forget it. He shut it out of his mind, surrendering to work, to relationships, to alcohol, but to no avail: he would continue to see it (standing at the foot of his bed, quietly, patiently, or being dragged away into the murk, silently, submissively) in his nightmares for the rest of his own abbreviated and bedeviled life.

But Ernest Eicher didn’t forget what he saw, and the Amish people prayed for the soul of the eyeless thing he had found in the culvert. Nor could he forget the shaggy, black beast that had been squatting in front of the rotting heap, gazing deeply into its gutted sockets. He hadn’t seen its eyes (“*Gott sei gelobet und gebenedeiet*” he said here, with a tremble, before whispering “Gott in His mercy here protected His humble servant from seeing *de Awga der Unmensch*,” with his own eyes clenched in prayer) but he was sure that they would have been dead and white, like two pearl buttons glinting in candlelight – like two dying fireflies fading into the colorless vacuum of space.